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Some articles use the masculine pronoun when referring to God, in keeping with convention and to avoid the clumsiness of constructions such as 'He or She' or 'Him or Her.'

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Practicality of Devotion

Children, people criticise devotion and spirituality as blind faith, as mental weakness, and as a means of exploitation. Devotion is not blind faith. On the contrary, it is faith that removes blindness. Devotion is a practical science. It fosters righteousness in society and offers relief from the sorrows of life. Faith in God gives one the strength to remain standing amidst the hard knocks of life. When we worship God, we assimilate His divine qualities. So many people have been uplifted by faith in God!

We obey the words of one we love dearly. Suppose the girl we love says, “If you love me, you will stop smoking.” If the boyfriend loves her sincerely, he will quit smoking at once. This is true love. Love has driven many to give up their bad habits. “I quit because she doesn’t like me drinking.” One might ask

if this is not a weakness. Considering the benefits, it is certainly not a weakness but a strength.

Faith and devotion stop one from doing wrong and inspire us to do good. The presence of traffic rules minimizes road accidents. The presence of police and courts checks the incidence of crime. Similarly, devotion and spirituality are practical means of maintaining harmony in society. Through them, moral and ethical values become ingrained in people.

The path of devotion stresses an individual's responsibilities to society. Devotion to God and compassion towards fellow beings and the poor are like the two sides of a coin; if there is one, there will be the other. The compassion we show the poor is true worship of God. True devotion inspires us to give up the desire for inordinate wealth and to serve the poor with the wealth that is in excess of our

needs. Pilgrims to Sabarimala undergo a ceremony during which they keep the *irumudi kettu*¹ on their head. During this ceremony, it is customary to give coins to children. After performing the *homa* (fire ritual) and other *pujas* (forms of ritual worship), it is also customary to feed the poor and give them clothes and money. Thus, devotion nurtures civic consciousness and compassion. Similarly, snake worship and other *pujas* for the protection of sacred groves protect and preserve the environment.

What we need is practical logic, not intellectual sophistication. We tell children that if they lie, they will become blind. Though it is not true, doesn't this harmless lie guide them to the right path? We might not be able to see the logic behind certain customs that nevertheless confer many

¹ A small bundle with two pouches, the contents of which are to be offered to the Lord.

benefits to people. Such customs reach out to and uplift people.

There may be some who use devotion and spirituality to exploit others. Don't counterfeit coins come into existence because genuine coins have value? Just because there are two vulgar books in a library does not mean that the entire library is stocked with such books, does it?

Love and faith are the greatest gifts man has received. A life without them is like a painted corpse, i.e. life-

less. This does not mean that logic and intelligence are not needed; they are, but they have their place. Don't both the scissors, which cuts a cloth into pieces, and the needle, which sews them together, have their own uses? The question is not whether or not God exists but whether man suffers. We must think of practical ways in which we can mitigate the suffering. Devotion is the means of finding the solution to one's sorrow within oneself. Its relevance and usefulness will always prevail. ❧

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Share your experiences, poems or artwork, and inspire thousands. Even if you think your contribution is small or insignificant, it may be of great value to many.

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Divine Mercy

by br. neelakanthamrita
chaitanya

The Vaishnavait literature¹ of Tamil Nadu describes the life of saints and devotees in rich detail. These biographies appeal to the masses, enabling them to assimilate lofty spiritual truths embodied by these great souls. The life of Thirukachi Nambi, an ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu and Guru of Sri Ramanujacarya,²

1 Literature pertaining to Lord Vishnu and his avatars.

2 A key figure in the Vaishnavait tradition and chief proponent of Vishishtadvaita, the philosophy of qualified non-dualism.

is a beautiful example. Thirukachi Nambi was engaged in worshipping Lord Vishnu daily in the Varadaraja Perumal Temple in Kanchipuram, near Chennai. His devotion to Lord Vishnu was such that every night, the Lord would converse directly with him.

One day, while Nambi was fanning him, the Lord saw Shani Bhagavan³ standing behind Nambi. Lord Vishnu realized that Saturn would soon rule Nambi's life for the next seven-and-a-half years, and that it would be a challenging time for him. Lord Vishnu warned Shani Bhagavan not to touch his dear devotee. Deferring to the Lord's wish, Shani Bhagavan requested that he be allowed to exert his influence on Nambi for seven-and-a-half months. Lord Vishnu said that even that was too long. Shani Bhagavan reduced the time

³ A personification of the planet Saturn, which delivers the results of our past karma in the form of positive or negative events in our life.

period to seven-and-a-half days, but the Lord did not agree to that either. Finally, Lord Vishnu allowed Shani Bhagavan to seize Nambi for seven-and-a-half hours.

In that short period, Nambi was accused of a theft he did not commit, and he was imprisoned. Later, the king realized that Nambi was innocent, released him, and begged him for forgiveness. By Lord Vishnu's intervention, Nambi's long seven-and-a-half years of karmic suffering was reduced to a brief seven-and-a-half hours.

This story illustrates the following verse in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Lord Krishna says:

*kshipram bhavati
 dharmatma
 shashvacchantim nigacchati
 kaunteya pratijanibi na me
 bhaktah pranasbyati*

Soon he becomes a noble soul and certainly attains lasting peace. O Arjuna, declare boldly that no devotee of mine is ever lost. (9.31)

In the previous verse, Lord Krishna says that even if the vilest sinners worship the Lord with exclusive devotion, they are to be considered righteous if they have repented. Amma has many devotees, who used to lead unrighteous lives, but who underwent a transformation after meeting Amma and receiving her unconditional love. Some have even become residents of Amritapuri, dedicating their life to serving others and doing spiritual practices. They are living examples of Krishna's promise of redemption.

