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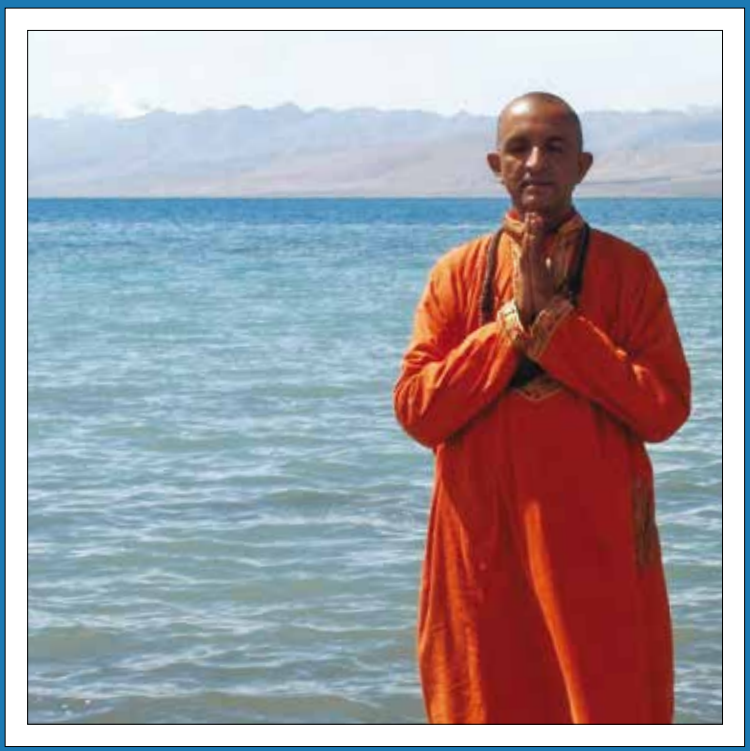
CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS SERIES

Bhakti Marg 3

The Many Faces of the Divine

From the teachings of
two great luminaries of the 20th century

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati
Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Bhakti Marg 3
The Many Faces of the Divine

With kind regards, ॐ and prem

Swami Niranjan

Customs and Traditions Series

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From the teachings of
two great luminaries of the 20th century,

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Including answers from the satsangs of
Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati

Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

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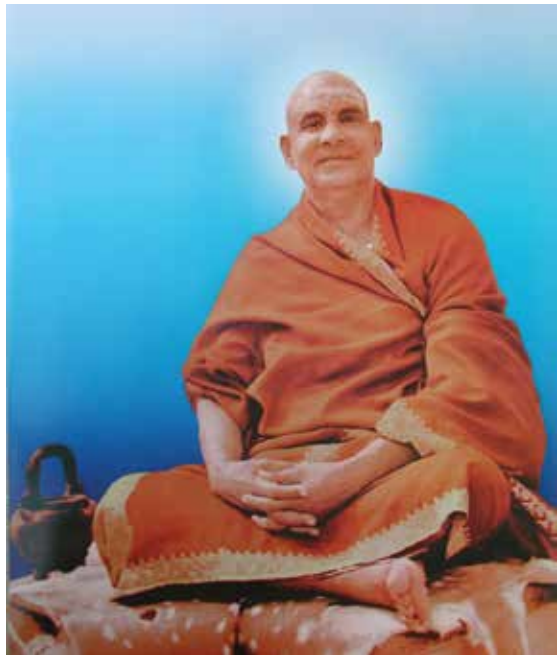
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Dedication

In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga.

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Preface

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

Customs and Traditions – Bhakti Marg consists of three volumes. They explore the depth and beauty of the many paths leading to the experience of bhakti, carved forever in the hearts of bhaktas. Yet how to express this feeling of love for the unlimited, infinite reality or Being? Out of compassion for seekers and aspirants, bhaktas of all times have tried through music and poetry to give expression to the innermost chamber of their hearts.

In *Bhakti Marg* the voice of three generations of masters is heard. The question and answer format lends immediacy to the content and establishes a personal relationship between the masters and readers, who may discover questions they would also like to ask and answers they are looking for. The wealth of information, insight and practical guidance contained in these volumes becomes a source of inexhaustible inspiration to the devotee. Ultimately however, it is the devotee's sincerity and ability to develop more and more love that will lead to the unique experience of bhakti. The poet Jafar has said:

> Why do you ask me the way to meet Him?
> If it is your resolve to meet the Lord,
> The way is there from all sides.

The three volumes of *Bhakti Marg* show the devotees how to find and adore their deity, how to unite with the beloved in the state of bhakti. The understanding that there is something beyond the gross, material dimension of existence is part of the human psyche. Unkown and incomprehensible as the transcendental dimension may be, the desire to experience at least a glimpse of it is embedded in the collective consciousness of humankind.

Worshipping the sun, the god hidden in thunder and rain, a tree, rock or river are the first expressions of this longing to connect. In the course of human history, seers and sages discovered and revealed *mantras*, sound vibrations, and *murtis*, elaborate forms of the Divine which were used to reach out into the unknown. Through sound and form the distant reality enters the devotee's heart and life. *Bhakti Marg* presents ways and methods to appease the yearning for closeness with the Divine.

Introduction

Bhakti Marg 3: The Many Faces of the Divine describes the play of the Divine here on Earth. Divinity descends, manifests and lives with the sole purpose of guiding and inspiring people to evolve. The infinite forms of the Divine reflect the hopes, desires and needs of people of all times and cultures. Divinity is one with myriad forms, yet the devotee becomes attracted to one specific form. Out of love for the devotee, God changes shapes and clothes, colour and attire. God allows the devotee to choose.

Today's modern society is in search of a direction and channel for the strongest human emotion – love. People do not find in their contemporary culture what they are looking for and are attracted to gods, goddesses, saints and sages from other cultures and eras. They reach out into bygone times to revive ancient traditions and they reach out across the globe to reconnect with the transcendental dimension alive in other cultures. The Indian system of music, *kirtan*, has become a global phenomenon. It is singing the many names of the many forms of the Divine. Pilgrimages or *yatra* are fascinating people around the world. That which, only a few years ago, was reserved for staunch believers, is now drawing people of all walks of life.

The foundation of Indian spiritual traditions is the desire to experience in this world and in this human life the unmanifest, formless, invisible and incomprehensible

dimension. There is complete faith that this dimension or transcendental reality exists. Yet how can one connect to it, feel it, experience it? The answer is love.

The devotee has to increase the quantity and purify the quality of love. The ceaseless flow of love has to expand until the whole world is in a loving embrace. When a bhakta's love is selfless and unconditional for all of creation, then he lives and expresses bhakti and becomes a bhakta.

Devata

These faces, forms, sounds and manifestations are called devata, which Sri Swami Satyananda defines in the following manner, "Devata is a form that is embedded in the human consciousness. This form is based on the archetypes and is inherent in the human mind. These archetypes are primitive, millions and millions of years old. They have lived with man from the day of his advent, or even before that."

Seers and sages in deep states of meditation have experienced these archetypes as sound and form. The form is called devata. According to Sri Swami Satyananda, "That form is not just what is perceived by the eyes. It is a circuit of energy itself." Therefore, devata does not mean a god or goddess. Gods and goddesses are forms like triangles, snakes or flowers. They may be more refined, more elaborate forms, yet the essence is still energy.

The meaning of the word *devata* is 'something that sheds light, illumines, enlightens'. Each individual feels drawn to a form corresponding to his or her nature, inclination and aspiration. That form becomes the source of support and inspiration.

Avatar

Only under certain conditions do special beings incarnate, take a human form and live among their people. These beings are called avatars. There is a specific time and purpose for an avatar's incarnation which is described by Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:7–8):

> Whenever there is decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Arjuna, I manifest Myself.
> For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked;
> And for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age.

An avatar comes with a mission and a message for humankind at a precise moment in history. It is not a random or a chance event, but rather an event that has the power to change the course of human history. Avatars, therefore, are known to civilizations of all times. Their influence extends way beyond the time and civilizations they manifest in. Buddha, Christ and Mohammed are avatars who have given shape to the human understanding and experience of life the world over, and their guidance and influence continues to this day.

In the Indian culture, Sri Rama and Sri Krishna, the most beloved avatars, incarnated thousands of years ago, yet they remain alive in the hearts of devotees as the source of inspiration, examples of *dharmic*, righteous, living and as the foundation for boundless love and worship. Their presence is an integral part in a devotee's life, enriching and guiding every step and expression of feeling. The purpose of their coming is never lost as it is contained in their teaching and in the exemplary way they have managed the many challenges they faced, for they had no easy lives.

Having taken human form, their joys and sorrows are human. They have families, friends and enemies. They have duties and responsibilities to shoulder. They show how life can be mastered with skill and dignity. This is how Swami Sivananda describes the role of an avatar, "There is the descent of God for the ascent of man. Avatars are rays of God."

The devotee's choice

God takes many forms, each one elevating the consciousness of the devotee. It is personal inclination and aspiration that determines the choice of a particular form of God for an

aspirant. It is a choice beyond reason and logic, a choice of the heart and soul. Ultimately, God is one. The divine, transcendental reality is one, yet manifests its many qualities in various forms and shapes: fearsome or benevolent, playful or disciplined, creating, sustaining or destroying, removing obstacles, dissolving desires or simply exemplifying the possibility of perfection. Unable to relate to the invisible presence permeating all of creation, names and forms are a medium to be loved, adored and worshiped by the devotee.

The distinction of god and goddess is man-made. God is genderless, so are consciousness and energy. Gods have been given a human body to help establish a relationship between the devotee and his beloved deity. Swami Satyananda describes the essence of this relationship, "In the early stage of bhakti, one must remember that duality exists. There is the lover and there is the beloved. This *dvaita*, or duality, is something that bhaktas do not want to part with."

Krishna bhakti

Nowhere is this duality more beautifully expressed than in the lila of Krishna bhakti. The gopis were not simple village girls. Swami Sivananda says, "Gopis were exalted beings. They should not be judged by human standards." They understood and knew with every fibre of their being that Krishna was not an ordinary human being, a cowherd like the others. They maintained constant awareness of his divinity and this allowed them to experience his presence, his darshan. Swami Niranjanananda states, "God's grace is not received through the sense faculties. The vessel of God's grace is one's inner strength and force of spirit."

The rasa lila is the culmination of the relationship between the gopis and Sri Krishna; there they transcend the duality of lover and beloved as they seek and experience oneness. Swami Niranjanananda describes the rasa lila thus, "The consciousness of the gopis went so high that they became one with transcendental reality for that particular period of time as they danced." According to the *Narada*

Bhakti Sutras (sutras 20–22) the gopis represent 'the perfect expression of bhakti', and the bhakta's journey from duality to unity.

Yatra, a pilgrim's encounter with the Divine

All over the world places have been identified as being endowed with a special or strong presence of the Divine. These places known to all civilizations are called tirthas. A *tirtha* is a place where faith becomes a living experience, faith comes alive in a place of pilgrimage. It is faith that inspires and motivates the pilgrim to go on an arduous journey, braving obstacles and challenges along the way with the goal of having prayers fulfilled, receiving guidance and strength or simply having darshan of the Beloved.

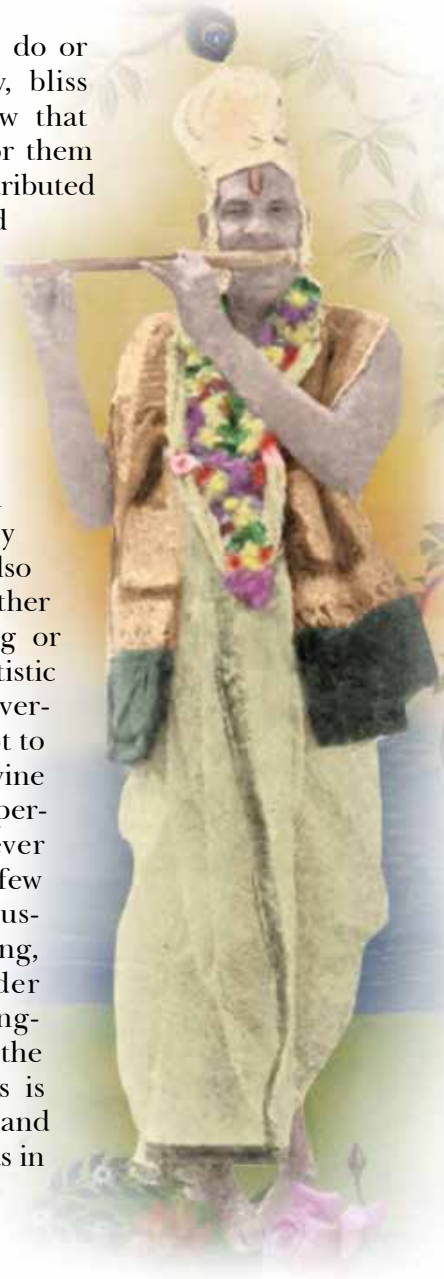
The Beloved may be an exquisite form of the deity, cast in gold and decked in precious stone, or an unadorned *murti*, figure, symbol or idol. Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder and in the heart of the devotee. The place of pilgrimage may be a simple or elaborate temple, a stone, a tree, a mountain. A place where divinity manifests is like a magnet inviting devotees to partake of the manifestation kept alive with the depth of their own faith. Mount Kailash is considered sacred by Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Bon traditions.

Swami Sivananda, Swami Satyananda and Swami Niranjanananda have shared their encounters with the sacred places they went to as humble devotees and bhaktas. The personal experiences of three modern-day pilgrims illustrate the extraordinary sadhana that a pilgrimage can be if undertaken with purity of intention and complete surrender.

The overflow of love

Once the experience of bhakti is attained, it becomes a state which is lived every moment. Swami Satyananda states, "Bhaktas continue to live their lives in a state of calmness. However, each action and each thought is permeated with awareness of the Divine. Every act becomes blissful."

There is nothing left to do or be except to share joy, bliss and love. Bhaktas know that attainment cannot be for them only but has to be distributed freely among one and all, throughout God's creation. This they do unquestioningly, unconditionally in every interaction they have with the world.



Bhaktas transmit bhakti not only through their being and daily life but, on occasion, also through their art. Whether storytelling, dance, song or poetry, each form of artistic expression is but an overflow of love in an attempt to let the world and the Divine know that what they experience and live can never be communicated. A few examples of poetry illustrate the depth of feeling, devotion and surrender to the Divine. The longing and the ecstasy are the bhakta's reality and this is conveyed as a testimony and inspiration to all aspirants in search of bhakti.

1

Devata

MANIFESTATIONS OF DEVATA

What is the meaning of the word devata?

Swami Satyananda: The word devata does not mean god. In Sanskrit the literal meaning of the word *devata* is derived from the primal sound *dyu*, which means 'to enlighten' or 'illumine'. A primal sound is composed by nature, not by man. 'Dyu' is always used in the sense of enlightenment or illumination. Etymologically it is anything that is illumined, anything that is enlightened or light. A torchlight can also be called devata, because it illumines and throws light everywhere.

How does the *Bhagavad Gita* describe deva?

Swami Sivananda: *Deva* literally means 'shining one'. By sacrifice the gods such as Indra are nourished, and the gods shall nourish with rain. The highest good is the attainment of the knowledge of the Self which frees one from the round of births and deaths. The highest good may also mean the attainment of heaven. The fruit depends upon the motive of the aspirant. The *Bhagavad Gita* says (3:11):

Devaanbhaavayataanena te devaa bhaavayantu vah;
Parasparam bhaavayantah shreyah paramavaapsyatha.

> With this do you nourish the gods and may those gods nourish you; thus nourishing one another, you shall attain the highest good.

Could devata be described as a visible form of energy?

Swami Satyananda: Devata means a tangible form which can be perceptible, which can be visible, which can be seen. A triangle, a bird, tree or flower drawn on a blackboard is a form. That form is not just what is perceived by the eyes. It is a circuit of energy itself. Therefore, it is said in tantra that every form is filled with potential energy. When a form is created on a piece of paper, certain forces of energy are transformed onto the paper. When a drawing or painting is being created on a blackboard, canvas or paper, what exactly is being done is rendering the invisible, transcendental, unseen forces or powers of the circuits of nature into one particular form, and that form is again reconvertible into energy.

Is the devata based on the archetypes of the mind?

Swami Satyananda: Devata is a form that is embedded in the human consciousness. This form is based on the archetypes and is inherent in the human mind. These archetypes are primitive, millions and millions of years old. They have lived with man from the day of his advent, or even before that.

Even animals, highly evolved animals and others as well, have their archetypes. These archetypes are in a subtle form. In the human being they would not only be in billions and trillions, but trillions of billions. In yoga these archetypes are called *samskaras*, and in western countries they are called karma. In this context *karma* means the deep-embedded archetypes in the personality, or in man's structure. These archetypes are so funny. If they are to be expressed and brought to the forefront on the level of higher consciousness, their figures will sometimes be very horrifying, like a dragon, or Kali. That is the form of an archetype.

When the archetypes are developed on the upper surface of the human mind or consciousness, they can be seen in

these forms. In their basic form, these forces are responsible for the evolution of mind and matter. In the Darwinian theory of natural evolution there is something which is not clear. After all, why does evolution happen? There has to be a process of linking. In evolution there has to be a constant link from one state to another, but in the process of evolution of matter and mind, there is a missing link. There is something missing which cannot be explained.