In his book *Ultimate Success*, Swami Ramakrishnananda narrates an incident that happened many years ago. There was an ardent Krishna devotee named Bhaskar, who lived about seven kilometres away from Amritapuri. One day, Bhaskar offered *payasam* (sweet pudding) to Lord Krishna's image in his house. Amma, who was giving Krishna Bhava darshan, got up and

walked the entire distance to Bhaskar's house. There, she asked him for the *payasam* which he had just offered Krishna. The devotee was dumbfounded and realized that Amma was Lord Krishna himself.

Later, Amma permitted Bhaskar's adopted son to run a teashop inside the ashram for devotees. The young man earned a good income. After a few years, when Amma requested him to move his shop to another spot in the ashram because of space constraints, he became upset and left the ashram.

After the 2004 tsunami, he turned up at one of the ashram's relief camps. Amma noticed him and saw how malnourished he looked. She forgave him for his earlier arrogance and had a house constructed for his family. Such is her boundless compassion.

In the *Gita*, Lord Krishna tells us what kind of offering is dearest to him:

*patram puspam phalam
toyam yo me bhaktya
prayacchati
tadabam bhaktyupabrtam
ashnami prayatatmanah*

I accept even the simplest offering of a leaf, flower, fruit or water, if it is offered with devotion and a pure mind. (9.26)

Amma says that the best offering to God is the '*brdaya-pushpam*' – 'the flower of our heart.' The heart flower denotes pure love and innocence. We have heard that an innocent heart is the dwelling place of God. There are many instances from the lives of Amma's devotees that show this.

There was a devotee in Madurai, whose grandson was born with a congenital heart defect. Since the family could not afford the corrective surgery, Amma told them that she would arrange for the surgery to be done free at the AIMS (Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences) Hospital. As the boy

was then too young to undergo a heart surgery, it was decided that it would be done after he turned three.

In the meantime, the boy grew close to Amma, and began to consider her his dearest playmate. Just before the operation, the family came to meet Amma, who lovingly assured them that the operation would go well. The little boy insisted that Amma be with him during the operation, and she affectionately agreed.

When it was time for the surgery, the boy refused to enter the operating theatre until Amma came. The parents did not know what to do. Finally, a nurse told the boy, "Son, Amma is waiting for you inside the operating theatre!" She thus succeeded in convincing the boy.

After the surgery, the nurses and the doctor remarked on the special fragrance that had lingered in the operating theatre during the operation instead of the usual chemical

smell. When the boy regained consciousness, his first question to his parents was, "Where did Amma go? She was here with me until a moment ago."

The next time they met Amma, they told her what the boy had said. Amma smiled and said, "How could I not come? He was calling out to me so intensely; I could not stay away from him!"

There was once a householder devotee who went to meet his Guru at his ashram. He prayed sincerely to the Guru to free him from the bondage of *samsara* (cycle of birth and death). The Guru was moved and said that he would call the devotee to the ashram when the time was ripe.

A few years later, the Guru called the devotee and asked him to come and live with him at the ashram. The devotee said that as his children were still young, he would come after their marriage. Years passed. After the marriage of the children, the Guru called

him again. This time, the devotee said, "I need more time. I want to spend time with my grandchildren."

Years passed and the devotee died. Because of his attachment to his family, he was reborn as a dog in the house. One day, the Guru visited the devotee's house. Recognizing the dog as his old disciple, the Guru approached him and asked him to follow him. The dog said that he needed to protect the family, which had many enemies. Eventually the dog died and was reborn as a snake in the same house.

Out of deep compassion for his devotee, the Guru made a firm decision to save him at least in this birth. He went to the house and told the family members that there was a snake in their cupboard. He asked them to bring it to him without killing it. They did as advised but also thrashed it. Seeing the bruised snake, the Guru told him, "You should have come to me right at the

beginning, when I called you the first time!”

This story makes me wonder about Tumban and Bhakti, the ashram dogs, on whom Amma lavishes much love and attention. This does not mean we have to be born as a dog or snake to enjoy her love. What the story shows is that the Guru will never forsake us. She hears all our prayers and fulfils the pure desires of every innocent heart.

When we pray to God to fulfil our desires, we should exercise discernment, as wrong desires always bring sorrow. Once, a daughter-in-law prayed intensely to Lord Shiva for relief from her oppressive mother-in-law. Pleased with her penance, Lord Shiva appeared before her and granted her a boon. The daughter-in-law said, “Lord, please grant me three wishes.”

Shiva smiled and replied, “I shall, on one condition. Whatever you ask for, your

mother-in-law will get 10 times more.”

The daughter-in-law agreed. For the first wish, the daughter-in-law asked for 100 *crore* (1 billion) rupees. Lord Shiva smiled and said, “So be it, but your mother-in-law will get 10 billion crores.”

For her second wish, the daughter-in-law said, “I want to become Miss India.”

“Alright,” replied the Lord, “But your mother-in-law will become Miss Universe.”

The daughter-in-law had a hard time digesting this. She thought carefully before asking for her last wish. Finally, she smiled and said, “Lord, I want a mild heart attack.”

We should not pray like this. Praying to harm others makes us unfit for divine grace, as God is compassionate and loves all beings.

The following incident exemplifies Amma’s all-encompassing love. Once, an old man came to meet Amma for the first time during her Chennai

program. He was undergoing tremendous mental suffering and tearfully shared his sad story with Amma. After being diagnosed with stage-one leprosy, he had been treated and his disease had been cured. He even obtained a medical certificate testifying that he was completely healed but his friends and relatives shunned him and treated him as an outcast.

Amma lovingly consoled him, gave him darshan, and made him sit next to her for some time. She called Swami Vinayamritananda, who is in charge of the Chennai ashram, and asked him to give one of the houses from the free-housing project to this old man. Hearing this, the man shed tears of gratitude. “My own family members rejected me,” he said. “But Amma, who did not even know me until today, accepted me and blessed me with a house!”

Even though this man was not a devotee and was meeting

Amma for the very first time, she was ready to help him without any hesitation. Such is the greatness of Amma’s compassion.

There is nothing that we can offer the Guru in return. She turns the business creed, ‘Minimum investment, maximum returns,’ on its head. Her approach reflects a different creed: ‘maximum investment, minimum returns.’ The Guru spends all her time and effort in uplifting her devotees and disciples.

Being *purna* (complete), Amma needs nothing from anyone. She is the ocean of *sat-cit-ananda* (truth-consciousness-bliss). The scriptures say that Sage Shuka became absorbed in pure consciousness after taking just a sip of that ocean. Sage Narada, who also sipped a little of *sat-cit-ananda*, soared into a state of divine ecstasy. How can a mere mortal express her glory? May Amma ever dwell in our hearts. ❧



Amritavarsham68: Pray & Serve

by br. madhavamrita chaitanya

September 25th, 2021, marked the day of the Kartika *nakshatra* (Pleiades constellation), Amma's birth-star. That evening, during bhajans, there was an exchange between Amma and Swami Amritaswarupananda. Swamiji wanted Amma to sing '*Innallo karttika nalu,*' a bhajan that commemorates Amma's birth on the day of the Kartika star, but she would have none of it. Amma spoke about how, during her first 26 years, no one celebrated her birthday. This

was not unusual, for no one in rural areas was fêted on their birthdays in those days. If at all anyone remembered them, it would be the mothers, who would make offerings in a temple for the wellbeing of their children.

It was the first brahmacharis who insisted that Amma's birthday be celebrated. Br. Balu (now Swami Amritaswarupananda) and Br. Rao (now Swami Amritatmananda) bought Amma new clothes as gifts for her 27th birthday. When they reached the ashram, they saw her playing with children. She looked like a child herself — slim and dressed in a blouse and long skirt. They coaxed her into putting on the clothes they had brought. Amma quipped that the T-shirt from Swami Amritatmananda was two sizes too large whereas the skirt that Swamiji brought was three times too large! Somehow, she agreed to put them on over the clothes she was wearing, and

kept them on for all of 10 minutes, after which she removed them, chucked them aside, and dashed back to play.

Amma recalled that when she was not playing with the neighbourhood children, she would sit in meditation for hours on end. Sometimes, she would lie in the backwater slush, oblivious to the outer world. She would not eat anything for two or three days. When roused from her rarefied states, she would demand food that had been cooked three days earlier.

Once, she noticed that Swamiji and Br. Sree (now Swami Purnamritananda) had been composing a bhajan while she was playing with the children. She kicked up a big fuss over why they had not included her in the composing. It was on one such occasion that Amma joined them in singing *Innallo karttika nalu...?*

*innallo karttika nalu
en amma piranna nalu
saundaryam vilangum nalu*

santosham pukkum nalu
Today marks the day of
the Kartika star, the
birth-star of my Mother,
the day when beauty
incarnated and joy
blossomed.

The image of Amma singing a birthday song to herself is vintage Amma. To sing a birthday song to oneself without any self-consciousness whatsoever is possible only for innocent children and for the spiritually illumined, who are totally devoid of any sense of individuality. We might have seen toddlers clapping when people applaud them for something they have done; they haven't acquired an individuated sense of self. Amma's singing of '*Innallo...*' can be seen in a similar light.

More alluring was Amma's evocation of her carefree days. For us, leading lives circumscribed by the pandemic, her words were as mouth-watering as a reel of green meadows and

blue skies would be to prison inmates. But let us not forget that Amma's freedom is essentially spiritual, not physical. It is liberation from social strictures that prescribe how one should act and from the strait-jacket of cares and worries. Of course, Amma is not one to bask in bliss while we wallow in our self-created miseries. She incarnated for the sole purpose of leading us to inner joy.

When the bhajans ended, Amma gave in to Swamiji's request. Soon after, he started singing '*Innallo...*' Amma joined in, much to the delight of her children. She sang guilelessly, just as she must have, 41 years ago.

The next evening, Swami Purnamritananda gave a sat-sang in which he mentioned how the lives of *mabatmas* (spiritually illumined souls) like Amma cannot be contained within the axes of time and space. The following mantra in the *Sri Lalita Sabasra-*

nama (1,000 names of the Divine Mother) expresses this truth: *'Om desha-kala-paricchinnaiyai namah'* — 'Salutations to the Divine Mother, who is not limited by time and space' (701). This ought to give us some idea about why Amma looks upon birthday celebrations as one of the many quaint notions earthlings harbour. Just as the sun never knows darkness, birth and death have no meaning for the eternal.

Yet, Amma humours us. She gives devotees apples on their birthdays. As she wants nothing for herself, she uses her birthday celebrations as occasions to launch some humanitarian project or the other. That has been the case since the first public celebration of her birthday, when she launched *Amritakuteeram*, the free housing project for the poor. Though the pandemic has denied the ashram an opportunity to organize public celebrations in the last two years, Amma has used the

occasion to amplify her ever-green message of praying to God for the strength to help others. The theme of *Amritavarsham*⁶⁸ was, in fact, 'Pray and Serve.'

Starting from September 25th, *homas* — religious rites in which oblations are offered to a sacred fire — were performed over three days in the ashram's large hall. The ashram's monastics, both male and female, performed the *Mahaganapati*, *Navagraha*, *Mahasudarshana*, *Dhanvantari* and *Mrityunjaya* *homas*. The *homas* were accompanied by the chanting of sacred mantras. The aim of these rites is to promote global peace and welfare by removing the obstacles to their attainment, mitigating malefic planetary influences, eradicating negativities at the individual and collective levels, and preventing untimely or premature deaths. There were eight *homa kundas* (fire pits) in total. The smoke from these sacred fires is said to have a

purifying effect on the environment.