This missing link is the archetype. This archetype comes even to animals. Highly developed animals, like elephants and monkeys, at a particular time, not necessarily all the time, have some sort of hallucination or experience. For a certain period of time like a fraction of a second they see something which is not there. As a result of this particular perception, of this particular experience of the expression of the archetype, evolution of consciousness is pushed a bit further.

Therefore, in meditation, either spontaneously or through the practices, when one happens to come across certain experiences, certain forms or divinities, certain animals or a light, or one sees the whole universe or many objects, it means one is bringing the primitive archetypes from the dark side of one's consciousness to the upper point of one's consciousness and thereby giving a thrust to one's evolution.

This evolutionary thrust comes in the form of experience. This experience is devata. Some call it divine experience, some transcendental experience; others call it hallucination. Some call it atma jnana, some samadhi. Some call it universal experience, others cosmic experience. Some people hear sounds, others can see forms. Some can see dragons, some can see Kali, some can see a man or a woman with four hands and a beautiful face. That is devata.

What is the need for a deva?

Swami Niranjanananda: God is definitely one, and represents the highest qualities of existence or *Brahman*, the evolved being. At the same time, however, there are many devas. The word *deva* means 'a being made of light'. In each stage

of life the quality which we express is a deva. One may be a very good person. That quality of goodness is a deva, an illumined example.

In order to identify with one impersonal God, people need a symbol. It is like saying that air is everywhere, but we call it by different names like wind, thunder, storm, which are manifestations of the same air in different situations. In the same way, people have created images or symbols of God to suit their need, though actually, the ultimate experience of God is formless. The ultimate experience of God is, 'I and my Father are one'. Gold is one thing, but out of the same substance one can make a ring, a necklace or earrings and give each a different name. Similarly, one creates an image of God with which we can identify, although God is one all-pervading presence.

Even people who have had mystical experiences begin to identify with the symbol which enabled them to have that experience. This causes confusion in many people's minds because their idea of God is only one; however, if they analyze it more deeply, they will see that these different forms are only a means of self-expression, just as a child makes something out of clay and loves it very much because it is his or her own creation. The master sculptor knows that it is only a very basic form, when in reality one can do much more with clay.

How can the perception of symbols and archetypes be explained?

Swami Satyananda: Modern psychology uses the word archetype; Sanskrit uses the word *pratika,* or symbol. Each and every object which exists in the universe has many forms at the same time. What is perceived and comprehended is the gross form, but what is thought about is not gross. When one looks at a flower one sees a gross flower, but when one thinks of a flower, what is seen is not the gross flower but the subtle flower which is the reflection of one's mind. When visualizing or thinking of the flower, one is actually seeing the form in

the mind, which is the basis of perception, but when looking at a rose, the perception, cognition and comprehension is taking place within the mind from the gross plane.

This experience which takes place within can be perceived at different stages, according to the depth of the mind. Seeing the rose in a dream is one state of mind. Seeing the rose in meditation is another. Therefore, the rose that was seen in a dream is not the same as the rose seen in meditation, nor is it the same as the rose seen on the bush. They are three different roses. When the mind becomes concentrated and goes deep and the rose can be seen as clearly as it would be seen on the bush, that is the experience of an archetype.

The direct experience of an archetype is called *aparoksh-anubhuti*. That is what the form of Shiva is, the expression of the deepest spirit. It is not the manifestation of the mind, senses, *buddhi* or intellect. It is the manifestation of *antar atma*, the innermost core of the spirit. When C.G. Jung and other great psychoanalysts speak about archetypes, they are talking of something which exists within the universe, for the concept of the universe is also within the mind. Everyone is part of the universe. The sun, moon and stars are part of the universe. The atmosphere, the environment is part of the universe.

When speaking about the universe, it is not only matter that is meant. It is talking of existence: the existence of the material universe, the existence of the mental universe, the existence of the supramental universe. The seven highest planes of existence, bhuh loka, bhuvah loka, swah loka, maha loka, janah loka, tapah loka and satya loka, are not separate spheres of existence, but exist one within another, just as curd is made from milk, butter from curd and ghee from butter.

Why are archetypes never bad?

Swami Satyananda: The word devata does not merely stand for a beautiful personality. It also stands for an experience of something hideous and frightening. Someone who

happens to see a dragon in meditation, or an ugly form with protruding teeth and a horn up in the air, will wonder in the morning if that dream was good or bad.

No subconscious experience is bad. No super-conscious experience is bad. Whatever is seen is a part of oneself. Or whatever is seen is a part of the infinite universe or the infinite reality, which is called archetype. These archetypes are seen in the form of devata.

What is the relationship between the dark and light forces within?

Swami Satyananda: Hindus have a peculiar philosophy. When talking about spiritual life they talk about quarrels and fights, wars and battles, killing and destruction. In all the Puranas, in all the Itihasas, the legendary or traditional histories and epics, in the entire history of India, spirituality is defined in terms of battle, war, missiles, death, in terms of *devas*, divine beings, and *asuras*, demons, in terms of *manavas,* the human being, the individual.

Life is a battlefield and there is a continual fight between forces that are dark and those that are not. This eternal battle between the two forces continues in every individual as long as he lives and even after he dies. There is no other way to explain the situations in life except as a battle. In the *Mahabharata*, on one side there are the Pandavas and on the other side there are the Kauravas, and Sri Krishna tells them to fight. Sri Krishna said to fight, whereas Gandhi said not to fight, to be non-violent. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna says at least twenty-one times:

Tasmaat yudhyasva Bhaarata.

Therefore, you should fight.

Were these people wrong, or was Sri Krishna a violent person? In this context fighting means one has to fight with one's limitations, the lower tendencies in life. There is a block in the personality, because what one is searching for

is very close, closer than the breath, closer than one's own mind, yet one is not able to see it. This mental block is called *ajnana* or *avidya*, ignorance or nescience.

Do the deities exist within the body?

Swami Satyananda: The microcosm in the body holds the macrocosm. The head is the microcosm, in it exists the macrocosm. In this body, that area inside the brain where all the glands, muscles and grey matter exist holds the macrocosm. If the pineal gland or any other gland is seen from a particular angle with an instrument capable of subtle vision, an image of Ganesha will be seen. That is its structure. The molecular structures of the glands that exist in different parts of the brain are replicas of Hanuman, Ganesha and Devi.

Srimad Devi Bhagavatam Maha Puranam describes the residence of Devi, where Devi lives, how many friends she has, how many attendants she has, what kind of a chamber her house has, how many doors, the height of the ceiling, the width of the pond outside the house, the mountains beyond the pond, the army. When this description is compared to biological anatomy, it is an exact match. To understand this, it is essential to have knowledge of anatomy, of the different layers of the brain, the different centres from where communication, electric circuits and chemical flows travel, and how the different sensory organs connect with each other.

With this knowledge, one will feel that Ganesha is not the deity of a certain tribe, but a deity who exists within every human being in the form of genius. It is the same with Hanuman and Devi. In tantra the abode of Devi is called kundalini. The entire circuit of Devi starts from a point, and goes down the spinal column. Where the spinal column ends, at the tail bone, behind the uterus, it meets with the gland behind the womb in the cervix. That gland is mooladhara. From ancient times this structure has been called an inverted tree. Many traditions have spoken about it. The Bible refers to it. How will a tree performing sirshasana look?

Oordhwamoolam adhahshaakham, as described in the *Bhagavad Gita* (15:1):

> *Oordhvamoolamadhahshaakhamashvattham*
> *praahuravyayam;*
> *Chhandaamsi yasya parnaani yastam veda sa vedavit.*
>
> They (the wise) speak of the indestructible peepul tree, having its root above and branches below, whose leaves are the metres or hymns; he who knows it is a knower of the Vedas.

The deities such as Ganesha, Hanuman and Durga are not just mental or tribal concepts but actually exist in the body. They are a reality of the microcosm, which is the home of the macrocosm. The cosmos exists within everybody. God seen outside when He cannot be seen inside. That is when a person goes to a temple, due to helplessness. When he cannot see his face, he has to see it in a mirror. When he begins to see Him inside, he will stop going there. Kabirdas says:

> *Moko kahan tu khoje bande, main to tere paas mein.*
>
> Where do you search for me, I am so close to you.

There is another strange thing inside this microcosm. There are billions of cells within this body and each cell is a complete person, which means that whatever a person is, is contained within one cell. This means that within me there are billions of Swami Satyanandas. This is a finding of science, not of the Puranas. It is said that a man's joys, sorrows, fortune, fate, life, death, disease, complexion, height all exist within each cell of his body.

Science has discovered cloning. It is no longer necessary for a child to be born naturally, for a cell from the body can be cloned. The two and a half billion cells of my body can be taken out and as many children created. Science does not believe in God. However, this proves that a great truth lies

hidden within the body. Everybody should have knowledge of that truth, whether boy or girl, educated or illiterate, qualified or unqualified, of good or bad character, vegetarian or meat-eater. What matters is whether one's awareness is centred outside or inside. For an externalized person the world will go on the way it has gone on. An internalized person is a yogi. A yogi is always internalized.

In the *Ramacharitamanas* it is written that a person can exist within, even while living amid the illusions of the world. Living within means being awake within while sitting for meditation or prayer or yoga. What one finds will not be found in any temple, mosque, church, pilgrimage or guru. One will find Him within. God exists within everyone. This is why the sages go on saying: *Soham Soham Shivoham Chidananda roopa Shivoham*.

How are the devatas related to the energy points in the body?

Swami Satyananda: There are centres of prana which are indicated in the ancient scriptures and in the ancient tantric texts in the form of devi and devata. When I was young I saw a chart of a yogi, and in different parts of the body were Dakini, Hakini, Shakini, Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara. These devis and devatas represent the energy points in the body. I am not talking about acupuncture, but about what is said in the scriptures and in the ancient books of tantra. The ancients seers came to the conclusion that each and every part in the nadi has an energy point, which is known as the place of a divine being or a place of divine consciousness.

Do devatas reside in land and buildings?

Swami Satyananda: Every place has a devata who looks after that place. When I bought the adjacent land, I drove out the old devata of that place as he had not looked after the land well, nor had he helped the owner to develop the place. When I bought Tapowan, I performed the *bhoomi poojan*, land worship ceremony. The one-month program of Sita's

wedding was performed for this purpose. The bhoomi poojan was just an excuse because Sita is the daughter of earth, the goddess of land. There are many stories about her. I told the devata of that place, "You leave. You have not looked after this place well. You have ruined the land."

Every piece of land has a devata and that is why the ritual of bhoomi poojan is conducted. The earth is a living element. The earth is as alive as you are; in fact, the earth is a more alive element than you. The earth is called *devi*, goddess, and you have to repay your debt to her. You are indebted to God who looks after your house, family, business, cattle, dogs, and so forth. Different traditions use different symbols to denote this residence of God in everything. In Greece, it is the basilica and among Hindus it is the tulsi plant and the peepal tree. I worship Tulsi and peepal every day by lighting incense and lamps. Why should I not believe in this God? Where is the harm in it? Just because you cannot see God, you say He is formless! No, God has a form, but I cannot see it. That is why there is a symbol for Him.

In what way do devatas influence creation and existence?

Swami Satyananda: In this creation, there is someone who looks after everyone. Things do not happen on their own. Nothing evolves on its own. Your children were not born on their own. They are not the result of an accidental occurrence: not me, not you or anyone else. There is a force, a God, who does this. Just as India has a government, similarly, there is a government that runs the various departments of this universe.

In English, it is called the cosmic government and in the Upanishads it is referred to as the imperishable government. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Yajnavalkya said to Gargi, *Etasya va aksharasya prashaasane Gargi suryachandramasau vidhritau tishta* – "In this mysterious government, the sun and the moon stay separate, never colliding into each other. They go along their own paths in their own way. The river always flows down from the top." A lot of other similar things are

written in this Upanishad about how this government looks after everything.

The whole creation is under an illusion. You think that your mother and grandmother were born and then they died; that you were young once and then simply became old. In the same way, the various living organisms and elements seem to change in nature, too. However, all this does not happen on its own. Everything is controlled by different forces, called devatas or gods.

Does each devata have its own subtle plane of existence?

Swami Satyananda: The vedic system in India has many books about the universe or universes. They talk about different planes of existence: *Deva loka*, the plane of the gods, *Varuna loka*, the plane of Varuna, and *Vayu loka*, the plane of Vayu. They say there are infinite planes of existence. There are stories about where the devas or divine beings live, what kind of people they are, how they move and what their activities are. Where do Indra, Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Brahma live? What does Saraswati look like? How beautiful is she? Who are Lakshmi and Saraswati? There are various other planes and they are far away. One can go there only through the mental body, not physically.

There is a great sannyasin named Narada, who goes to all these planes, just like sending fax messages. He carries a *veena*, a stringed instrument, and sings 'Narayana, Narayana, Narayana'. Narada goes from Indra loka to Brahma loka, from Brahma loka to Vishnu loka, from this plane to that plane, from that plane to another plane. He just keeps on moving. He also came to earth many times. He is considered to be the greatest devotee of Narayana. He was a sannyasin and he did not marry, but once he thought about marrying a girl, Vishwamohini, whom his mother wanted him to marry. Finally, he discovered that she was only an illusion created by Vishnu, who had taken the form of Vishwamohini, and Narada was cheated. So, in this way, there are various planes of existence spoken about in the vedic texts. They also say

that the great rishis, those with higher spiritual powers, were able to communicate with these subtle planes of existence.

Is devata a manifestation of God?

Swami Satyananda: Electricity comes from a substation. The energy itself is invisible, but it manifests in the visible form as light. Light, sound and heat are different forms of energy. Similarly, God manifests in different forms, such as Shiva, Shakti, Rama and Krishna.

God has no name, but people have given God many names, according to their *bhavana* or sentiment. No matter what form is given to God that form becomes true and it is not only a figment of the imagination. Some see God reclining in the relaxed form of Vishnu, while others see God as the fierce Kali Devi. Each will have his own God, according to his own inclination. However, total affinity and identity must be felt with whatever form appeals.

Tulsidas, who wrote the *Ramacharitamanas*, could see God as Sri Rama, wielding the bow and arrow. He did not imagine God as Krishna, the butter thief. When he went inside the Krishna temple at Dwaraka, he said:

Kaha kahu chhabi aapki bane ho naath
Tulsi mastaka taba navai dhanusha baana lo haath.

How to describe Your beauty today, O Lord?
You have a peculiar form,
But unless there is a bow and arrow in Your hands,
Tulsidas cannot bow down his head.

Does the devata have different levels of manifestation?

Swami Satyananda: Many languages have this word or use one which is similar. Some say 'deos', and others say 'theos' as in theosophy, which also means devata. Devata is that element which is effulgent, full of light. This luminous element exists inside everyone and as the veil of ignorance is removed, this light becomes manifest. The light manifests in stages. Firstly, it is very dim like the light of the dawn,

then there is strong light and then twilight. The light of Bhairava is that of noon or midday. This is the light of vijnanamaya atma.

There are five koshas: annamaya, manomaya, pranamaya, vijnanamaya and anandamaya. Vijnanamaya is one state of consciousness, anandamaya is another and pranamaya is yet another. Just as ghee is a manifestation of butter, butter of curd and curd of milk, likewise anandamaya is a manifestation of atma, still grosser is vijnanamaya, and then come manomaya, pranamaya and lastly annamaya.

What is meant by 'expansion of mind'?

Swami Satyananda: Consciousness is like a torchlight; it gives light to an object, it sees an object. The object seen in the light of consciousness is devata. Therefore, in the unconscious state, in samadhi, when everything is dark and no object is experienced and even the awareness of 'I' is completely cut off, the consciousness expands. In the course of that expansion, one becomes aware of certain objects and figures inside, and those are called devata.

As one goes on sublimating the various substances of mind, the mind begins to expand. How does expansion of mind take place? When the mind is dependent on the sense objects, it is limited. Its experiences can be earmarked, they are definite, and there is a limit to them. A person looking at a rose does not experience a sunflower in it. A rose is a rose and a sunflower is a sunflower. That is a limitation, and the experience is limited to time and space. However, when one starts sublimating the substances of the mind, that is twenty-three of them or twenty-five of them, then one is able to experience invisible sounds, invisible forms, invisible fragrances, and even invisible ideas. One can even experience the invisible planes, invisible realms which are inhabited by an invisible people who may be like you, or who may be a little different. They are called devas, divine beings. One becomes aware of those different planes of consciousness.

Are there examples of manifestation from modern times?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is an example from Sri Swami Satyananda's life which may give an idea of how that consciousness manifests in life. During his *parivrajaka* or wandering days, he was passing through a town in Madhya Pradesh called Raigarh. He had not eaten for many days and had a splitting headache caused by hunger. He fainted in front of a church. When he came to, he found that a Belgian priest had taken him into the church and was caring for him. The priest gave him something to eat and drink and then Sri Swamiji left.

Fifteen years later, when the ashram was being established, Sri Swamiji made enquiries about that Belgian priest. The caretakers and other priests in the church said, "In our history there has never been a Belgian priest looking after this church." Sri Swamiji said, "Impossible! I know the name, I know the date, I know the time when I met him, and I also remember what he gave me to eat. How can you say he never existed, that he has never been here and that you know nothing about him?" They swore that they were telling the truth. "In this church we have never had any Belgian priests; we have never had any white-skinned priests, only Indian priests."

Even today Sri Swamiji talks about this event. He questions what happened. Maybe it was God Himself; maybe it was Jesus, another spirit, Shiva, Brahma, or Vishnu who had taken that form in order to save him when he was practically dying of hunger. These things can happen and they will always remain a mystery because there is no logic behind them. It can only be said that some auspicious, caring force came, whether in human or spirit form.