When Amma arrived on stage on the 27th, she first asked her children to chant the peace mantra, *Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu* ('May all beings everywhere be peaceful and happy'), 54 times. After the *paduka puja*, the ceremonial washing of her sandals, Amma's pre-recorded birthday message was played. She reminded her children to become more socially aware, and to reach out and help those who are suffering. She spoke about how, unable to afford medicines for regulating blood pressure or blood sugar, for example, some of the poor have been afflicted by strokes. Amma said that the ashram has been trying to identify those in need and helping them with supplies of medicine and in other ways.

Amma also said that the global pandemic is the collective karmic consequence of our actions, nature's retaliation

against us for our rampant exploitation of the environment. She said that just as we would not blame only a part of the ocean if someone drowned in it, we cannot point the finger of blame at anyone in particular for the coronavirus epidemic. We are all equally to blame in one way or another.

What are the lessons to be learnt from this dark, ongoing chapter in our lives? First and foremost, we must learn to treat Mother Nature with much more respect and reverence. Secondly, we must have the faith that we can emerge stronger from this ongoing crisis. Amma said, "Through such challenges, we should be able to tap into the wellspring of strength hidden by our weaknesses... When a river flows, it encounters many obstacles such as boulders, trees and mountains in its path, but it does not stop flowing. It circumvents all impediments and continues to flow. Its only mantra is 'Onward, onward,

onward...’ This mantra gives the river the strength to fulfil its goal of merging into the ocean. Similarly, if we have right understanding, we will have an attitude of acceptance towards life.”

Acceptance is nothing less than seeing the hand of God in all circumstances and facing each one with discernment and a never-say-die spirit. This attitude is an expression of the faith that Providence knows what is best for us. Amma pointed out that if we examine the lives of great people, we will see that all of them became great only by overcoming adversities, which increased their courage and determination to reach the goal.

Amma also spoke about the difference between *vicara-jivis* and *vikara-jivis*. The former are rational whereas the latter are of a more emotional bent. Amma said that we should take the middle path in life, one in which the head is supported by the heart, where

intellectual decisions are informed by love. Instead of giving in to despair, we should calmly consider our options and do what we need to, in order to forge ahead.

There was, as always, much food for thought in Amma’s birthday message. It is up to us to assimilate them as best as we can. As Swamiji pointed out in his satsang on the morning of September 27th, Amma does not force anything down anyone’s throat. Just as Lord Krishna advised Arjuna and then left it up to him to do as he saw fit, Amma imparts dharma to us and then gives us the freedom to act as we wish:

*iti te jnanam akhyatam
gubhyad gubhyataram maya
vimrshyaitad asheshena
yathecchasi tatha kuru*

I have thus imparted to you the most secret of all knowledge. Reflect upon it deeply, and then do as you wish. (*Bhagavad Gita*, 18.63) ❧

Forgive and Forget

by rta
(rita sutcliffe), u.s.a.

I was born into a spiritual family. My father came from a long line of Methodist ministers, although he did not follow that profession, and my grandfather was still actively preaching while I grew up. My mother was also a Methodist. Church going and Bible reading were the foundation of her family and community life. She and her family walked one-and-a-half miles every Sunday morning to a small church to hear the Word of the Lord, and a much-thumbed Bible had a place of honour in the living room.

I was baptized by my grandfather and taken to a Methodist church every single day of my life until I left home for college. My formal religious training included weekly Sunday School, held before the hour-long worship service, and a week-long summer Bible School. An important part of Sunday School and Bible School was hearing stories from the life of Jesus Christ and learning verses from the Bible by heart. For successfully learning Bible verses and longer scriptures, we would receive various small awards. I still have some embroidered bookmarks of Bible verses that I won for having memorized that week's scripture challenge. The verses that most captured my imagination were:

Love your neighbour as yourself. (James 2:8)

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (Mathew 7:12)

Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other

also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. (Luke 6:29)

For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me...

Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. (Mathew 25: 35-40)

Unknown to me, I was absorbing and being shaped by the *mahavakyas* (great sayings) of the Christian faith, which would become the foundation of my life. My future behaviour and standards were based on what I observed in my family and the scriptures I studied and memorized as a child.

Among them were many stories and sayings from Christ's teachings of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a cornerstone of Christianity, although that is not always apparent in the words and actions of some Christians.

Judge not, that you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. (Luke 6:37-38)

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-35)

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

(Lord's prayer, Mathew 6:12)

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. (Mark 11:25)

Father forgive them, for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34)

As a teenager, I ferreted out some hypocrisy in formal religion and among people in our church. I also had some doctrinal issues with the version of Christianity I was being taught. I had the usual arrogance and outraged righteousness of youth, and when I left home for college, I left organized Christian religion, embarked on a spiritual search among other great religious traditions, and commenced a lifelong study of comparative religion. I was still searching at age 39, when I heard about Amma.

In 1986, a young woman named Kusuma travelled

across the USA to organize Amma's first World Tour. I had the good fortune to hear her talk about Amma and show a video of her on June 21, 1986. The moment I heard Amma's name, something resonated within me, and after hearing a description of her life and seeing the video, I strongly felt that she was the teacher I had been seeking. She seemed to be someone who did not just write books and give lectures but who had experienced the Truth. In those days, all that was available about Amma was a small biography, a few small black-and-white photographs, and a tiny book of teachings called *For My Children*. I purchased these and put Amma's picture on my altar. From that day onwards, I consulted her little book of teachings and asked myself in every situation, "What would Amma do?"

I finally met Amma in 1987 and it was obvious that she was my spiritual guide. I did my first North Indian mini-

tours with her in 1989 and 1990 and began visiting Amritapuri Ashram in 1991, where I lived for most of the year until 2016, when family responsibilities drew me back to the USA. During my time at the ashram and in the USA, I had abundant opportunities to contemplate and practise forgiveness based on Amma's teachings and example and my Christian upbringing.

One saying that I heard Amma stress early on was, "Today's friend is tomorrow's enemy. Today's enemy is tomorrow's friend." Amma often repeats the same stories and points over and over again. I confess that in my 33 years with Amma, I have been guilty of mentally saying to myself, "Oh, there's that story again!" and even tune out for a while. Big mistake, as I found that I would often hear a story or allusion that I had already heard a hundred times and suddenly I would hear it differently and a new world of

subtle meanings would open up. So it was with *today's friend, tomorrow's enemy*.

Before meeting Amma, I had never noticed this enemy-friend, friend-enemy phenomenon, but shortly after hearing this phrase, I began having this experience quite often. One stands out in my mind. I recruited someone I had thought of as a friend, or at least a friendly acquaintance, to work on a project with me, as she had a lot of experience in this area. Soon, I noticed her sitting every night with my supervisor and discovered later that those nightly sessions were critiques of me! I was hurt and bewildered and felt betrayed. Subsequently, we both ended up leaving the project.

A few years later, she declined even to live in the same building that I did. I realized I must have unknowingly disturbed her deeply but had no idea what I had or how to remedy the situation.

Fast forward a few more years. We were both on Amma's Europe Tour but not going to Finland, because flights there were too expensive for us. There were a number of us in this situation, and one of the French ashrams, Le Centre Amma - Ferme du Plessis, graciously agreed to host us. Most were in a dormitory setting, but a few of the elderly from the tour group were given rooms. When I went to my assigned room, guess who my roommate was? The same woman! I acted as if nothing had ever transpired between us. So did she, and we chatted about many things and stayed together harmoniously for three days, until it was time to join the tour again. After we had finished packing our bags, she told me how much she had enjoyed sharing the room with me and hoped we would be roommates again some time! This was the same person who had thought she could not even be in the same building with

me. Yesterday's enemy was now today's friend!

Amma often tells us that when we criticize someone, we should look at ourselves to see if we are doing the same thing. She also often says that when we point the finger of blame at someone, three fingers are pointing back at us. She also tells us to remember that whenever we have a negative experience with someone, we are likely to have done the same thing to someone in a past life. That person is just a vehicle for the delivery of karma. As usual, all these teachings of Amma were shown to me over and over again in real life situations, often in mundane ones.

One of my pet peeves in ashram life was people standing around and blocking the passageway while chatting. I would mutter to myself, "Why are they stopping in a doorway to talk, when no one can pass?" "Why are they stopping on the stairwell and blocking the way

for those who want to pass?" "Why are they holding up the elevator to have this conversation after we have waited for over 10 minutes for it?" Soon thereafter, I would find myself doing the same things while having a crucial communication that had to happen at that moment. So how could I continue to be irritated when I realized that I, unconsciously or consciously, did the same thing and had to forgive them and myself as well?

I have always been hypersensitive about being misunderstood. One day, when someone mentioned a big misunderstanding that we had had a while ago. I realized that I had totally forgotten about it. It was like barely being able to see objects or their contours on a foggy day. I had not only forgiven but forgotten some painful situations with people. Something that had seemed so crucial then no longer seemed worth bothering about. What a relief!

I realized I had also been influenced by a few brahmacharini friends, who, even after huge disputes, went on interacting with each other as usual. Brahmacharinis I had altercations with did not even seem to remember the quarrels the next time I saw them.

Amma tells us again and again to forgive, not to bear grudges, and to work together with the common goal of serving humanity. These lofty goals are not always achieved, but when one lives physically with Amma and sees her example daily, we move closer to these ideals.

Living closely with Amma, I have seen how she never holds a grudge against anyone. She has welcomed back into the ashram, people who slandered her and the ashram. People, including myself, indulge in all kinds of unexpected behaviour around Amma when buried *vasanas* (latent tendencies) surface. Amma forgives, even making excuses on our behalf.

Watching and listening, I received lesson after lesson from a living Master on the power of forgiveness.

The next step, to see that all of creation is perfect, has been harder for me, far beyond my level of spiritual understanding. Yet I know it must be true, as Amma and other spiritual masters say it is. However, with the COVID-19 virus destroying so many lives and fires of rage burning all over the world, it is hard to see that perfection. But advanced souls do see it. And we do know that from destruction can come transformation, as I personally experienced in the aftermath of the tsunami of December 26, 2004. I saw how that tragic event broke down walls and structures and unleashed another tsunami, albeit a positive one. Many women, who lost their husbands, were given vocational training and thus empowered to become providers for their family. We do not know what will come out of

these dark days, but we do know that rainbows can suddenly appear. Likewise, all the experiences I have had have been orchestrated for my spiritual growth and journey to perfection. How then can I be angry and unforgiving with someone who is only trying to help me grow, whether they know it or not?

Occasionally, going through these experiences and contemplating on them, I have a flash of insight: "There's no one to forgive!" There is no one there to forgive as there is only the underlying supreme consciousness, which is never wrong, can never do wrong. Supreme consciousness is pure love, and what is there to forgive in pure love? What an incredible sense of freedom these moments of expanded consciousness bring me. But they remain moments, experienced only sporadically.

I realized that one of the many differences between a *mahatma* (spiritually illumined

soul) and the rest of us is that we may forgive certain incidents whereas Amma is forgiveness. In that state, forgiveness just flows from her like water, without thought or deliberation. The state of *sabhya samaadhi*, the abiding state of Oneness in which she abides permanently, precludes any other way of being.