DEVATA AND REALITY

Why is the worship of devata not a form of religion?

Swami Satyananda: Devata is the form. For many centuries it has been misunderstood by various traditions, which have used the word idol, not devata. As a result, those who believe

in devata are known as idolaters. However, I am not talking about religion, nor do I support or preach any religion. I do not believe in religion, which is the cruellest thing that mankind has invented for the destruction of humanity, and if the world is destroyed it will be destroyed only by religions.

Evolution of mind, transformation of mind and experiencing deeper things in life can be done in certain ways, and one of the ways is devata.

What particular devata do you worship?

Swami Satyananda: Bhairava is the name of a devata. When I was doing panchagni tapasya, my second sitting began at twelve noon, at the time when Bhairava is usually worshipped by installing a stone lingam. However, I have Bholenath, my dog, who is the embodiment of Bhairava, so I bathe him, cover him with ash, apply a tilak and give him prasad. Then at twelve noon he sits near the panchagni.

Bhairava is the name of a *tattwa* or element which is full of light. The devatas are named after the qualities of light contained in their essence. On visualizing this inner light, some named it Rudra, others gave the names Bhairava and Shiva. This inner light has been perceived by people over thousands of years and they have named it devata. Although different words are used, they all refer to the effulgent, brilliant or enlightened consciousness. This is the meaning of devata.

Why do people say there are many gods and goddesses?

Swami Satyananda: Either there is only one reality or there is no reality at all. There cannot be many realities. The universe is homogenous. Everything is just one, not many. It is impossible to see many gods or goddesses. Energy is one, consciousness is one, matter is one; matter, energy and consciousness are not three. They are manifestations or transformations or formations of each other. Milk becomes curd, curd becomes butter, butter becomes ghee; they are not different. This is the path that has to be followed, on the basis of Truth.

The Truth is one called by various names. A person may be called father by his son, son by his father. Who is he? Is he so many, or is he just one? He is just one. Emotionally one may be able to link and can link with that reality, but to say that there are many gods and goddesses is nothing but foolishness, ignorance.

What is the truth behind devatas?

Swami Satyananda: The gods and goddesses like Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Durga or Devi are *mandalas*, pictorial concepts. Sometimes I say that they do not really exist and sometimes this shocks people because, after all, Hindus have been used to thinking in a particular way for over five thousand years, so if a reinterpretation is suddenly given along modern scientific lines, they are shocked. Was Shiva really like that? Could there have been such a man? Was he a man who really existed in some period of history somewhere in the Kailash mountains in Tibet, and who married once or even twice? Sri Rama is known to have been an historical figure, so was Sri Krishna, but does Vishnu really exist in that form? Does the Sheshnag or Ananta exist in that form? Or is that form simply a symbol of a great process taking place within? These are some of the questions I don't really like to answer.

The concept of trimurti – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; the concept of Shakti – Durga, Lakshmi and Kali, and many others are important. They relate to the great realities, not only within but in the macrocosms. These are called mandalas and they help not only to improve concentration but also to awaken consciousness.

How do Shiva, Parvati and Ganesha relate to reality?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha, the Holy Ghost, the Holy Trinity – they are a reality of another dimension. When talking about reality, people want to know if they lived like they do. Is that what is called reality? There is the following joke about this.

Once a fellow from a primitive tribe, a simple person, dreamed that one of his chickens was stolen by a neighbour. In the morning he reported to the chief of the tribe that his neighbour had stolen his chicken in the night while he was sleeping.

When the chief asked the neighbour if he had stolen the chicken, he said he didn't remember. The chief said, "He says you stole his chicken." The culprit asked, "When did I steal it?" and the fellow replied, "In the night." "You saw it?" "Yes, I saw it." "What were you doing then?" "I was sleeping." "I was sleeping, too, but I did not dream that I was stealing your chicken!"

This is the concept of man's reality. What is thought to be real need not be real. According to science, too, every experience is relative, not absolute. On what does this experience depend? Is it a concept? Is it an object? Has it a reality in space and time? Finally, the definition will be found inside. Even this world, in which man has been aspiring and trying to prove so much, does not really exist. Everything is relative, and therefore Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha, the Holy Ghost and the Holy Trinity are absolute realities in the realm of reality. However, in the world of appearance I think they are not real; they are a vision.

How do the devatas represent the one reality?

Swami Sivananda: Hindus worship many gods, but they are only different aspects of the one reality. There are many gods in the Vedas. In the scriptures of other religions they are known as angels. The Upanishads profess only one God – Brahman. God is certainly one. He has no second. The absolute Reality must be one. There cannot be two absolutes.

Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are three aspects of God. Brahma is the creative aspect; Vishnu is the preservative aspect; Shiva is the destructive aspect. There are three other aspects. Virat is the manifested aspect; hiranyagarbha is the immanent aspect; ishwara is the causal aspect. *Virat* is the sum total of all physical bodies; *hiranyagarbha* is the sum total

of all minds, the cosmic mind; *ishwara* is the sum total of all causal bodies, *karana sharira*.

Why are there so many gods and goddesses?

Swami Satyananda: *Shakti*, energy, has innumerable forms, and is not only of one type. Although the primal shakti, the root shakti, is one, its manifestations are endless. That is why Devi is worshipped in so many forms. The truth is that shakti is not just of one kind. Intellect is one shakti, memory is another shakti, speech, prana and knowledge are all shaktis without which one cannot exist. That is why there are many *bija mantras*, seed mantras, for awakening these different powers. Take *vidya shakti*, the power of knowledge, which is perceived in the form of Saraswati. I am not talking of the goddess Saraswati whose idol is worshipped in the temple, but of the energy which is in the form of vidya or Saraswati. The best method of awakening this energy is to take the bija mantra of that shakti and awaken its sleeping potential.

What is the link between devata and mantra?

Swami Satyananda: When the rishis were in the depths of meditation, they had the realization of two things at the same time: mantra and devata. They not only heard the sound but also saw a figure. Every revealed sound has a revealed symbol. In samadhi, in the depths of the unconscious, one hears and one sees. When taking up a particular mantra, there must be a clear conception of mantra, rishi and devata. One must know which mantra one wants, to which rishi it was revealed, and what the symbol is.

What is the understanding of tantra?

Swami Satyananda: Many people practise mantra, but they think it is religious. Somehow they have identified mantra with a particular religious system and with a deity of that religion. This is an incorrect notion. Religious people in any religion have not been able to explain the spirituality of their religion. This is why religion throughout the centuries

has suffered misinterpretation and has been misunderstood. People have not been able to define the spiritual symbolism, the tantric symbolism of the deities. In Sanskrit and in tantra, the word is deva, not the word God.

Deva means illumined being. Therefore, the symbol associated with mantra represents illumination, and this illumination is nothing but the illumination of one's experience. Experiences are taking place in the subtle bodies, in the occult and subliminal bodies, of everyone. These experiences are in the form of consciousness, in the form of geometrical patterns which move in a circular motion or a triangular way. These experiences are only possible when the inner mind is able to cast illumination or light on them. The inner body of everyone is enveloped by a shroud of darkness, *avidya*, which does not allow one to see and experience things fully.

For example, a person who is angry knows and feels he is angry, but can he see it? It has a form. If a person is worried, he knows and feels he is worried, but can he see the worry? Is worry abstract, is it formless? Has the form of fear, anxiety or happiness ever been seen? Sometimes during an absolute dream, the fear is symbolized, the passions are formulated, the anxieties are materialized in form. Every direct intuitive experience, *anubhava*, has a form, a dimension. It may not be objective or gross, but definitely every experience has some kind of density and some kind of existence. Radio or electromagnetic waves are not seen. A voice can be heard but not seen. Emotion can be felt but not seen. Why? Because the mind is not enlightened.

When the mind is enlightened, it can cast light on a particular experience. Fears, knowledge, feelings, passions can be seen. Everything can be seen as a form, in a human form, in a geometrical form, in many forms. This is called devata and that is the concept of deva in Indian philosophy, particularly tantric philosophy. Therefore, the philosophy of tantra is not pantheistic just because it talks of gods and goddesses. It should not be confused with monotheism or

pantheism. These are academic classifications and do not really matter in the case of an aspirant who is going deep into his own mind, into his own self. These two principles of purusha and prakriti have to be separated in order to liberate the great force, or shakti, and for the process of separation, tantra has the principles of mantra, yantra and mandala.

What is the connection between devata and mandala?

Swami Satyananda: Devata, universal forces, have been symbolized in the form of mandalas. The Greeks created their symbols, so did the Egyptians, and Hindus have created their symbols. Every culture has created its symbols, but there is one important point. These mandalas represent individual patterns because they are the discovery or realization of one individual. Sometimes, however, mass consciousness can realize the same mandala, and therefore close patterns of symbols can often be seen in Greek and Hindu mythologies.

The Konarak temple in India represents the reality of the sun. That is the mandala of *surya*, the sun. Surya is the mandala of universal energy. It is not only the sun outside in the sky, but universal energy. The universal surya and the spherical surya can be combined or compared. The same concept exists in the Greek culture. There is another example. Hindus believe in Saraswati who represents the mandala of wisdom and learning, fine art, music and aesthetics. The Greeks developed a similar concept in Athena.

It is possible that a similar mandala is conceived by different people in different periods. However, progress in the experience of mandalas has not been considerable across the world in the last five to ten thousand years because people have been engaged in wars, conquests and discovering new methods of commercialization. As a consequence, the art and science of mandala has suffered.

2

Forms of Divinity

This world is an overflow of the bliss of God.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

DIVINITY MANIFEST

How should one start to connect to God?

Swami Niranjanananda: What is God for an ant? A super-ant. The reality for an ant is God as a super-ant. The reality for an elephant is God as a super-elephant. The definition of God will change from species to species, from culture to culture, from person to person, from religion to religion, from belief to belief.

The search is to connect with what one feels. The search is to connect with what can inspire. To have that inspiration, one has to take the path of *Satyam*, *Shivam* or *Sundaram*, truth, auspiciousness, beauty, according to one's natural expressive traits. Some people are bhaktas by nature, so they take the path of Sundaram. Some people are jnanis, intellectuals; they take the path of Shivam. Some, who like to interact, they take the path of Satyam. Swami Sivananda says that an integrated development of head, heart and hands is best. One starts in an integrated manner, and then let the natural inclination take over.

Who are most representative devatas of God?

Swami Satyananda: When Brahma is called, Goddess Saraswati comes along on her vehicle, the swan, *hamsavahini*; Vishnu comes on the farsighted eagle, *garudavahini*, and Shiva comes on a bull. In Bihar, people say that Shiva rides a bull and comes majestically with joy. His coming is a blissful event and there is splendour in it. When Shiva comes, one feels intoxicated. Narayana ushers in prosperity. Brahma brings music, fine arts, dance, knowledge, language and literature. Worship of this trinity is worship of God.

What is the meaning of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva?

Swami Niranjanananda: God has three operational forms: Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh or Shiva. These do not differ from each other, although they have been explained and portrayed as different, from the perspective of worship and religion.

Look at your life. Are you a child, a parent or a grandparent? To one person you are a child, to another you are a parent, and to someone else you are a grandparent. Despite having many roles to play, you essentially remain a human being. Your son does not call you 'brother', but 'father'. Your wife does not call you 'child', but 'husband'. Your wife is also a sister to someone, a mother to someone else, and in every situation her function changes. In only one individual many qualities, attributes, roles and duties are seen.

In the same manner, God's Brahma aspect is the manifest form of His creative talent. When a person makes a vessel from clay, the changed aspect of clay is seen in the vessel. To the one who made the vessel, the title 'potter' is given. Similarly, people call the one who made the universe 'Brahma'. The one who nourishes this universe is called 'Vishnu', and the one who brings change is known as 'Shiva'. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are the three forms of God that bring about the development of this world. In the form of Brahma, God brings about creation; in the form of Vishnu, God maintains and sustains; and in the form of Shiva, Mahesh or Rudra, God brings about transformation.

The word 'transformation' means a new development. When something new is discovered, the old has to end. Thus, Shiva as the energy of transformation, Vishnu as the energy of sustenance, and Brahma as the energy of creation are the three manifest forms of that unmanifest, eternal, infinite Parameshwara, through which He becomes capable of enacting His will. The one element of God has three different functions. For this reason, God is portrayed in the three forms, which have been presented in various ways by scriptures, religions and various schools.

Why do people perceive God differently?

Swami Satyananda: In the *Ramacharitamanas* it says: *Jinha ki rahi bhavana jaisi prabhu murati tinha dekhi taisi* – "As is one's sentiment, so is one's perception of the form of divinity."

Why are Shiva, Parvati and Ganesha regarded as being so significant?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva is known as the destroyer of ignorance, which is the root of all diseases. Therefore, he is the first guru. Parvati is the giver of life, blessings and wisdom. She is the first disciple because she did not guard the knowledge which was within her, but gave it out to all, even to animals. Ganesha, also known as Ganapati, their elephant-headed son, is the remover of obstacles. Before any worldly enterprise or religious rite is begun, Ganesha is always propitiated. Although he is known as the remover of obstacles, Ganesha also creates obstacles so that people do not become egoistic. His name is evoked and swells from the mouths of millions in India daily.

Jaya Ganesha, Jaya Ganesha,
Jaya Ganesha Pahimam
Sri Ganesha, Sri Ganesha,
Sri Ganesha Rakshamam

Is there any difference between the Shiva of Tantra, the Brahman of Vedanta, the Purusha of Samkhya, the gods of the religiously minded, the consciousness of yoga, atma of Hinduism?

Swami Niranjanananda: No there is no difference. You call the sweet by a name, 'sugar' in English, 'shakar' or 'chini' in Hindi, but the concepts are the same. It is the same difference that exists between two people. The eyes are different, the nose is different, the brain is different, the mind is different. There is a difference between the figure, the form, the nature. Nevertheless at one point people are human beings, and at that level there is no difference.

Similarly, there will be no difference with any of these people or gods. At one level they are the same, yet when it comes to the belief, theory and practice of a philosophy, they are given different forms to explain the view of the particular idea. They are different attributes of the cosmic Self. It is said in the *Yajurveda*: *Ishavasyam idam sarvam* – "This whole world is pervaded by God."

What is the difference and the relationship between God the Father, as represented by Shiva and God the Mother, as represented by Shakti, Durga or Kali?

Swami Sivananda: The Supreme God is represented as Shiva, and His power is represented as His wife – Shakti, Durga or Kali. There is no difference between God and His shakti, just as there is no difference between fire and its burning power. Shakti is inherent in God. Just as heat cannot be separated from fire, so also Shakti cannot be separated from God, the possessor of shakti. Shakti is Brahman itself. Shiva and Shakti are one, inseparable. Shiva is always with Shakti. Worship of Durga, Devi, Parvati, Shakti or Kali is worship of Shiva.

Mother Durga is the energy aspect of God. Without Durga, Shiva has no expression, and without Shiva, Durga has no existence. Shiva is the soul of Durga. Durga is identical with Shiva. Shiva is only the silent witness. He is motionless, absolutely changeless. He is not affected by the

cosmic play. Durga does everything. Shiva is quite indifferent to the external world. He has handed over power of attorney to His consort, Durga. It is Mother Durga who looks after the affairs of the world. Shiva is absorbed in contemplation of the Self. He remains in a state of nirvikalpa samadhi.

Shiva is omnipotent, impersonal and inactive. He is pure consciousness. Shakti is dynamic, the power or active aspect of the immanent God. Shakti is the embodiment of power. She engages in creation, preservation and destruction.

Shiva and Shakti are related as effulgence and the power that is latent in pure consciousness which gives rise to the world of distinctions. In other words, Shakti is the possibility of the Absolute appearing as many aspects of God. God creates this world through the power of creation, preserves through the power of preservation, and destroys through the power of dissolution.

Shiva is an embodiment of bliss and knowledge. Shiva himself appears in the form of a man with a life of pleasure and pain. If this point is always remembered, dualism and hatred, jealousy and pride will vanish. Every human function must be considered as worship or a religious act. Answering calls of nature, micturition, talking, eating, walking, seeing and hearing become worship of God if the right attitude is developed.

It is Shiva who works in and through man. Where then is egoism and individuality? Human actions are divine actions. One universal life throbs in the heart of all, sees in the eyes of all, works in the hands of all and hears in the ears of all. What magnanimous experience it is, if one can feel This by crushing this little 'I'. Unfortunately the old tendencies, the old desires and the old habits of thinking stand in the way of realizing this experience.

How have the many forms of God evolved in various traditions?

Swami Niranjanananda: The word 'god' in Sanskrit is *deva*. In English, *deva* and *dev* mean 'illuminated being', or 'self-effulgent being'. According to Indian thought there are

many gods that represent the effulgent spirit contained in the different objects, very much like Zeus, Athena, Apollo and others of the ancient Greeks. There is a great similarity between the description of Greek and Indian gods. Zeus represents the god of thunder in Greek mythology and is the king of the gods. Indra is also the god of thunder and the king of the gods according to Indian mythology. Apollo, Athena and other Greek gods and goddesses have similarities with gods and goddesses of Indian myth. They represent the effulgent nature of the spirit in every part of creation, whether it be thunder, stone, trees, mountains, human beings.

However, beyond these minor gods, or devas, there is one supreme reality known as *Ishwara*, the undecaying principle or transcendental, unchanging reality. This unchanging reality has three aspects in the manifest dimension. The aspect of omniscience is represented by the concept of Brahma, the creator. The aspect of omnipresence is represented by the image of Vishnu, the energy which is present in everything as the sustaining force. The aspect of omnipotent energy, power and strength is symbolized by Shiva and it is his responsibility to use his power in order to bring about a change, or transformation in the existing structure of life.

Mythologically there are many stories, but one should not concern oneself with the mythologies, because one does not know whether they actually happened or not. They are so far back in the remote past that one does not know if they are reality or fantasy; the one thing we have to understand is the concept of the trinity, which exists even in Christianity as Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

The concept of the trinity is also found in the Indian system in the form of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. If one compares the Christian trinity with the Indian trinity one will find similarities – for example, the concept of God the Father. It should not be seen from the point of view of the Supreme God, but as the quality which a father represents.

Who is the father? The creator. Who is the creator? Brahma. Who is the son? Creation. What is creation? Continuity, maintenance. The Son can be compared to Vishnu. The Holy Spirit can be compared to Shiva, because it is always in the background, the force that works upon beings, conditions and situations in order to bring about change and transformation. Therefore, even in this superficial comparison, the two trinities of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva can be considered as the same – or at least similar, in quality and manifestation.

The concept of God also conveys the same thing, G-O-D: generation, representing Brahman; organization, representing Vishnu; and destruction, representing Shiva. Generation is the power of omniscience; organization is the power of omnipresence; and destruction is the power of omnipotence. If one goes to the root of the various concepts, one will find that they all have the same beginning, middle and end. It is only the interpretations which vary. If one's ishta is Vishnu then one should identify, not with the mythological image of Vishnu, but with the energy, strength and quality that Vishnu represents. If one identifies with Shiva, one should understand Shiva in terms of the qualities which Shiva represents, and similarly with Brahma.

How does the trinity of gods relate to everyday life?

Swami Niranjanananda: Every created life form and every created object goes through three different conditions or experiences. These three conditions are experienced by sentient beings as birth, life and death. These three conditions are also experienced by material objects as creation, their time as object, and destruction.

These three conditions are powered by three attributes, qualities or evolutes. Without knowledge, there cannot be any creation. One has to know something, in order to make something. One needs to have a basic concept, an understanding, an idea or a thought as the foundation for creating something. For creation, knowledge, *jnana*, is the

power. For maintaining and preserving life, the power is the power of sustenance, nurturing. The third is the power of change or destruction. At the end of their time, objects disappear from their point in space where they existed and merge into *shoonya*, void or nothingness; they are destroyed, their time ends. These three conditions of birth, life and death – or creation, maintenance and destruction – come within the range of time. After death and before birth, time doesn't exist for a life form. It exists as something that is there in the universe, ensuring movement, ensuring growth, evolution and development.

This is the concept of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. This is the concept of Saraswati, Lakshmi and Kali. Brahma as creator is powered and supported by Saraswati, knowing. Vishnu as maintainer, preserver and sustainer is aided by Lakshmi, representing attainment, fulfilment, satisfaction, contentment. From the point of birth to the point of death, the longest association is with Vishnu or Narayana or life. Death is represented by Shiva, the one who changes, who alters, and he is aided by Kali, the goddess of time. When time stops, death is complete. These three conditions are also reflected in human behaviour, in practical day-to-day life. These are not only philosophical ideas or religious beliefs, but practical behaviours in the life of every individual.

What are the various ways in which people identify with divinity?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are two aspects of divine consciousness, *sakara*, or the manifest form, and *nirakara*, or the unmanifest form. If one identifies with name, form and quality, it is the manifest connection. Indians have been free in their connection with the Divine. When India became free from the British Raj, the population was 330,000,000 and the number of gods was also 330,000,000. This means that everyone is free to identify with a quality, attribute and form representing divinity for them. Those people who believed

in different manifestations and incarnations of Vishnu came to be known as Vaishnavas. Those who believed in different manifestations and incarnations of Shiva came to be known as the Shaivas. Those who identified with different manifestations of Shakti, the feminine force or power, became known as Shaktas.

This broad labelling and categorization happened much later on, but initially in our system, everyone was free to evolve their own understanding and concept of divinity, and people have expressed that nature in various ways. Later, these different expressions or experiences became stories, descriptions and part of mythology. Mythology definitely has historical value. Many events in the life of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna and Buddha show them to have possessed divine qualities lacking in ordinary individuals. They were elevated to the level of godhood, and they were gods just as much as everyone is also part of the same force and reality, but are not aware of it. The moment people realize their true nature they will also attain the same status.

If one identifies with the sakara aspect of ishta, an image with quality, form and name, one should see the quality which the image represents. If one identifies with nirakara, one should remember that for this path a different type of person is needed. In order to experience the nirakara state one has to have a different nature, mind and calibre. Very few people can realize Ishwara, the nirakara, the unmanifest, but many can associate themselves with sakara, the manifest.

What is the difference in a bhakta's relationship with God the Father and with God the Mother?

Swami Satyananda: Parameshwara neither promotes nor deprives anyone. Parameshwara's blessings are sufficient. Devotees do not ask God to give them this or that, and they never ask God to do their work. They pray to Devi, Kali, Durga, Tulsi for these things. Who understands the needs of all human beings? Only a mother can understand a child's

needs, and mother is Devi. The creation and dissolution of the whole universe depends upon Her. God is a witness; God is eternal, constant, absolute. This has been said in Vedanta, in the *Bhagavad Gita* and in the Vedas.

What are the different forms that the Divine Mother takes?

Swami Sivananda: The Divine Mother is everywhere. She is endowed with the three gunas: sattwa, rajas and tamas. She manifests as will, *ichchashakti*, action, *kriyashakti*, and knowledge, *jnanashakti*. She is Brahmashakti or Saraswati in conjunction with Brahma, Vishnushakti or Lakshmi in conjunction with Vishnu, and Shivashakti, Mahakali or Durga, in conjunction with Shiva.

Saraswati is cosmic intelligence, cosmic consciousness, cosmic knowledge. Lakshmi does not merely mean material wealth like gold and cattle, but all kinds of prosperity, glory, magnificence, joy, exaltation or greatness come under Lakshmi. Durga is the transformative power of divinity, the power that dissolves multiplicity in unity.

Durga assumes many aspects according to the tasks to be performed by her. She is sometimes sweet and tender and at other times terrible and devouring. She is always kind and gracious to her devotees. Arjuna, the Pandava hero, worshipped her before starting the fight against the evil-minded Kauravas. Sri Rama worshipped her at the time of the fight with Ravana, to invoke her aid in the war. He fought and won through her grace. When Vishnu and Mahadeva destroyed various demons, the power of Devi was behind them. Devi took Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra and gave them the necessary shakti to proceed with the work of creation, preservation and destruction.

Who or what is Mahamaya?

Swami Satyananda: God should not be feared, but one should be afraid of nature. Nature is called Mahamaya. Mahamaya will never spare anyone. Even when God was born as Sri Rama, He was subjected to the law of karma.

Mahamaya does not even spare God. A person who pronounces judgement in the court is still within the decree of nature's law. This is the will of God, and nature executes it. Mahamaya is the goddess, the power; she is Kali, Durga and Lakshmi. Shankaracharya has said:

You are sun and moon, fire and water,
You are sky, earth and air,
You are greatness and strength.
There is none except you
Who is all of this creation.
You are happiness and wealth,
So I remember you always.
You are guru, you are Shiva,
You are father and mother too.
You are relatives and you are learning,
You are intelligence and you are salvation,
O Goddess, you are all in all.

Are there forms that should not be worshiped?

Swami Satyananda: Worship must be to sattwic devis and devatas, not tamasic devatas. No ghosts, demons, black magic. This is like calling a ruffian to your house to protect you and tomorrow he attacks you. One should worship Rama, Shiva, Ganesha, Dattatreya, Tulsi, Peepal, Ganga, Yamuna, Himalaya, *Ramayana* or *Srimad Bhagavatam*. These are sattwic gods. There are various devis worshipped in the village: some are for black magic, some for burning down the house, some for making someone's son fall sick, and some for killing someone. Never do any of this, as you will suffer from the backlash. What is most important is your faith, your emotion and your relationship, which should be sattwic.

What is the story of Shiva and Sati?

Swami Niranjanananda: The story goes far back in time and is lost in myths; today's events become history, history becomes a memory, and memory in the course of time becomes a myth. That myth is lost in time until the day that the age returns which gave birth to the event; it is a cycle. This cycle of generation, development and growth is known in tantra as the concept of Shiva and Shakti. Today these two may be ideas, but once upon a time they existed on this planet as ordinary human beings. Shiva and Shakti were a married couple, and the name of Shakti was Sati. They lived a happy and contented life until the day tragedy struck.

One day Sati, the wife of Shiva, saw everyone going to her father's place for a yajna. Each and every tribe, each and every ruler, each and every philosopher or pandit had received an invitation except Sati and her husband Shiva. Of course, Sati was very much affected by it, "My father has invited everybody for this massive event and he has not even sent us information that such an event is taking place. Please, participate and come as part of the family."

She decided to go to her father's place, and she sought Shiva's consent. Shiva flatly refused. He said, "No, it is unwise to be an uninvited guest. If you want to be a guest, make sure that you are invited. If you want to be received properly, make sure that you are invited. If you are uninvited you will be ignored." However, Sati was adamant and she overruled Shiva, so Shiva sent guards with Sati to her father's place. He said, "You go – I am not going." When Sati reached her father's place she saw that everyone was given a proper place, food, respect, but there was no place for her, the daughter, or for her husband Shiva. She was ignored by her father, she was ignored by her family, just as Shiva had predicted. She could not withstand the rebuke, the insult to herself and her husband. So, she immolated herself in the fire of the yajna. She said, "To die, to commit suicide, is

better than to live a life where one has been insulted in front of everybody." Then she died in the fire.

The news came to Shiva and he became furious. He said nobody had the right to insult a person to such an extent as to compel them to take their own life. It was against *dharma*, the law of nature and the law of existence. In his fury he sent Virbhadra to go and destroy the palace and the yajna. There was a big fight and of course Shiva won, Virbhadra won. Sati's father's head was cut off and thrown into the fire.

The father had a powerful position in this world where he was like the chief minister of a section of humanity, a *prajapati*. He was the head of the clan of a huge congregation of people, many tribes. So everybody came to Shiva and appealed to him, "Look, what happened was improper. Your anger is justified, but now the yajna has to go on for the sake of the world." Shiva asked, "Who will perform the yajna?" Everybody said, "You can ensure that the yajna is performed by bringing the father of Sati back to life." Shiva was a big surgeon of his time. Today people do heart transplants, kidney transplants, arm transplants and liver transplants; Shiva was the first person in history to do a head transplant – a medical feat. He said, "Okay, bring me the head of an animal which will fit the size and the stature of this body". The head of a goat was chopped off, and Shiva transplanted the goat's head to the human body. The man, the goatman, came alive and was appointed to fulfil the yajna.

Thus, when Sati died, Shiva became mad, destroyed the yajna, and then ensured that the yajna went on. After that he took Sati's body, the dead body of his wife, and like a mad man started to wander around. How to stop this mad man carrying a dead body on his shoulders wandering around the whole world? He would not listen to any reason. That was when Vishnu, who was another important personality of that time, came forward with a discus as his armour. With his discus he chopped the body of Sati into fifty-two pieces. The places where these fifty-two organs fell became the shaktipeethas.

According to the myth, Sati's heart fell where Sri Swami Satyananda settled, in Deoghar. That place is known as *hridayapeeth*, the seat of the heart. The eyes fell down in Munger, and therefore inside Chandisthan the image of the eye as the icon is seen. In Deoghar it is the figure of the heart as the icon of Devi. Another important *peetha* or place of enlightenment, is Kamakya in Guwahati, where the yoni of the Devi fell.

What is the significance of Shiva's wedding to Parvati?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva who lived in the forest went to marry Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, who lived up in the snow peaks. He was the master, guru and controller of ghosts and demons, and so they were part of his marriage procession. Some had one eye in the back of their head, some had no eyes, or eyes in their belly. Some had only one ear, others had huge elephant ears or only holes for ears. Some walked on one leg, others on three.

Parvati's family sent out a reception party to escort them to Parvati's house, but when they caught sight of Shiva and his strange companions, they took to their heels and ran for dear life. At Parvati's house they related what they had seen in awe and horror, "Oh, he is terrible! The son-in-law has come riding on a bull. He is naked and his body is smeared with ash. He has snakes all over him and his companions are most hideous." Parvati's mother was so upset. How could she accept such a horrible son-in-law? But Parvati remained calm and resolute.

The moment Shiva's procession entered the Himalayan kingdom, he and his funny companions turned into dazzling divine beings with beautiful faces, fine clothes, fragrant flowers. The demons changed into lovely people. Everything was transformed in the twinkling of an eye, and so the marriage took place.

After consummating their marriage, Shiva and Shakti descend together, symbolizing that the highest consciousness is now manifesting on the plane of duality. Having become

one, Shiva and Shakti are now able to act in the world as two. This event is of great significance for the evolution of all beings because it also represents the process taking place in every aspirant who experiences a spiritual awakening and then returns with heightened awareness to work in the world.

What do Shiva and Parvati look like?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva is beautiful, in the sense that he is attractive. He is a mad man, adorned with snakes and scorpions, who sits on a bull and smokes ganja. His body is besmeared with ashes and his hair is matted.

Shiva's beauty is such that anyone meeting him would go into a trance. His wife is so lovely and so glorious that everybody who looks at her says, "What a beauty!" In the *Ramacharitamanas*, however, Tulsidas has said, "I am not going to describe the beauty of Parvati because she is my mother." How can one describe the beauty of one's mother? Anyone else's beauty can be described, but the beauty of one's mother is private.

Why is Shiva conceptualized as half-male and half-female?

Swami Satyananda: Glimpsing Shiva in any state, waking, dreaming, half awake, conscious, subconscious and meditative or any other, even for a fraction of a second, like a quick shaft of lightning, means that life will become blessed and fruitful. After that, it does not matter if one dies or lives on. The ultimate achievement in a man's life is to have darshan of God. Who is Shiva? What is his form? Does he have a human body? Is he only pure consciousness? Some say Shiva is half-man, half-woman – he has assumed the form of *Ardhanarishwara*.

People have conceptualized Shiva as half-male and half-female and that is his real form. I believe that is the truth about him because we are all half-male and half-female. Not one man is a complete man, nor one woman a complete woman. We are half-male and half-female, fifty-fifty. This is ida, that is pingala; this is Ganga that is Yamuna; this is *ham*,

that is *tham*; this is sympathetic, that is parasympathetic. Everybody is a combination of Prakriti and Purusha, but people are trying to get rid of Prakriti and just become that resplendent Purusha.

Can it be said that Shiva and Parvati are symbols of the concept of duality?

Swami Satyananda: This concept of Devi or Goddess is part of a universal principle known as Shiva and Shakti, Purusha and Prakriti, yin and yang, ida and pingala, consciousness and energy. Just as electrical wiring must have two poles, positive and negative, in the human body there are two channels of energy, ida and pingala, and two corresponding nervous systems, sympathetic and parasympathetic. The substance called mind can be divided into two parts: time and space. This duality is everywhere; even in bhakti there is Bhagavan and bhakta, God and devotee. They are complementary to each other; they exist and relate mutually.

In the Shaiva sect this duality is known as Parvati and Parameshwara. In a wedding celebration the bride sits on the left side of the groom. The left side belongs to the female partner, the right side to the male partner. The left side belongs to Parvati, the right side to Shankara. The left side is ida, the right side is pingala, the left side is sympathetic, the right is parasympathetic. The left is minus, the right is plus, the left is space, the right is time. This is the concept of duality that was propounded by the rishis and munis. However, it became difficult for laypeople to understand, so they used different symbols, deities and myths to explain it.

First they explained theoretically what ida and pingala, time and space, matter and energy are, but ultimately one has to experience this theory within. One has to try a practical experiment for oneself. There are many methods for trying this experiment and many ways of understanding and realizing it within. In the same way, there are many routes to travel to Deoghar from Calcutta, Delhi, Madras, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. People come by their respective

routes which differ one from another. The route depends upon the starting point, although Deoghar is the destination common to all.

It is wrong to assert that there is only one way. Everyone is standing at different positions in this world created by God. Therefore, there are as many paths as there are people. These paths and routes are termed sadhana. There are many paths of sadhana to suit the needs of each individual.

SHAKTI

What is the Divine Mother? By what names is she known?

Swami Sivananda: The Divine Mother, Devi, Maheshwari or Parashakti is the supreme shakti or power of the Supreme Being. Shakti is the energy aspect of God. It is inherent in God. Just as heat cannot be separated from fire, so too shakti cannot be separated from God, the *shakta*, or the possessor of shakti. Shakti and shakta are one. They are inseparable.

Devi, Durga, Kali, Bhagavati, Bhavani, Ambal, Ambika, Jagadambe, Kameshwari, Ganga, Uma, Chandi, Chamunda, Lalita, Gauri, Kundalini, Tara, Rajeshswari, Tripura Sundari are all forms of Shakti. Radha, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Savitri are five names of the same Shakti. She is worshipped during the nine days of Navaratri as Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

How does Shakti manifest in this world?