Early in my life, the teachings and example of Jesus Christ laid a strong spiritual foundation in forgiveness. But when I met Amma and saw forgiveness in a living human form, it all became real and alive for me. It was like the difference between seeing in black and white and then seeing in colour, or being short-sighted and then putting on glasses. Let us make use of our great good fortune to be alive when Amma is showing us daily how we can transcend our base emotions and become like her, in a constant state of forgiveness, of oneness, and of supreme pure love. 🌸

Spreading the Light of Love in Prisons

by bri. bhavani, india

Self-harm and suicidal behaviour are the leading causes of death in prisons around the world. Surveys in jails throughout India revealed that many inmates want to learn yoga and meditation to gain a more positive mindset. In 2017, following one such survey conducted across jails in Kerala, volunteers from the Kottayam District Legal Services Authority approached Amma for help. In response, she sent ashram volunteers from the Amrita Circle of Love




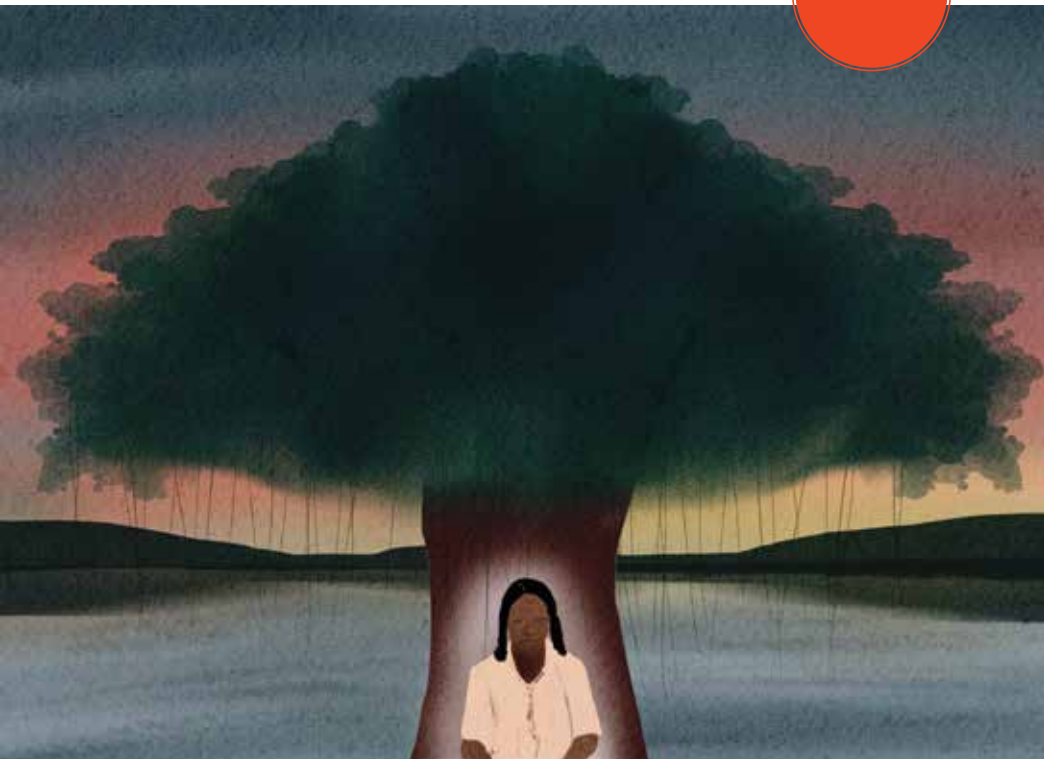
team to teach Amrita Yoga and the Integrated Amrita Meditation (IAM™) technique to prisoners in Kerala. Both Amrita Yoga and IAM™ were formulated by Amma to promote physical and mental health.

In 2019, Amrita Vishva Vidyapeetham, the M.A. Math and the Tamil Nadu Prison Department collaborated to initiate this program in Tamil Nadu. Volunteers conducting the program, are trained by the ashram. They teach all convicts and prisoners in remand, irrespective of race, religion or gender. Since 2019, the inmates of 114 prisons in Tamil Nadu — including central prisons, district jails, sub-jails and borstal schools — have attended the Amrita Yoga and IAM™ program. To date, ashram volunteers have conducted 1,112 sessions that have benefited 21,438 inmates. During the pandemic, online classes have been conducted wherever it

was found impractical for volunteers to visit the jails.

More than 78% of the inmates who participated said that the IAM™ alleviated their depression and improved their moods. One inmate stated, “Doing this simple yet powerful meditation every day has relaxed my mind. This has been not just my experience but that of everyone here.” Another inmate said, “When I wake up every morning, I look forward to this meditation. I will be happy if I can continue this course every day in the prison.” Yet another said, “We feel so blessed to receive this training even during the pandemic. We would like to thank Amma for this opportunity.”

Surprised by the positive outcome, the Deputy Generals of Police and Deputy Inspector Generals of the prisons have requested the ashram to conduct Amrita Yoga and IAM™ on a routine basis for both the inmates and prison officials. 



Om Namah Shivaya

by rachna chhabria, india

From the time she was young, Sudhamani would see her mother Damayanti-amma pray every day. Waking up early, Damayanti-amma would bathe before sunrise. Then she would pluck flowers from the garden and sit in the family's prayer room for hours.

One day, while Damayan-ti-amma was cooking in the kitchen, Sudhamani asked her, "Amma, how can one see God?"

"If you pray sincerely, God will appear before you," her mother replied.

"What does God look like?" Sudhamani asked.

"When you see God, you will know," her mother said, "Now, go and study. Let me complete my cooking."

"Today, I'll pray the whole day until God appears before me," Sudhamani decided. Seeing that everyone in the house was busy, Sudhamani went out of the house. The sun's rays warmed the world as she walked down the deserted street. "I need a quiet place where I can pray in solitude, a place where no one will disturb me," Sudhamani thought, looking around. Seeing the temple in the distance, she had an idea. She headed towards it. Entering the temple premises, she looked

around and saw many devotees.