Swami Sivananda: Shakti is symbolically female, but it is in reality neither male nor female. It is only a force which manifests itself in various forms. Electricity, magnetism, heat, light, the five elements and their combinations are external manifestations of Shakti. Intelligence, discrimination, psychic power and will are Her internal manifestations. She keeps up the *lila*, play, of God through the gunas – sattwa, rajas and tamas. She lies dormant in mooladhara chakra at the base of the spine, in the form of serpent power or coiled-up energy known as the kundalini shakti. She is at

the centre of the life of the universe; she is the primal force of life that underlies all existence. She vitalizes the body through sushumna nadi and nerves, and nourishes the body with chyle and blood. She vitalizes the universe through Her energy. She is the energy in the sun, the fragrance in flowers, the beauty in the landscape, the Gayatri or the blessed Mother in the Vedas, colour in the rainbow, intelligence in the mind, the potency in homeopathic pills, the power in sages, devotion in bhaktas, sanyam and samadhi in yogis.

Knowledge, peace, lust, anger, greed, egoism and pride are all Her forms. Her manifestations are countless. Devi or Shakti is nature itself. The whole world is Her body: the mountains are Her bones, the rivers are Her veins, the ocean is Her bladder, the sun and moon are Her eyes, wind is Her breath and fire is Her mouth.

How does one experience Shakti?

Swami Niranjanananda: Adi Shakti, the cosmic energy or primordial energy, has not been defined; it is undefined, unexplained and un-experienced. Yet because of its pervasiveness and because of its activity this Adi Shakti is also known as the power which beautifies the universe, the cause of cosmic beautification, and beauty in itself. From this perspective, Adi Shakti is known as Tripura Sundari. *Tripura* means 'three dimensions', and *sundari* means 'the most beautiful one' – one that is the most beautiful in all the three dimensions of experience. In this form of Adi Shakti or Tripura Sundari she is unreachable, but she becomes the cause of existence.

The cells in the body are alive due to shakti, due to energy. The grass is green because of shakti. The flower shows its colours, due to the shakti inherent in it. A single-cell amoeba moves along the ground because of the shakti inherent in it. This cosmic Adi Shakti is the cause of life; it is life, and it is also a universal, a cosmic experience and realization. It is experienced in many different ways, but the way that yogis have discovered is the vibrational method.

The whole universe is throbbing and vibrating and pulsating with shakti, and the throb, the pulsation, the vibration, is known as *spandan*. It is through spandan that one can recognizes the existence of this cosmic shakti.

If one speaks from a poetic point of view about clouds and rain, somebody can say that rain is contained in the cloud and it falls to the ground. Some raindrops fall into the ocean, some raindrops fall in the mountains, some raindrops fall in the desert, some raindrops fall on the roof terrace of a house, and some raindrops fall on the head. The raindrops are the same, but as they fall in different locations, they serve a different purpose. What is the purpose of a raindrop falling in the ocean? It makes the ocean water a little less salty. When a raindrop falls on a human head, it lowers the blood pressure of the head and cools the head a little bit. When a raindrop falls in the desert, the desert can bloom into a beautiful garden. When it falls in the mountains, it can irrigate many fields. When it falls on the rooftop, it can fill up a water tank.

In the same manner, shakti falls equally on everyone, but where it falls, it serves a specific purpose for that person. This shakti may be experienced, seen or visualized by the individual as a manifest realization of Devi. An experience is given a tangible form. A visual symbol or visual impression gives a glimpse of one's experience. Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, or other forms of Devi – like Katyayani, Kanya Kumari, Kali, Tara, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta or Tripura Sundari – all represent one experience, one realization, one manifestation of that cosmic shakti.

Durga is the name of raindrops falling in the mountains, which irrigate the fields as they fall down. Lakshmi, for sake of understanding, can be said to be the raindrops falling in the ocean to lessen the salinity of the water. Saraswati can be the raindrops falling on the human head to cool the hot human head. Different images, impressions, perceptions can be used to describe an experience. The images of Devi are the different visual impressions of an inner experience, of

change, contentment, happiness, fulfilment, a feeling of love, a feeling and expression of compassion, of having overcome the limitations of life. The different aspects of Devi represent altered states of mind and different realizations.

Who is Shakti as the Divine Mother and what is our relationship with Her?

Swami Sivananda: Devi is the Mother of all. The pious and the wicked, the rich and the poor, the saint and the sinner are Her children. In this world, the wants of the child are provided for by the mother. The child's growth, development and sustenance are looked after by the mother. The necessities of life and its activities in this world, and the energy needed for it, depend upon Shakti or the Universal Mother. The human mother is a manifestation of the Universal Mother. Women are forms of the Divine Mother.

People are freer with their mother than with anybody else. They open their heart more freely to their mother than to their father. There is no God greater than the mother. It is the mother who protects, nourishes, consoles, cheers and nurses. She sacrifices her all for the sake of her children. She is the first guru. The first syllable which almost every quadruped or human being utters is the beloved name of the mother, 'Ma'. A child is more familiar with the mother than with the father, because the former is kind, loving, tender and affectionate, and looks after the wants of the child. Whenever the child wants anything it runs with outstretched hands to the mother rather than to the father. If she hears the cry of the child she leaves her domestic work and runs immediately to attend to the child. In the spiritual field also, the aspirant, devotee or the spiritual child, has a more intimate relationship with Mother Durga than with the father, Shiva.

It behoves, therefore, that the aspirant should approach the Mother first, so that She may introduce Her spiritual child to the Father for its illumination or self-realization. That is the reason why devotees have placed Radha, Sita, Gauri first in the *jugal*, or combined, names, such as

Radha-Krishna, Sita-Rama, Gauri-Shankar, Uma-Shankar, Bhavani-Shankar, Lakshmi-Narayana.

The Mother's grace is boundless, Her mercy is illimitable, Her knowledge is infinite, Her power is immeasurable, Her glory is ineffable, Her splendour is indescribable. Approach Her with an open heart and lay bare your heart before Her with frankness and humility. Be as simple as a child. Ruthlessly kill egoism, cunningness, selfishness and crookedness. Make total, unreserved, ungrudging surrender to Her. Sing Her praises, repeat Her name and worship Her with faith and unflinching devotion.

How should one understand the three forms of Shakti?

Swami Niranjanananda: The faculty of action is Durga; she is *kriya shakti*. The faculty of will is Lakshmi, *iccha shakti*. The faculty of knowledge is Saraswati, *jnana shakti*. These are the three aspects or roles that Shakti plays in creation: knowledge, will, and action. This is also the sequence. One can study a map of different continents and countries. In books one can read about different countries, cultures and civilizations. This understanding is one's knowledge. Then one gets an opportunity to travel, desires to travel, and makes the effort to travel. The thought, the desire, the will that comes is iccha shakti. Finally, the journey one undertakes is kriya shakti.

Knowledge is a broad-based concept, and will is solidification of that knowledge. Knowledge solidifies into a form, a shape, an idea, into one aspiration. It is then consolidated and applied into action, converted into action – jnana, iccha, and kriya. Thus, *jnana*, knowledge, is the sattwic power; *iccha*, will, is the rajasic power; and *kriya*, action, which takes one to a particular, defined destination, is the tamasic power. Sattwa is Saraswati, rajas is Lakshmi, and tamas is Durga; she is the goddess of tamas, with the role to cut asunder the veil of tamas.

Rajasic nature and tamasic nature, will and action, connect one to the material world. Lakshmi and Durga help one

survive in a better state and frame of mind and body while one is in this material world. Saraswati is the wisdom, the sattwic, creative expression of life which leads to fulfilment.

GANESHA

What does Ganesha, the first son of Shiva and Parvati, represent?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva had two sons. The eldest was Ganesha and the youngest was Kartikeya. In India, except at the time of the death ceremony, in each and every ceremony, pooja, or celebration, the first person who is remembered and worshipped is Ganesha. Without worshipping Ganesha, a ceremony cannot begin, whether it is a marriage, name-giving or sacred thread ceremony, or even mantra diksha or sannyasa. Ganesha is considered the intuitive genius, or intuition in yogic language.

Ganesha is a funny looking person with the head of an elephant and small eyes. He has a big belly and a big body. He must weigh about one hundred and twenty-five kilos, and he rides on a mouse. He loves sweets. Indians say that if Ganesha is offered sweets, he will give auspiciousness.

Ganesha represents the intuition one gains through yogic practices. Without achieving intuition, higher sadhanas cannot be undertaken, and therefore intuition is of great importance.

What force does Ganesha represent? What is the symbolic philosophy of his form?

Swami Sivananda: Salutations to Sri Ganesha also called Ganapati, who is Brahman Himself, who is the Supreme, who is the energy of Shiva, who is the source of all bliss, and who is the bestower of virtuous qualities and success in all undertakings. Ganesha is the elephant-headed God. He is worshipped first. His names are repeated first before any auspicious work is begun, before beginning any kind of worship. He is the Lord of power and wisdom. He is

the eldest son of Shiva and the elder brother of Skanda or Kartikeya. He is the energy of Shiva and so he is called the son of Shankara and Uma.

The following story is narrated about his birth and his having the head of an elephant. Once upon a time, at bathing time, the Goddess Gauri, the spouse of Rudra, created Ganapati as a *shuddha*, pure, white being, out of the mud of her body and placed him at the entrance of the house. She told him not to allow anybody inside and went to have a bath. Shiva returned home quite thirsty and was stopped by Ganapati at the gate. Shiva became angry and cut off Ganapati's head, taking him for an outsider. Gauri came to know of this and grieved much. Shiva ordered his servants to bring the head of any creature that might be sleeping with its head facing northwards. The servants made a thorough search and found only an elephant in that position. The head of the elephant was cut off and brought before Shiva, who joined the elephant's head to the body of Ganapati.

Shiva made him worthy of worship at the beginning of all undertakings such as marriages, journeys, expeditions, studies. He ordained that the annual worship of Ganesha should take place on the fourth day of the bright half of *Bhadrapada* (August–September). Without the grace of Sri Ganesha and his help nothing whatsoever can be achieved. No action can be undertaken without his support, grace or blessings.

The following are some of his most common names: Sumukha, Ekadanta, Kapila, Gajakarnaka, Lambodara, Vighnaraja, Vinayaka, Dhumaketu, Ganadhyaksha, Balachandra, Gajanana, Vakratunda, Surpakarna, Heramba, Skandapurvaja, Siddhivinayaka, Vighnesvara. His mantra is *Om Gam Ganapataye Namah*. Sadhakas who worship Ganesha as their ishta devata repeat this mantra or *Om Sri Ganeshaya Namah*. The *Ganesha Gayatri* are

> *Om tatpurushaya vidmahe hastimukhaaya dhimahi tanno dantih prachodayaat.*

Om ekadantaaya vidmahe vakratundaaya dhimahi tanno dantih prachodayaat.

Sri Ganesha is an embodiment of wisdom and bliss. He is the god of and foremost among *brahmacharis* or celibates. He rides on the *vahana*, the small mouse. He is the presiding deity of mooladhara chakra. His form represents *Om* or *Pranava*. He is the god who removes all obstacles on the spiritual path and worldly success, so he is called *vighna-vinayaka*. His *bija kshara,* seed mantra, is *Gam*. He is the god of harmony and peace. Riding on the mouse represents that he has killed egoism. He holds *ankusha*, an emblem of divine royalty, which indicates that he is the ruler of the world. Ganesha is the first god, *Adideva*.

A mouse is a small creature and an elephant is the biggest of all animals. Riding on a mouse and wearing the head of an elephant denote that he is the creator of all creatures from the biggest elephant to the smallest mouse. Elephants are wise. Wearing the head of an elephant indicates that Ganesha is an embodiment of wisdom. It also denotes the process of evolution. The mouse gradually evolves into an elephant and finally becomes a man. That is the reason why Ganesha has a human body, the head of an elephant and a mouse as his vehicle. This is the symbolic philosophy of his form.

He is the god of *ganas* or groups, such as a group of elements, a group of senses, a group of tattwas. He is the head of the followers of Shiva. The Vaishnavas also worship Ganesha. They have given him the name of Thumbikkaialvar, God with the proboscis or trunk. Lord Ganesha's two shaktis are kundalini shakti and vallabha shakti.

Ganesha is fond of *modakas*, sweet balls made of rice. On a Ganesha pooja day he was going from house to house accepting offerings of modakas. Having eaten a good number of those offered to him, he set out, riding on the mouse at night. Seeing a snake, the mouse became afraid

and stumbled, with the result that he fell down. His stomach burst open and the modakas came out and Ganesha stuffed them into the stomach, and catching the same snake tied it round his belly. Seeing all this, the moon in the sky laughed heartily. Ganesha was annoyed at the behaviour of the moon and pulled out one of his tusks and hurled it at the moon and cursed that no one should look at the moon on Ganesha pooja day. If anyone looks at the moon he will earn a bad name, censure or ill-repute. If anyone happens to see the moon on that day by mistake or by chance, he will be free from that ill-repute or blame if he repeats or hears the story of Sri Krishna's clearing his character of the accusation of stealing the Syamantaka jewel. Ganesha was pleased to ordain thus.

Worshippers of Ganesha look upon him as being identical with the supreme Self. In the *Ganapati Upanishad* he is identified with the supreme Self.

In what way is Ganesha regarded as a symbol of higher evolution? What does his elephant head represent?

Swami Satyananda: The symbol of Ganesha is understood in a different light, not exactly as a psychological symbol, but as the head of the groups of consciousness. In the collective consciousness, there are groups of faculties headed by certain deities, for example, charity, compassion and service are one group; learning, oratory and art are another. Each group of faculties is guided by one deity, while Ganesha is the leader of all the groups or faculties of consciousness.

The elephant head which was substituted for the human head represents super intelligence in man. The elephant is the vehicle of Indra, leader of the psychic faculties, presided over by the indriyas. He is known as the god of gods. Gods are psychic beings, astral formations, therefore, the human head was replaced with an elephant head. However, it does not mean involution; it is evolution along a new line altogether. This human head would remain a human head, but a psychic head was put on the human body.

Why is the name of Ganesha chanted before performing a ceremony?

Swami Satyananda: In India no ritual is started without first chanting the mantra *Om Sri Ganeshaya Namaha*. The name of Ganesha must be chanted first because there is no action in the world which can be done without the aid of *buddhi*, intellect. Speech, thought, sight, all the karmendriyas and jnanendriyas require the functioning of buddhi. The moment buddhi is absent, nothing is understood. The eyes are open but one doesn't see. The rat is the symbol of clever intellect, keen, penetrating vision. Buddhi also represents the same thing. Take a person who has intellect and subject him to all kinds of calamities and he will always find a way out. The rat is an expression of penetrating mind, quick intelligence, immediate decision-making, and Ganesha is a symbol of buddhi, intellect.

What quality does Ganesha embody?

Swami Satyananda: Ganesha is the embodiment of total knowledge. He enjoys studying, reading and writing. He worked as Vedavyasa's steno in order to write the entire *Mahabharata* epic.

What is Ganesha's personality like?

Swami Satyananda: Ganesha is not like Shiva. Shiva is happy to eat anything, but Ganesha needs proper food. He likes to dress well and he needs a proper room in which to stay. He is a man of certain standards. He is learned, educated, an intellectual and a scholar. When Vyasa dictated the *Mahabharata*, Ganesha was his scribe. Ganesha is my gurubhai. Shiva is my beloved God, I am his bhakta, and if his son comes, he is my guru brother, my senior gurubhai. The form in which God's grace is shown, the form in which He is revealed or inspires should be left to God.

Why is Ganesha's birthday so popular?

Swami Sivananda: Ganesh Chaturthi is one of the most popular festivals. It is the birthday of Ganesha. It is the day most sacred to Ganesha. It falls on the fourth day of the bright fortnight of Bhadrapada (August–September). It is observed throughout India, as well as by devotees in all parts of the world.

Ganesha is the elephant-headed god. He is worshipped first in any prayers. His names are repeated first before any auspicious work and any kind of worship is begun. He is the Lord of power and wisdom. He is the eldest son of Shiva and the elder brother of Skanda or Kartikeya. He is the energy of Shiva and so he is called the son of Shankar and Uma Devi. By worshipping Ganesha mothers hope to earn for their sons the sterling virtues of Ganesha. Without the grace of Ganesha and his help nothing whatsoever can be achieved. Ganesha is an embodiment of wisdom and bliss. He has as his vehicle a small mouse. He is the presiding deity of the mooladhara chakra, the psychic centre in the body in which the kundalini shakti resides. He removes all obstacles on the path of the spiritual aspirant, and bestows worldly as well as spiritual success.

Mushikavaahana modaka hastha,
Chaamara karna vilambitha sutra,
Vaamana rupa maheshwara putra,
Vighna vinaayaka paada namasthe

O Lord Vinayaka! Remover of all obstacles, the son of Lord Shiva, with a form which is very short, with mouse as Thy vehicle, with sweet pudding in hand, with wide ears and long hanging trunk, I prostrate at Thy lotus-like feet!

How is Ganesha related to the structure of the brain?

Swami Niranjanananda: A Lebanese scientist photographed images of the physical brain from different directions. As he was looking at these impressions of the brain, he discovered

that one can physically observe various shapes and images in the brain. At first he could not understand what they represented, but then he discovered that they were images of devis and devatas. He searched for Ganesha and discovered him in the brain stem.

At the point where our spinal cord enters the brain, there is a small section which is known as the medulla oblongata, which is a part of the cerebellum, the primitive brain. Above the medulla oblongata and cerebellum is another part of the brain, the cerebrum, the logical, intellectual brain. When viewed from below, or 'ventrally' in anatomical terms, this logical, intellectual brain with the primitive brain and brain stem sitting below it forms the shape of Ganesha. One can superimpose the image of Ganesha upon the ventral image of the brain in any book on anatomy and physiology. One will see that it is an exact replica of Ganesha's head.

Ganesha allows one to move from the level of primitive existence into a higher existence of knowledge, and that is the function of Ganesha, both in mythology and in life.

The medulla oblongata in the cerebellum is the seat of Ganesha in the body, and it is associated with ajna chakra. According to kundalini yoga, ajna chakra is the controller of mooladhara chakra. Ajna chakra is the switch and mooladhara is the bulb. Just as a light bulb is activated by a switch on a board located far from the light, the activation of mooladhara and the awakening of kundalini occur when one is able to activate ajna chakra.

Ajna chakra is the seat of guru. It is guru in ajna chakra that commands Ganesha in mooladhara, "Ganeshaji, open the gates. This aspirant wants to get in, to have the darshan of Mother Kundalini." Ganesha enables the jump from the primitive brain to the transcendental brain, the higher brain, the higher mind, and access to the kundalini shakti. The journey into the dimension of shakti is achieved by propitiating him. This is the theory of kundalini yoga.

How should Ganesha be propitiated?

Swami Niranjanananda: The three areas that Ganesha governs are time, matter and memory. He is also the doorkeeper of the brain stem, and as doorkeeper he must ensure that nothing bad or negative enters. He is there to block the negative from getting inside the head, however, people do not recognize his work and ignore his warnings. When one ignores his warnings, he comes back and creates problems. When one does something wrong, who is it within that tells one what one has done is incorrect? People say, "My conscience is telling me I should not do this." What one calls one's conscience is actually Ganesha inside telling one not to do it. It is that faculty of Ganesha which one calls conscience, which makes one aware of right and wrong.

Therefore, in order to propitiate Ganesha, one needs to have right thinking, right performance and right behaviour. By thinking in the right manner, acting in the right manner and behaving in the right manner, *sadvichara*, *satkarma* and *satvyavahara*, one is able to manifest the powers of Ganesha in one's life. Sadvichara is right thinking, appropriate thinking. Satkarma is right and appropriate action. Satvyavahara is the right and appropriate attitude and behaviour. When one is able to incorporate these three things into one's day-to-day living, Ganesha comes alive within one.

Being the doorkeeper of life, Ganesha ensures that nothing bad or negative enters one's life. If something bad comes along, he will create obstacles to stop it from getting in, and if some negativity has to be overcome, he will remove the blocks, the obstacles and allow it to go out. These are the two functions of Ganesha; to create blocks, not for harassment, but to stop the negative from entering into one's life, and to remove blocks so that the bad can leave one's life. Therefore, he is called *Vighnaharta* which means 'the remover of obstacles'. Ganesha is the maintainer of peace.

How does Ganesha help one transcend one's shortcomings and limitations?

Swami Niranjanananda: The symbolism of Ganesha is clear: a chubby god with an elephant's head who enjoys the beauty of life, who enjoys good clothes, who likes to eat good food, who always brings auspiciousness in life and who is a benevolent force that, when invoked, can help one to transcend one's own shortcomings and limitations.

Mythologically, one can imagine Ganesha as a cosmic entity. Physically, one can experience him in one's own body as the part of the body which takes one from primitive behaviour to rational behaviour, from instinctive behaviour to knowledgeable behaviour, from reactive behaviour to behaviour that is well thought out. In the psychic dimension, he is the guardian of all the *shaktis*, the powers, the feminine energies that are responsible for the creation and formation of life, of the body, the mind, sentiments and all other human experiences. Ganesha is not the guardian of Parvati only. Parvati represents the cosmic Shakti, and this cosmic Shakti manifests in myriad forms; in the form of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Indrani or in any other form that one may like to conceive of it. The beauty of Ganesha is that he protects this Shakti and maintains the purity of Shakti, preventing it from being tainted by one's ignorance.

Time, matter and memory are three important aspects. One's memory is limited. One says that one has memory of this lifetime, but the memories that one holds of this life are not sharp and clear. One does not have a clear memory of what one did when one was young. Often people cannot even recall what they were doing on this day one year ago, or even remember what they did yesterday. One's memory is short-lived. Ganesha's capacity for remembering indicates that he has the memory of everything since the beginning of time until the present day. He is like the genetic imprint which contains all the information, right from day one of existence until today. He is the storehouse of knowledge, wisdom and information. Ganesha is the power; Ganesha is the shakti

that bridges the gross and the physical with the spiritual and internal. It is a bridge between the two levels of experience, between the two dimensions: the gross and the physical, the psychic and the spiritual.

Another attribute of Ganesha is that he controls every kind of experience that enters the perception of consciousness, not 'human perception'. Perception of consciousness has to be understood in the right context. Right now one is aware, one is conscious, but one is not aware of each and every input of one's senses. One is not aware of the functions and behaviour of one's own mind, yet one considers oneself aware. Ganesha has homogeneous awareness, total awareness of the past and the present, and therefore he becomes the ruler, the controller of all experiences that occur in the realm of consciousness, and nothing is unknown to him.

Ganesha is also the controller of all the agents that give one either a positive or a negative understanding, knowledge or experience: the divine and the demonical, both. Ganesha controls the demonical and the detrimental forces through strategy, and guides the benevolent forces through logic and deep, internal, intuitive inspiration. After all, when one encounters bad people, when one is surrounded by bad people, what does one do to get oneself out of that situation? One must be sharp, clear and careful to avoid situations that can be detrimental. One has to use strategies to manage the bad which has surrounded one, and that is what Ganesha uses when he has to control the negative hosts, the negative shaktis, the negative powers. When Ganesha has to deal with the positive, uplifting powers and forces, he uses intuitive, logical awareness and inspiration. When the spiritual aspirant is lifted up from fear and confusion into conscious awareness, then right thought, right speech and right interaction become the trademark of human life. When the right action, right speech and right interaction become the trademark of human expression, then one can say, "Ganesha is my friend."

Ganesha has been accepted in both of the two major spiritual traditions of India – vedic and tantric. The first reference to Ganesha comes in the *Rig Veda*, in which he is identified as a remover of obstacles.

What are these obstacles that the Vedas speak of that Ganesha has to remove?

Swami Niranjanananda: The vedic tradition says that there are eight obstacles that hamper human evolution. The first is known as *mada,* or arrogance. The second is known as *abhimana,* or ego. The third is known as *matsarya,* or jealousy and competitiveness. The fourth is known as *moha,* or obsessive infatuation. The fifth is known as *lobha,* or greed. The sixth is known as *krodha,* or anger. The seventh is known as *kama,* or sensual, sensorial and sexual passion. The eighth is known as *mamata*, or attachment. These are the eight pitfalls that hamper the progress of the human journey in spiritual life. The vedic tradition says that these eight pitfalls must be avoided, and by invoking the grace of Ganesha, one must overcome them.

For each pitfall, a particular aspect of Ganesha has been defined. One has to fight fire with fire. One has to remove a thorn with another sharp object. Similarly, to deal with one's anger, one has to invoke the appropriate quality of Ganesha. One cannot just say, "Ganesha, Ganesha, Ganesha"; one must invoke the appropriate quality of Ganesha. In order to overcome passion one has to invoke the right quality of Ganesha. In this manner, to deal with the eight shortcomings or limitations of human life, eight different aspects of Ganesha have been identified. These eight forms of Ganesha are known in the vedic tradition as *Ashta Vinayaka*.

These eight forms of Ganesha can be seen in temples in the western region of India. The form of Ekadanta Ganesha is invoked to eliminate arrogance from life. The form of Dhumravarna Ganesha is invoked to eliminate ego from life. The form of Vakratunda is invoked to remove jealousy

and competitiveness. The form of Mahodara is invoked to remove infatuations. The form of Gajanana is invoked to remove greed. The form of Lambodara is invoked to control anger. The form of Vikata is invoked to control passion. The form of Vighnaraja is invoked to control attachment.

These are the eight forms or symbols of Ganesha that have been accepted in the vedic tradition, literature and scriptures. All the references to Ganesha in vedic literature define the practices, sadhanas and mantras by which one can overcome the eight detrimental qualities of life. After that, the spiritual journey becomes smooth and fast.

KARTIKEYA

Who is Kartikeya?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shiva and Parvati have two sons. These sons of Shiva and Parvati are not born of a physical union; Ganesha is born as the sankalpa of Parvati's shakti, and the brother of Ganesha, Kartikeya, is born out of the sankalpa of Shiva. Kartikeya was Shiva's manas putra. Ganesha was Shakti's manas putra.

Therefore, Ganesha is his mother's son, not his father's son, while Kartikeya is his father's son, not his mother's son. Ganesha was created due to the sankalpa shakti of Mother Parvati to be her helper and protector. Through willpower, Parvati gave birth to Ganesha. Similarly, Shiva too, in order to help the devas vanquish their enemies, gave his power, his *ojas*, to Agni. Agni, the fire god, could not hold this luminous ojas of Shiva, so he dropped it in the waters of Ganga. When he dropped it in the waters of the Ganga, six women were taking a bath. They saw this beautiful boy emerge in the water, and all six women said, "I am his mother," and they started fighting over this beautiful boy. Kartikeya, as he was Shiva's son through a miracle, grew six heads, so that with each head he could suckle the milk of each mother and satisfy them all.

What do Kartikeya's six heads symbolize?

Swami Niranjanananda: Kartikeya was created by Shiva to help the gods overcome their fight against the demonical forces and powers. According to literatures of spiritual life, the six heads represent the five elements and one mind.

The five elements and mind represent a person who is actively involved in this world, who is subject to all the emotions and can identify with the world. In character, people are not like Ganesha. They are like Kartikeya. They also have six heads: the five sensorial heads and one mind, the mental head. Each head tries to prove its supremacy over the others. All the senses try to prove their supremacy. The mind tries to prove its supremacy. The result of them trying to outdo each other and prove that they are supreme is total confusion and distress for the human being.

Kartikeya was created to fight the demonical forces. If the devas represent the transcendental and cosmic powers, the demonical forces represent the gross and the detrimental powers of life. To vanquish these demonical powers and to support and encourage the establishment of the divine powers, Kartikeya has to be in the middle. Therefore, Kartikeya is seen more as a human being, using his powers and the abilities of the senses and mind; whereas Ganesha represents a being who is equally at ease in all the expressions of consciousness, of the mahat tattwa. Ganesha is calm and composed. Kartikeya can become volatile, just as people can become very volatile when something does not happen according to their expectation in life.

What does Kartikeya represent in the process of yoga?

Swami Satyananda: Kartikeya, the second son of Shiva, was born on a lotus, so he is called lotus-born. He became the commander-in-chief of the army of *devas*, the divine beings, and he led the army to battle with the *rakshashas,* or demonical forces, the dark forces, and dislodged them from heaven. Kartikeya is the symbol of the process of yoga against the lower nature which man has inherited from previous incarnations.

How did Kartikeya become a sannyasin?

Swami Niranjanananda: The two brothers, Ganesha and Kartikeya, lived happily with their parents in Kailash. When they grew up and reached a marriageable age, Shiva and Parvati received a proposal for marriage from a king who had two beautiful daughters. Shiva informed his sons, "Listen, I have received this marriage proposal. Do you want to marry or not?" Both nodded, "Yes, we want to get married."

Shiva, who is the father of everything, started to think, "Kartikeya is volatile, and he is very human. If Kartikeya marries, he may not live happily ever after with his wife; he will not be able to do justice to the family." Then he said, "I'll let destiny decide what will happen to them." Of course, he was a manipulator of destiny too, and he had a chat with the rishis, who came upon a plan. The plan was that they would ask the two sons, Ganesha and Kartikeya, to go around the Earth three times; the first one to complete the journey and return to Kailash would qualify to marry the princesses.

Kartikeya was happy when he heard the news, because he had a small plane, a peacock. He said, "With my peacock I can fly around the world in eighty hours." Kartikeya got on his peacock and started to perambulate the Earth. Ganesha looked at his mouse and said, "Impossible." So Ganesha hit upon an idea. He said, "According to the scriptures mother and father represent the Earth. If I go around them three times, I complete my perambulation of the Earth." Ganesha did that, finished his perambulation in about five minutes and said, "I'm ready for marriage." As a result, Ganesha was married off to two girls – Riddhi and Siddhi.

When Kartikeya returned, he saw that Ganesha was married and he became furious. He said, "You have cheated me and now I'm not going to live in the same house." So he left Kailash and settled in Sri Sailam in the south of India. Kartikeya did not marry. He resigned from his post as the commander-in-chief of the gods' army, established a hermitage, and lived the life of a sadhu in association with

other ascetics, propagating the path of sannyasa. He lived like a vairagi in Sri Sailam. Even today, the teachings of Kartikeya are guidelines for sannyasins on how to live, how to think and how to act.

VISHNU

What are the names of the incarnations of Vishnu?

Swami Sivananda: *Hari* means one who steals the hearts of yogis (*hrati yogichetamsi iti harih*), or he who destroys sins, even when remembered by a wicked man, just as fire burns even when it is touched through inadvertence:

Harir-harati papain dushtachittairapi smritah;
Anichhayapi samsprishto dahayyeva hi pavakah

Rama means he in whom the yogis take delight (*ramane yogino'smin-iti ramah*) or the Supreme Brahman who is Infinite Consciousness and Eternal Bliss, from whom the yogis derive their pleasure:

Ramante yogino'nante nityanande chidatmani;
Iti ramapadenasau parabrahma vidhiyate.

Krishna means one who draws the hearts of the yogis (*karshati yogino mana iti krishnah*). Another meaning of Krishna is given in the following verse:

Krishirbhuvachakah sab'do nascha nivrittivachakah;
Tayoraikyam param brahma Krishna ityabhidhiyate.

Krish also means 'existence', *na* means 'bliss'; so Krishna is the Supreme Brahman in whom both these aspects are combined.

What are the symbols of Vishnu?

Swami Satyananda: The conch and the shaligram are both very dear to Vaishnavites. Devotees of Vishnu do not eat meat or even onion or garlic, but they put to their lips the bone of a snail which is called a conch. It is a kind of animal

which lives in water and this stone is its internal skeleton. They dip a grass resembling wild tulsi in the water and the creature comes up, attracted by the smell. When it comes to the surface, they catch it with a net, dry it and peel away the skin down to the bone.

The shaligram is the inner shell of another aquatic animal. There are many varieties bearing such marks of Vishnu: the conch, the lotus, the kundalini chakras. Shaligram is found only in the bed of the Gandaki river at Muktinath in Nepal. This place is situated at high altitude and one has to cross difficult terrain to reach it.

Now a plane service for tourists has been started but I went there by foot. At that time the government of Nepal used to arrange food, fuel and chillum for the wandering sadhus. It was a very high quality chillum. At night we would make a dhuni and sing. As we smoked the chillum we felt high and, from those heights, the world seemed to be left far below. There is a government tax on the shaligram if you bring it out of the country. The authentic shaligram has a small golden ring which the customs officers remove before giving it to you. Just as Shaivites worship the Shivalingam, the shaligram is worshipped by followers of Vishnu. There are many types and qualities of shaligram, but the authentic shaligram has a ring of gold.

It is an irony that Vaishnavites never eat onion and garlic, and do not even want to hear the word meat, yet the two objects most highly revered amongst them are the bones of snails: one which is called a conch and the other shaligram. Why and how did this happen? This is the virtue of good company. Since the conch is held in the hands of Vishnu, it became an object of worship for the Vaishnavites, not because it is the bone of a snail. Whatever is held in God's hands becomes sacred. That means that through satsang even the most inferior and most inauspicious people become auspicious and fit to be worshipped.

What is the significance of the shaligram?

Swami Satyananda: In India, it is believed that when God incarnates in human form, four signs will be found on the soles of His feet. The presence of these signs indicates that He is a divine incarnation.

There are many other indications, like the sign of a conch in the finger prints, but it is the signs on the soles of the feet that are really important. Vaishnavas are orthodox people. They are pure vegetarians, but they worship the inner core of this animal, because it has the marks of God.

What is the value of the gold around the shaligram?

Swami Satyananda: The gold band around the shaligram is pure. It is so perfect that one feels it has been fixed on by some good craftsman or goldsmith. It looks like gold work on the stone, as if it is part of the body of the shaligram. I think the gold in one shaligram should weigh five grams, or say ten grams maximum. I cannot say its purity in carats, but it does not require any processing. It is in its purest form.

How is Vishnu related to consciousness?

Swami Niranjanananda: According to the Vaishnava tradition, in the beginning nothing existed, just water. Water means the possibility of existence, life. In that water slept Vishnu. This symbolizes inactive consciousness, consciousness which was not actualized. Vishnu was in eternal yoga nidra, the consciousness inactive, dormant, no stimulation, nothing. Then something happens to his manipura chakra; there is spandan, vibration.

Manipura chakra represents energy and is the storehouse of prana shakti. That vibration happens in the passivity of consciousness. The energy vibrates and with the vibrations of energy the quality and the tranquillity is affected. So a new being emerges from Vishnu's navel, Brahma. That Brahma is born out of movement. It is responsible for creation because creation represents movement, progression and evolution. Brahma is born out of movement, the spandan of manipura

chakra, and that faculty of the awakened self is known as Brahma, the creator. Vishnu is the dormant consciousness; Brahma is the awakened consciousness, the individual consciousness.

LAKSHMI AND NARAYANA

How is Narayana all-pervasive?