"I'll meditate under the old banyan tree," thought Sudhamani and walked towards the ancient tree. She sat down cross-legged under it. Closing her eyes, she started meditating, visualizing the form of Lord Shiva and chanting the mantra, "*Om namah shivaya.*" She had often heard her mother chant this sacred incantation.

The birds on the tree twittered. A couple of squirrels made chattering noises. Sudhamani disconnected her mind from the birdcall and other sounds.

Some time passed. "What are you doing here, my child?" asked someone, shaking Sudhamani by her arm. The young girl reluctantly opened her eyes. It was the temple priest. The old man stared at her with a concerned expression on her face. "It's the peak of summer, child. Go home before you get a sunstroke," he said.

“Okay,” said Sudhamani and stood up. She walked out of the temple gates and headed towards the seashore. Choosing a secluded spot, Sudhamani sat down on the sand. Closing her eyes, she once again started chanting “Om namah shivaya” and focusing her mind on the image of Lord Shiva. Within minutes, the young girl became absorbed in meditation.

The sounds of the gentle waves lapping the shore enhanced the tranquil ambience of the coast. A few kites flew overhead, making their distinctive keening sound.

The sun was now directly overhead. Its harsh rays prickled the young girl’s skin. Nevertheless, she continued meditating. Half an hour passed. A gentle wind ruffled her hair and caressed her body.

An hour passed. Still Sudhamani did not open her eyes. Dark clouds were hovering in the sky, blotting out the sun.

A few drops of rain began to fall, soaked up soundlessly by the sand. Soon, the drops turned into a gentle shower.

“Child, what are you doing here in the rain?” asked an old woman, shaking Sudhamani’s arm.

Reluctantly Sudhamani opened her eyes. “You will fall ill! Go home, daughter.” Grabbing Sudhamani by the arm, the old woman started walking briskly. The rain turned fierce as the young girl and the old woman reached the road. Both were soaked to the skin. Waving goodbye to the woman, Sudhamani walked down the lane leading to her house. Within minutes, her house loomed into view.

“Where did you go?” Damayanti-amma asked, the moment Sudhamani entered her house. “We have been looking everywhere for you.”

Sudhamani’s younger siblings — Satheesh, Sajani, Suresh, Sudhir and Sugunamma — were standing

behind their mother, watched her intently.

“I went to the beach,” replied Sudhamani.

“Don’t ever go there alone,” Damayanti-amma warned.

Sudhamani went into the room she shared with her sisters and changed into a set of dry clothes.

After drinking the tea her mother prepared for her, Sudhamani sat down in the family’s prayer room. “Why didn’t you appear before me?” Sudhamani cried, staring at the idol of Devi. “When will I see you?”

Sudhamani heard a voice from within. “You saw me so many times, Sudhamani. I came in the form of the old priest and the old woman. I was the shade of the banyan tree that you sat under. I touched you as the sun’s rays and the cool caresses of the wind. I was the sound of the waves and the keening kites. You heard me in the twittering of the birds, the chattering of

the squirrels, and the rustling of the leaves. I was the rain that drenched you.”

Sudhamani’s eyes widened. God was everywhere, both within and without.

“Even after seeing me so many times, how can you think I deserted you? My child, I’ve no fixed abode. I dwell in the heart of all beings. I’ve always been with you. You are as much a part of me as I am a part of you.”

From then on, Sudhamani began worshipping everyone and everything as a physical manifestation of God.

Many years later, Sudhamani came to be known as Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi or Amma. She made it her mission in life to comfort ailing humanity, giving them solace and succour in times of distress. ❧

This is a fictionalized story based on the life of Amma.

Lilas Around Amma

Master Planner

A quote I often recall is from the movie, 'I Am Amma's Baby:' "When we ask Amma for one, she gives us a hundred."

It is truly amazing how Amma knows all our deepest wishes and gives us what we want, provided our attitude is pure and innocent. Her children all around the world must have many stories that can attest to this. Amma knows how to guide each one of us according to what is best for us. We may be confused



about why things are not working out to our liking, but we will realize later that Amma was with us the whole time. She hears the call of our hearts and orchestrates situations in a way that will leave us in awe of her divine will.

From her room, Amma can hear the cows from the ashram cowshed and birds. Recently, when she heard the cawing of a crow, she sensed that it was in distress. Looking out of the window, she saw that the crow had only one eye and one leg and was starving. She asked Swamini Sreelakshmi to feed it. On another occasion, when she heard the cries of a cow, she asked a brahmachari to investigate. He found a cow crying in sorrow because her baby calf had been taken away.

These two instances reveal Amma's motherly nature, how she is able to instinctually understand the needs of her children in all forms, and rush to their help. How fortunate we are to have come under the

guidance of such a compassionate mother, whose love and concern is a balm for any sorrow.

Ever since I can remember, my only desire was to be physically with Amma as much as possible. During my college studies, I did multiple jobs to earn enough money so that I could be with her on her US Tour or in Amritapuri. While working, I would listen to bhajans whenever possible, thinking about and pining for Amma's physical presence. When I did not have to study for exams, I would work extra shifts, which sometimes extended into the night, and return first thing the next morning to start the day shift after sleeping for just a couple of hours. In this way, I was able to visit some cities on Amma's Summer US tours and spend the Christmas and New Year holidays in Amritapuri. When Amma saw me, she would say, "This boy works hard and buys his own air tickets so that he

can spend time with Amma!” These words would make my heart overflow with happiness and inspire me to work even harder in school and my jobs.