Swami Niranjanananda: Science says that life emerged from water. Tantra says the same. The aspect of Narayana or Vishnu emerged from water. Vishnu is always depicted as being in water. Shakti provided the platform for Shiva. Shiva became the inherent consciousness in every aspect of creation. Life emerged as Narayana when consciousness began to realize itself. Therefore, just as the scientific theory is that life emerged from the ocean, in the Hindu theory of evolution, life was propagated by Narayana, who is associated with water. There is a beautiful statement:

> *Jale Vishnuh thale Vishnurvishnuh parvatamastake*
> *Jvaalaamaalaakule Vishnuh sarvam Vishnumayam jagat.*
>
> Vishnu, the life-force, is everywhere, in the waters, in space, on land, on mountain tops, in the depth of the oceans. Everything is pervaded by the life-force called Vishnu. Vishnu is the catalyst to create plant life, animal life, bird life, insect life, human life, everything that moves or gives something to nature and is an active part of nature.

What do Narayana and Lakshmi represent?

Swami Satyananda: Narayana is the god of creation, who lives in water, and Lakshmi, his consort, is the divinity of prosperity. She gives a lot of food, clothes, money, cheese. Anything – but in plenty! Prosperity, fulfilment, completeness of all that is intended for *bhoga*, for enjoyment, for a comfortable life comes from Lakshmi. When there is fullness and total comfort, convenience and pleasure, that is Lakshmi!

How does Narayana sustain life?

Swami Niranjanananda: The sustaining power of life is Narayana. In the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, all have specific roles to play in life. Brahma is the creator, and after the process of creation is done, his work is over. Shiva is the changer, the destroyer; he removes the bondage of the world, of life and karma. He gives liberation, elevates the bound consciousness and merges it with the supreme consciousness. His work is at the end. However, from birth to death, it is the grace of Narayana and Lakshmi that sustains everyone. Narayana is the sustainer, the provider, not only of food or happiness, but of everything that one seeks and desires in life, from shoes, to money, to property, to children, to family, to friends. Without his grace one would be very lonely in this world and would not have anybody to call one's own.

Narayana has two forms: Vishnu and Narayana. Vishnu means one who pervades the entire universe: *Vyapaktva iti Vishnuh* – "One who is pervading the universe is Vishnu." The figure of Vishnu is depicted as standing. He stands on a lotus holding the conch, mace, wheel and lotus in four hands. The other form is that of Narayana. He reclines on the ocean of milk on the body of the thousand-headed serpent called Ananta. The figure of Hari or Vishnu is standing and the figure of Narayana is reclining.

Narayana with a single face is the impersonal transcendental self, who does not have to manifest in myriad forms, who is self-contained, self-effulgent and self-aware. When that transcendental Narayana manifests in the world and becomes the indweller of all hearts, then he acquires a thousand faces, a thousand eyes, a thousand limbs. Everything becomes a thousand, manifold, which is symbolic of the fact that Narayana lives within each one. The *Purusha Sukta* begins with the statement: *Om sahasrashirsha purushah. Sahasrakshah sahasrapat* – "The Supreme Being has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet." This is his Narayana shakti; this Narayana power manifests within

each one and sustains everyone from birth to death, giving everything in plenty. Only those who are hypnotized by the material objects and senses, despite receiving plenty, feel that they have nothing and crave for more. That is incorrect, as Narayana provides for each and every one equally.

What is the meaning of the *Purusha Suktam*?

Swami Niranjanananda: The *Purusha Suktam* states that Narayana is one-headed and also a thousand-headed, a thousand-eyed, a thousand-armed, a thousand-footed. He has a thousand limbs. Everything is in thousands, meaning that he is part and parcel of us and we have to invoke that power within us. He is singular when there is no duality, and when he encounters duality he multiplies, as everything, every form of life – whether vegetable, mineral, human, animal, insect, reptilian or bird – is permeated by the shakti of Narayana.

If the entire life is permeated by the shakti of Narayana, then life itself is Narayana. You are living in the lap of Narayana, yet you do not know that. You are fighting your personal battles, suffering from heart attacks and high blood pressure as you cannot face your own stress and anxiety. If you are able to awaken the shakti of Narayana within, you will become the source of peace for many, the source of happiness for many, a helping hand for many. That is the ultimate aim of human life as taught by Sri Swami Sivananda and Sri Swami Satyananda.

What is the relationship between Lakshmi and Narayana?

Swami Satyananda: Goddess Lakshmi told me, "Son, as long as you tread the right path, I will come whenever you call me. The moment you default, I'll be off." So I am afraid of displeasing her, though I am not really worried, because Lakshmi is the Mother. She should not be called directly because if she comes, it will be on her personal vehicle, which is the owl. The owl cannot see during the day, so one does not know where it may end up while carrying her to one's home. To avoid these risks, I have decided to serve

Narayana in order to call Lakshmi. Since she is devoted to her husband, she accompanies Narayana wherever he goes.

Worship Narayana first, in whichever form you wish. If Shiva is worshipped, Parvati will accompany him. That is why the greeting *Namo Narayana* is used. Narayana is the shakti behind creation. Narayana and Lakshmi are one. To call only Lakshmi is risky. If I direct all my tapasya towards calling her, there will be a lot of money, but money and wealth are as variable as the water current. Lakshmi is like the broken waves of water on a restless ocean.

How should one seek the grace of Lakshmi and Narayana?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the Vedas, Narayana is the indweller of all hearts. It is due to Narayana that you live. It is due to that force and power that you are able to perceive and experience nature, the world, the cosmos and the universe, the visible and the invisible. In order to nurture, sustain, protect and develop the shakti of Narayana, there is Lakshmi who brings prosperity and peace. If there is no prosperity in life, there is no peace in the mind. For peace of mind it is necessary to have basic prosperity in life.

If you don't have anything to eat for a couple of days, if your pockets are empty, if there is no bank balance, will you have peace of mind? Even to nourish and sustain your body, you are dependent on the grace of Lakshmi. Lakshmi is the giver of prosperity. Lakshmi is the giver of wealth, not only material and external, also mental, emotional and spiritual. The complete fulfilment one experiences in life, the prosperity, the peace and the bliss one experiences in life is due to the grace of Lakshmi.

Lakshmi and Narayana are two powers, two forces, whose grace one needs in order to prosper in material life as well as spiritual life. If the grace of Lakshmi and Narayana is sought for material life, one can be sure that one's spiritual life will not be successful. However, if the grace of Lakshmi and Narayana is sought for spiritual life, then along with spiritual life, one's material life will also be successful.

How should one relate to Lakshmi?

Swami Satyananda: Children do not have to worry or think because their mother worries and thinks about them. When they go home in the evening she is ready with cooked food. Her children never worry about her. In the same way, God worries more about you than you worry about Him. When you return home in the evening, your dal, roti and rice are ready. Mother is waiting with all the food she has prepared and even if you do not want it, she says, "Eat, eat, eat." If your ordinary mother can give so much love, care and thought for your wellbeing, just think what the Divine Mother can do. She has an immense number of children and she looks after the growth of the trees and plants as well as everything else in creation.

The grass, flowers, children and cows all grow and they are Lakshmi. Lakshmi means wealth, prosperity, auspiciousness, beauty. If you do not like the Indian Lakshmi, make a French, Spanish, Belgian or Dutch Lakshmi. If you do not want to see her in a sari, you can have her in trousers. Lakshmi does not even mind wearing bikinis because she lives in the ocean. Water is the origin of growth and prosperity. Water is the primordial source of life, of all creation.

What is the best way to keep Lakshmi happy?

Swami Satyananda: While being in the service of God, I have the chance to have the darshan of Goddess Lakshmi daily, so there is no need to beg for money. Every morning, I clean the room thoroughly before her arrival. I am her servant. I wash her sari and petticoat, clean her utensils and prepare her food. She gives me something and at the same time does not give me anything. She gives something to others through me. The divine gifts of Lakshmi should not be used for oneself. When one thinks about others only, not about oneself, Lakshmi becomes very happy, but she leaves someone who thinks only about himself and not about others.

Goddess Lakshmi has another rule. To call her, simply call Narayana because Goddess Lakshmi is ever faithful and follows her husband unswervingly. Serving Lord Narayana automatically brings the grace of Goddess Lakshmi, because she is devoted to her husband. However, if one seeks her grace alone, she will come alone on her own vehicle, the owl, not on Narayana's vehicle. The owl is invisible during the day and seen only at night, so Lakshmi is welcomed at night time. The owl is not able to see during the daytime, so do not call her alone, as she will leave after a few days, and then one is left with nothing. The master of Lakshmi is Vishnu. Vishnu's vehicle is the eagle, Garuda. The eagle is far-sighted, it has distant vision. If Lakshmi comes with Vishnu, it will be on his vehicle, the far-sighted Garuda. So there is no need to call Goddess Lakshmi.

What is the power of Lakshmi?

Swami Niranjanananda: Lakshmi is the shakti responsible for prosperity, fullness, contentment, happiness, fulfilment. When one receives her grace, it is received at two levels, the material and spiritual. On the material level, problems get cleared. More specifically, financial difficulties can be overcome with the invocation of Lakshmi. People are attracted to her for this reason; however, another great power of Lakshmi is that she bestows contentment. Contentment is the true prosperity in life. The wealth of human life is not a bank balance, but contentment in all conditions and situations of life. The mind is free and happy, and that is the grace of Lakshmi.

What is the grace of Lakshmi?

Swami Niranjanananda: Lakshmi is the cultivation of the quality which allows one's mind to be at ease and come out of its stressful condition. When one goes into an easeful state of mind, peace sets in, tranquillity sets in. With the setting-in of peace and tranquillity, ideas and thoughts become powerful; they become *sankalpas*, resolves. These resolves create a positive, optimistic, hopeful condition in the mind.

To maintain one's conviction, despite what other people say, and the determination and the drive to achieve what one has set one's eyes upon, with ease and grace, is the grace of Lakshmi. The grace of Lakshmi is to have cultivated that quality of sankalpa which can make one move mountains, and to give one inner happiness, peace and contentment.

There is an experience of focusing and thoughts becoming sankalpas, resolutions. There is an experience of faith and hope. People can experience this change from being fatalist to being full of faith. Fatalists suffer in life and people of faith don't. Those people who believe in fate generally suffer in life, because for them this life is the end, and the fear of failure sets in. People begin to blame fate and destiny for their incompetence and disturbed mind. If this can be converted into faith, hope, confidence, belief and strength come in, and that sustains and beautifies one's life.

That is the point of Lakshmi: maintaining positivity, a tension-free mind, ease and grace. With this, three things will happen. To survive in the material world, there is need of wealth; that is attainable too, provided one is in touch, in contact, and expressing one's clarity and creativity. If one can express one's clarity and creativity, one can be successful economically anywhere in the world. Clarity, creativity and competence is the grace of Lakshmi at the material, physical level. Happiness, contentment, positivity, optimism, hopefulness, strength, grace and a connection with beauty is the grace of Lakshmi at the mental level. Peace and bliss is the grace of Lakshmi for the spirit.

How did Lakshmi test Narayana?

Swami Niranjanananda: One day while Narayana was out travelling around the world providing for people, his consort Lakshmi prepared his meal and was waiting for him to return. When he finally came, Lakshmi asked him, "My Lord, why did you delay so much?" Narayana said, "Well, I was providing food for everyone." Lakshmi asked him, "You

provide food for everyone?" Narayana said, "Yes, even for the birds, reptiles and insects."

Lakshmi decided to test the powers of Narayana. She picked up an ant and put it in a small container, wrapped it in her sari and kept quiet about it. The next day, Narayana went about providing and distributing for everyone. When he returned, Lakshmi asked him, "My Lord, did you provide for everybody?" Narayana said, "Yes, I have given food and provided for everyone." Lakshmi wanted to prove that he was wrong, so she took out the container from her sari and opened it to show Narayana the ant which she had hidden and which had not eaten anything. Wonder of wonders, when she opened the container she saw one grain of rice which the ant was eating happily. The meaning is that God provides for everyone. The only condition is that one has to believe and not demand. Those who demand can be refused, but those who believe are never refused.

SARASWATI

Who is Saraswati?

Swami Satyananda: Saraswati is the goddess of learning, knowledge, *vidya*. Saraswati or vidya is part of the human personality. It is both a process and a part. All the mental aspects: *manas,* mind, *buddhi*, intellect, *chitta*, consciousness, are a part of Saraswati. Collectively they are known as Saraswati.

What do Saraswati and her relationship with Brahma symbolize?

Swami Satyananda: Which part of the personality is in contact with the cosmic consciousness? It is the mind which is the connecting link. Mythologically, Brahma can be approached through Saraswati. The story of Saraswati is significant. Saraswati was created by Brahma. She was his daughter; that was the relationship. Then Brahma felt passionate, so he ran after Saraswati and married her. Great criticism is levied on him as a result.

In mythology, Saraswati is both the daughter and the wife of Brahma. It is a symbolic relationship. Brahma is the cosmic creator and Saraswati is wisdom and understanding, which are born of the mind. The mind is the father and knowledge is the daughter. The mind is the creator of knowledge. The mind acts with knowledge because it has knowledge in itself. Being the symbol of knowledge, Saraswati is born of the cosmic mind and at the same time is working with the cosmic mind. The cosmic mind is working with Saraswati and is the creator of Saraswati.

The mind is the connecting link between the personality and cosmic consciousness. The cosmic mind is to be approached through intuition and intellect. Saraswati is the symbol of intuitive intellect, which is born of the cosmic mind and at the same time it is a part of the cosmic mind. Brahma is not the father or husband of Saraswati in the ordinary sense. He is the creator of Saraswati, and at the same time he is living, acting and manifesting with Saraswati.

What does Saraswati's vehicle, the swan, symbolize?

Swami Satyananda: Saraswati is the goddess of wisdom, learning and speech. Saraswati brings art, music, dance, literature and culture into our lives. She is dressed in white, and holds a veena in one hand and a book in the other. The book denotes knowledge and learning.

The vehicle of Saraswati is the swan because the swan has the characteristic of discernment. Saraswati is the goddess of learning, and through learning one is able to differentiate between what is right and wrong, proper and improper. Saraswati represents the quality of *viveka*, discrimination, discernment, analysis. What does the swan do? According to tradition, if one gives the swan one litre of milk mixed with water, it will drink only the milk and leave the water. The ability to differentiate between essence and non-essence is the characteristic of Saraswati.

What is the role of Saraswati sannyasins?

Swami Satyananda: According to tradition, Saraswati sannyasins were assigned the duty of preserving knowledge so that it could be used by future generations. It is their responsibility to understand and absorb as many of the different sciences, systems and branches of knowledge that exist in the world as they can. Truth is one, but it is called by many names. Therefore, it is important to realize the link between the different philosophies and systems of thought, and express them according to the need of humanity. To say that this path is better and that one is not suitable is not the purpose or the tradition of the Saraswati order. Having an integrated approach towards development and achievement in life is the main purpose of the Saraswati tradition.

What inner power does Saraswati represent?

Swami Niranjanananda: Ma Saraswati is the patron deity of the Bihar School of Yoga and its symbol in the form of ajna chakra. Ajna chakra is the seat of wisdom, intuition and logic, it is the seat of guru, it is the seat of Saraswati. In the tantras, Saraswati is the first Mahavidya, where she is known as Tara. *Tara* also means star or guiding light. How did the ancient navigators guide themselves in total darkness, across the middle of the ocean? Through stars; these were the guiding powers for the ancient navigators.

Similarly, in the tantras Saraswati is seen as the guiding light. She is also the shakti of the sattwic nature. Shakti is the manifestation of the sattwic nature in the form of the resilience of wisdom. Wisdom is different to knowledge. Knowledge is something one knows but doesn't live by. When one has the strength to live what one knows, one attains wisdom. Wisdom is the creative expression of one's knowledge. In that wisdom there has to be resilience, it cannot be rigid, fixed or stationary. Wisdom can never be stationary, and therefore wisdom also becomes common sense.

In material life, common sense is Saraswati. In spiritual life, wisdom is Saraswati, the guiding light. She is the shakti

of Brahma, the creator; any new effort, any new creative expression requires some understanding, knowledge, positive response from the side of the individual. When everything is positive within the individual, only then can creative response take place. If the individual is not optimistic, clear and focused, a creative response can never emerge. Despite knowing, one is not using one's creativity, the grace of Saraswati.

KALI AND DURGA

What is the significance of Kali according to Hindu scriptures?

Swami Satyananda: Kali is a feminine deity, a symbol of the unconscious. She is depicted completely naked and her body is black or smoky grey in colour. She has six hands. In one she holds a dagger, in another the head of a man, in the third a bowl of blood. She wears a garland of one hundred and eight human skulls. Shiva is lying beneath her and she is standing with one foot on his chest. Her mouth is open with the tongue projected, full of blood. She is ferocious.

Kali's lolling tongue of blood-red colour signifies the rajoguna energy, whose circular movement gives impetus to all creative activities. By this specific gesture, she is exhorting sadhakas to control their rajoguna. The sacrificial sword and the severed head held by the left hand are symbols of dissolution. Darkness and death are by no means the mere absence of light and life, rather their origin. The sadhaka worships the cosmic power in its female form, for she represents the kinetic aspect, the masculine being the static which is activated only through her power.

What do the different physical aspects, such as the garland of skulls and the six hands of Kali, represent?

Swami Satyananda: The skulls on the garland around the neck of Kali are the memories of different births, symbolized in the various chakras. When the unconscious rises up

to vishuddhi, one who was old looks young. In between these chakras there are many other accomplishments. Many people who develop the power of the unconscious lose it sometimes in between, because they make use of that power and then it recedes back to its original state. The unconscious state evolves and then reverts back to the subconscious. That is why the psychic states are changing, until they reach the highest state, sahasrara. After this, it becomes continuous for all time.