Let me narrate a series of events that prove what a master planner Amma is. In 2019, I booked a flight to Europe so that I could take part in a few of Amma’s programs there. Owing to a delay, I missed a connecting flight in Iceland. Instead of flying straight to Munich, I was rerouted to Copenhagen and only then to Munich. What was supposed to be a nine-hour journey lasted 19 hours! A woman who was in the same predicament was sitting next to me on one of the flights. She was a lawyer in Germany and said that, according to European law and airline policy in the case of severe delays, I was entitled to compensation. At that time, I was just too frustrated and tired. I was upset that I had missed Amma’s *prasād* dinner in Munich and had to spend

that night in an airport hotel. Before going to bed, I sluggishly inquired about the possibility of compensation on the airline contact page.

In the next city, London, when Amma was leaving the stage one night, she gave me an all-knowing look and asked, “How did you get the money to come here?” I told her that I had worked to earn enough money to spend time with her. Amma nodded approvingly. I returned to the US. After a few months, I received an email informing me that I would receive €600 in compensation for the delay! I was stunned, as the amount covered both the cost of the round-trip flight and accommodation in the airport hotel. With this money, I booked a flight to India for Amma’s 2020 South India Tour and spent some time in Amritapuri after that. During my flight back to the US, the TV screen in front of me was not working. I was compensated with a voucher

for this tiny inconvenience! This voucher was valid until March 12, 2021, and I could use it to purchase air tickets or book hotel accommodation.

Little did I know then that the COVID-19 pandemic would hit the whole world in March 2020. My desire to see and be close to Amma was shattered, as all tours with Amma were cancelled and there were no flights even. My one wish was to know when I could next see Amma or travel to Amritapuri, as knowing that would motivate me and keep my spirits high. I found it difficult to keep my mind in the present moment and had difficulty sleeping as I was always brooding about when I could see Amma.

Days passed painfully. In early March 2021, I learnt that with my OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) visa, I could come to Amritapuri. I was already working from home because of the pandemic, and the company I was working in

approved my application to work from abroad. As I was booking my flight to India, I remembered the voucher from the previous year. Checking it, I saw that it was expiring on the day I was leaving the US: March 12th!

During the flight, I kept thinking about Amma's call, "*Omana makkale vegam*" — "Come running, darling children" — and my eyes welled up with tears as I reflected on how she had answered my deep desire to be in her physical presence. When she gives, she gives something unimaginable, unexpected and special. The love that fills our hearts after this takes away all other desires.

Amma truly knows what is best for us and will shower her torrential grace at the right time. We just have to surrender and keep reminding ourselves that Amma is always with us, no matter what. I bow down with endless gratitude before this ocean of love.

— *Chandan Yashraj, USA*

Healing

I met Amma for the first time in 1993 in Bangalore, and have been seeing her every year since, whenever she visits Bangalore. I have also visited the Amritapuri Ashram several times. Though I received a mantra from Amma only much later, in December 2006, I have considered her my Guru and God from my first meeting. For me, she is Kali incarnate, ever ready to help her children. Any time I face a problem, I pray to Amma, my refuge and saviour. Though she is physically younger than me, I regard her as my mother. Amma also resembles my biological mother.

Whenever I have aches and pains in my body, I rub Amma's *vibhuti* (sacred ash) on the affected parts. My faith that her *vibhuti* will help has always borne fruit; after I apply the *vibhuti*, the pain invariably goes away. Amma's *vibhuti* is like medicine to me.

A few years ago, I had severe pain in my right shoulder, I had to sleep with my right hand stretched out. I could not even raise it to comb my hair. Putting on clothes was difficult. I visited an orthopaedic doctor, who recommended surgery. We fixed the date and time for the surgery.

I did not want to undergo the surgery. That night, I tearfully prayed to Amma, pleading with her to help me. She appeared in my dream and showed me a particular shoulder exercise as well as a breathing technique I was to do during the exercise.

During the dream, I asked Amma what I could do about my knee pain. She said, "We will do something about it later."

The next morning, I cancelled the doctor's appointment, saying that I was not well and that I would try to reschedule the surgery after a week. I then started doing the exercise Amma taught me.

Within a week, my shoulder pain was gone. I still do that exercise regularly, although there have been days when I forgot to do it. Whenever I stop exercising for a few days, the pain returns. I immediately resume the exercise and the pain goes away.

For years, my doctor had misdiagnosed the pain in my leg, attributing it to varicose veins. I had to wear special tight stockings for a long time. The pain in my left leg would keep me awake at night. I would sit up and start rubbing my leg to ease the pain.

When I consulted another doctor, he said that there was a clot caused by a ruptured nerve penetrating a main nerve. He advised surgery to remove the clot. The doctor also said that a tiny portion of the main nerve may have to be cut when he removes the clot and that he may insert a stent in that nerve. It was a minor surgery, after which I would have to be hospitalized for two

days. I agreed to undergo the procedure.

During the surgery, the doctor saw that the clot was not penetrating any nerve, and so, he could remove it easily without damaging or cutting any nerve. As a precaution, the doctor sent the clot for biopsy. It was non-malignant.

After the surgery, the doctor told me that I had never had varicose veins and asked me to throw away the stockings I had worn for years.

Though the pain in my left leg went away, my knees continued to trouble me. I had no idea what Amma had planned for my knees. The pain increased. When it became unbearable, I consulted a few orthopaedic specialists, who suggested total knee replacement for both knees. I selected one of the orthopaedic surgeons, who said that he would operate on one knee first; a few months later, he would perform surgery on the other knee. I was scared of two hospitali-

zations, two surgeries, and undergoing physiotherapy twice. I prayed to Amma, asking her to help me.

During the surgery, the doctor performed the knee replacement on both my knees. Within two weeks, I was able to walk without the aid of a walker. The doctor was

surprised by my speedy recovery and progress and pleased that the surgery had gone well.

Amma's grace has always protected and healed me. May Amma continue to hold her children in her embrace and shower her unending grace on all of us. 🌸

— *Sheela Chhabria, India*



On the Trail of Liberation

A RECOUNTING OF PRECIOUS MOMENTS WITH AMMA



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