When the unconscious reaches ajna chakra, one becomes the knower of past and future dimensions of time, of pure dhyana. It is a spiritual stage without any psychic or occult manifestation. When the unconscious reaches sahasrara, these developed faculties remain throughout life. There is no waxing and waning, no ebb and tide; it is all fixed and steady. Then one is a siddha or a yogi.

It is said that when the unconscious power unites with supreme Shiva in sahasrara, the sadhaka becomes free from mental bondage. He enjoys supreme bliss. He understands the real nature of the world, all powers are in him, he can manifest them at will, but he will never do it. He is in the world, aware of it, but not of it.

The six hands of Kali symbolize or represent the six chakras. The dagger in one hand represents the dagger of supreme *vairagya*, dispassion, by which she cuts off the head. This vairagya is the absolute detachment of the personality. The head in her hand is the symbol of the head of this present reincarnation. The bowl full of blood in her hand is the karma of this birth.

What do Kali and Durga each symbolize?

Swami Satyananda: Sometimes it happens that people get in touch with their unconscious due to mental derangement and they see ferocious things. It is said that the unconscious is full of inauspicious elements or tendencies. According to yogic philosophy, the first manifestation of the unconscious is terrible power. It completely subdues the individual soul,

i.e. Kali standing on Shiva. She wears a mala of human skulls, representing the memories of many human births. She is black or smoky grey in colour, which is the colour of the unconscious. She is thirsty for blood, which represents the rising kundalini.

Kali is a symbol of the human unconscious, but the lower manifestation of the unconscious is ferocious and the higher manifestation is glorious and beautiful. So the higher, deeper and more refined aspect of the unconscious is Durga. She is a beautiful lady with eight hands, representing the eightfold elements of man. Durga is seen riding on a tiger and she is supposed to be the remover of the evil consequences in life.

Is Kali symbolic of kundalini? What about Durga?

Swami Satyananda: Kundalini is the unconscious in man. That is why it is said that kundalini should be awakened in the presence of the guru, otherwise the unconscious manifestations, like Kali, can put one down. It is a fact, and it is said in the old scriptures referring to kundalini, that when this serpent power rises up with her thirsty mouth, she first of all drinks the blood, then eats the bones and sucks the life.

This is the occult rendition. Kundalini drinks the blood on which the different bodies or incarnations were fed. Man is born again and again because there is enough material to take birth. So kundalini is Kali, and Durga is the higher manifestation. The unconscious power in man goes up to meet the superconscious. The superconscious is Durga and the unconscious is Kali. That is the mythological concept.

How do devis symbolize the stages of awakening of kundalini?

Swami Satyananda: There are various names for kundalini at different stages of awakening. When kundalini is just awakened and cannot be handled, it is called Kali. When kundalini wakes up and one is able to handle it and use it for beneficial purposes, and when one becomes powerful due to kundalini awakening, that is called Durga.

Kundalini is shakti, the energy. It does not have just a single manifestation. In each individual it has completely distinct manifestations, and therefore it has different names. Kundalini is the name of that power when it is dormant potential, but when it is manifesting, it is no longer kundalini. Then it is called Devi, Kali, Durga, Saraswati or Lakshmi according to the manifestation being exhibited.

In mythology, what is the meaning of Kali standing with one foot on Shiva's chest?

Swami Satyananda: According to yoga philosophy, Kali, the first manifestation of the unconscious kundalini, is a terrible power, which completely subdues the individual soul. This is symbolized by Kali standing on Shiva. In mythology, it is said that when Kali rises up in red anger, the gods and demons are stunned. Everybody remains quiet, nobody speaks. They do not know what she is going to do. This is the mythological story and may be interpreted accordingly. Then they ask Shiva to pacify Kali, but Kali roars and stands with one foot on his chest. The devas then pray to pacify Kali. They tell her, "You are the supreme creator; you are the counterpart of Brahman, the supreme being. Through you all of nature does its work. Through you, the supreme Lord has created and maintained all that is manifest. You are the destroyer of this cosmos. Ultimately everything in this world is dissolved in you." After many such prayers, Kali becomes calm, quiet and peaceful.

Then from the ferocious unconscious emerges Durga, the benign unconscious. Durga wears a mala of human heads to symbolize her wisdom and power. These heads generally number fifty-two, representing the fifty-two letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, which are the outer manifestations of *shabdabrahman,* Brahma in the form of sound. Durga is the giver of power and peace, which is the release of power from mooladhara. Kali is the primal, potential energy represented by mooladhara, the abode of kundalini. Kali worship is still prevalent in India. The greatest influence on the psychic

body and mind is exerted by the symbols or concepts of Kali and Durga, the goddesses.

How is Durga said to have been created?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Durga Saptashati* talks about Durga's awakening or coming alive. Once upon a time, there was a major war between the gods and the demons. Somehow the demons had the upper hand. Gods and humans are always suffering because of demons. One suffers more because of bad people than because of good people. The gods started losing, and they went to the trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva – and told them of their woe. While the three were listening to the woe of the gods, they became angry and from their bodies emerged a source of light, a point or flame of light that fused and became one. Out of that big flame emerged Devi in the form of Durga. The name Durga means remover of *durgatti*, the bad state or condition in life. Durga was the coming together of the cosmic force, emanating from Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. She became more powerful than all the devas combined, including the strength and the force that created her.

What is an example of the grace of Durga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Archimedes was working on a problem, and while having a bath the solution comes to his mind and he screams, "Eureka!" He runs naked from his bath to the king's court to tell the king that he has found the solution to the problem. The flash of realization, the flash of knowledge which removes tension, anxiety or distress is Durga's power. Intuitive awareness, intuitive knowledge is Durga shakti. It suddenly takes one from a state of anxiety, distress or difficulty into a state of perfect peace and happiness, balance and contentment.

When the negative becomes positive, that change is the grace of Durga. When one has the motivation to strive to become better, that is the grace of Durga. When one makes the effort but holds oneself back and is not successful, that

is the curse of Durga. Then one has to make an extra effort to receive her grace with the clarity, strength and conviction to overcome the limitation which is holding one back. Durga represents an aspect of inner realization and mentality, in which the distresses of life do not confine one to suffering; they cause one to face the difficulties with the conviction that one will win.

HANUMAN

What does the name Hanuman stand for?

Swami Sivananda: The name Hanuman stands for the spirit of perfect and supreme service to God.

What does Hanuman represent?

Swami Niranjanananda: Hanuman represents the strength of character. Hanuman represents wisdom, the sharpest, keenest and the finest mind. Hanuman represents humility and perfection. Hanuman represents total surrender and love for his master, the Divine. He represents innumerable qualities.

What are Hanuman's qualities as a disciple and what are his siddhis?

Swami Satyananda: Hanuman was a minister in the cabinet of King Sugriva, not a disciple of Sri Rama, but he had a premonition that one day Sri Rama would come in search of Sita while he was in exile, and so he was awaiting that day. From the time Hanuman met Sri Rama near the Rishyamuka hill, he served him under the orders of Sugriva. The most striking things about Hanuman were his physical strength, intelligence and devotion to duty. He was a very capable man.

Hanuman was born near Nasik in Maharashtra, close to Tryambakeshwar. From childhood he was so strong that he could lift an elephant as if it were a ball. Hanuman was Sri Rama's trusted friend, but since he had a devotional attitude

and manner in relation to Sri Rama, people think that he was his disciple. He considered himself the servant of Sri Rama. A disciple or servant must have one quality, absolute surrender, and Hanuman had that quality. He also had great faith.

The word *hanu* means 'chin', so Hanuman means 'one who has a prominent chin'. Chin here refers to *jalandhara bandha*, the chin lock, a yogic practice that awakens the prana vayu for which Hanuman was so famous. Hanuman's duties, accomplishments and achievements are yogic feats, whether he was flying in the sky, leaping across the ocean or burning the city of Lanka. His actions and miracles are yogic *siddhis*, manifestations of yogic power, not the deeds of a wrestler or muscleman. No muscleman can fly, cross the ocean in one leap, lift a mountain or burn a city. Only a person who has perfected yoga could do these things.

Hanuman was a great yogi. Being a master of prana, he could change his form and increase the dimensions of his body. In fact, it was said that he was an aspect of Shiva. When Sri Rama was born, Shiva was born as Hanuman. Vishnu was born as the avatar Sri Rama. Hanuman is an avatar of Shiva.

What can a spiritual aspirant learn from Hanuman's nature?

Swami Niranjanananda: Hanuman represents the awakened consciousness. Everyone is able to awaken consciousness but people are under a curse – not knowing who they are. Hanuman was under the curse; he was all powerful, enlightened from birth, he was an incarnation of Shiva.

There is a story that when Hanuman was young he was hungry; his mother not around, he saw the rising sun, flew up to it and swallowed it whole. The meaning of this story is of a person able to control pingala shakti, surya shakti, the pingala energy, and achieve dominance over the prana shakti. The moment one achieves dominance over prana shakti one becomes the master of all creative powers in the universe. The guru of Hanuman was Surya, the sun, in whose presence a shadow cannot exist even for a millisecond. Darkness cannot

exist even for a fraction of a second. The sun represents the illuminated mind. The guru of Hanuman was the sun and Hanuman overpowered his own sun, his pingala nadi.

However, Hanuman was then cursed, "You will not remember your powers until the time comes when you are able to use them for the benefit of everyone." Hanuman lived an ordinary life until he met Sri Rama. When he met Sri Rama he had to go and find Sita who was kidnapped by the terrorist King Ravana. In this search for Sita, an elder of a tribe and guru, Jambavan, made Hanuman realize that he was endowed with special powers. Therefore, the intervention of a guru took place. After he was reminded of his powers, Hanuman became capable of everything.

Hanuman epitomizes an enlightened and awakened consciousness. He is a symbol of humility and wisdom, great strength, great courage, absolute surrender and devotion. He represents the awakened consciousness which is a homogeneous and integrated expression of jnana, karma and bhakti. These are the three qualities of the enlightened consciousness. Hanuman represents that awakened consciousness who had forgotten his own potential, his own abilities and capacities and who needed a guru to remind him of his powers in order to search for Sita.

The harmony of jnana, karma and bhakti symbolized by Hanuman are the qualities which one wishes to acquire in one's life. They indicate the germination of the true spiritual culture and power within everyone. If one analyzes the character of Hanuman one will understand that this is the character that yoga and the enlightened ones speak of acquiring on the spiritual path. Every spiritual aspirant must have the qualities and characteristics of Hanuman.

What should the aspirant do on Hanuman Jayanti?

Swami Sivananda: Hanuman's birthday falls on Chaitra Shukla Purnima, the March–April full moon day. On this holy day one should worship Hanuman by fasting, reading the *Hanuman Chalisa*, and spending the whole day in the

japa of *Ram Naam*. Sri Hanuman will be highly pleased and will bless the devotee with success in all undertakings.

Hanuman is worshipped all over India, either alone or together with Sri Rama. Every temple of Sri Rama has the *murti* or idol of Sri Hanuman. Hanuman is the avatar of Shiva. He was born of the Wind god and Anjani Devi. His other names are Pavanasuta, Marutsuta, Pavankumar, Bajrangabali and Mahavira.

Yatra yatra raghunatha kirtanam;
Tatra tatra kritha masthakanjalim;
Bhaspavaari paripurna lochanam;
Maarutim namata raakshasanthakam

We bow to Maruti, Sri Hanuman, who stands with his palms folded above his forehead, with a torrent of tears flowing down his eyes wherever the names of Lord Rama are sung.

What are the qualities of Hanuman?

Swami Satyananda: Hanuman is always the first to arrive wherever satsang is being held and last to leave when the satsang ends. That is the role of Hanuman in satsang. Hanuman is a beloved boy. He represents brahmacharya, strength and valour. Every town and village in India has an akhara where young boys are taught the art of wrestling. They are all named after Hanuman: Hanuman Akhara, Bajarang Akhara, Bajarang Bali Akhara. These akharas are small rooms, barely ten feet by twenty feet, with sand pits where young boys go in the morning to do push-ups.

The *langoti* or loincloth is also associated with Hanuman. A langoti is like a suspended bandage. In India they say, "Keep your langoti tight," which means maintain brahmacharya. Hanuman was famous for his brahmacharya. He was an *akhanda brahmacharin*, he kept unbroken brahmacharya and never broke his celibacy. Hanuman represents strength and true brahmacharya. For him, the women in the world were mothers. In India, the elders tell the children to go to akharas where wrestling is taught, because

the akhara plants the seed of brahmacharya. Indian people consider this to be important, not only for the individual, but also for social discipline. The worship of a deity like Hanuman is most powerful and ideal for a young person.

Hanuman is also famous for service, *seva*. He was Sri Rama's doorkeeper. There is a special hymn called *Hanuman Chalisa*, which every Indian knows by heart. They have so much faith in Hanuman that on Tuesdays, the day that has been designated for Hanuman worship, the queues at his temples are several miles long. People line up to offer incense, laddoos and flowers. Hanuman is an ideal for all Indians. Every other god has become a matter of controversy. People ask why Sri Rama left Sita, or why Sri Krishna played with girls, but Hanuman is non-controversial. He is first in service and in strength as well as being a great and learned man.

Hanuman was very intelligent, well-educated and qualified. He was a true professional. These are Hanuman's three qualifications: he could fly, he could swim and he could make his body smaller than an ant or bigger than a giant. He was *atichatura*, a most clever man. That is why Sri Rama made him his personal assistant. Sri Rama himself was supremely intelligent. He was not a foolish man. In the *Ramacharitamanas* he is called *chaturashiromani*. He was not only intelligent; he was the crest jewel, the king of intelligent people. When Sri Rama is super intelligent, his peers should also be highly intelligent, otherwise they cannot get along.

Hanuman is the greatest *bhakta* or devotee of Sri Rama. Sri Rama is in his heart all the time. He is full of devotion for Sri Rama with the spirit of a servant. His relationship with Sri Rama is that of master and servant.

Why is Hanuman recognized as the ideal bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Hanuman was an ideal selfless worker, a true karma yogi who worked desirelessly and dynamically. He was a great devotee and an exceptional *brahmachari* or celibate. He served Sri Rama with pure love and devotion, without expecting any fruit in return. He lived to serve Sri

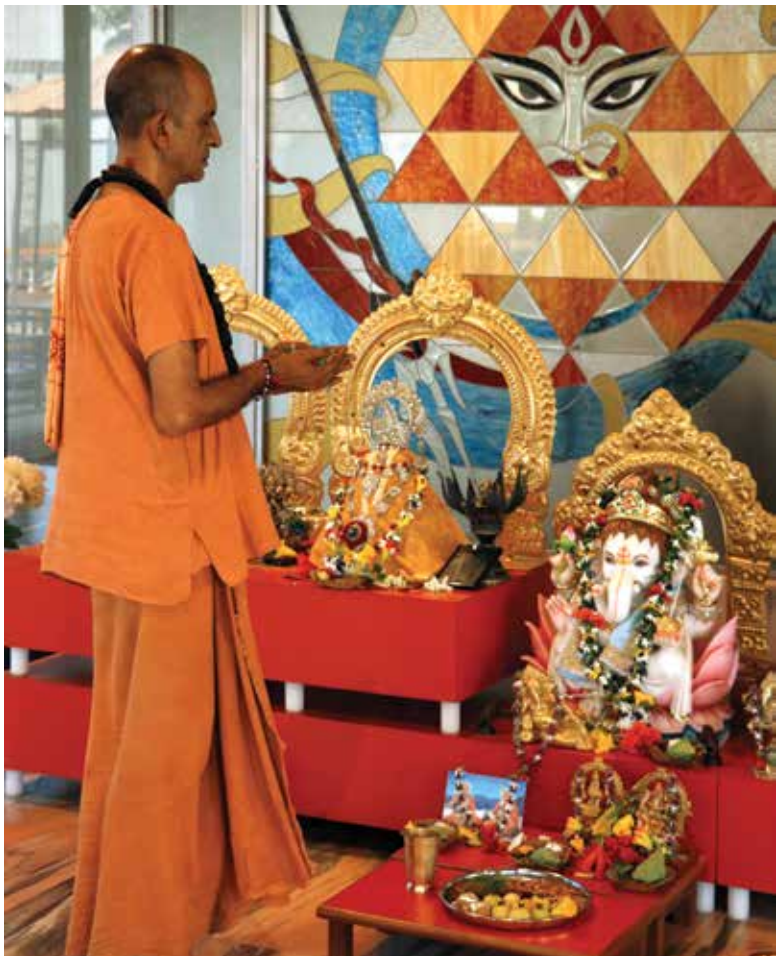
Rama. He was humble, brave and wise. He possessed all the divine virtues. He did what others could not do – crossing the ocean simply by uttering *Ram Naam*, burning the city of Lanka, and bringing the sanjeevani herb and restoring Lakshman to life again. He brought Sri Rama and Lakshman from the nether world after killing Ahiravana.

He had devotion, knowledge, spirit of selfless service, the power of celibacy and desirelessness. He never boasted of his bravery and intelligence. He said to Ravana, "I am a humble messenger of Sri Rama. I have come here to serve Rama, to do his work. By the command of Sri Rama, I have come here. I am fearless by the grace of Sri Rama. I am not afraid of death. I welcome it if it comes while serving Sri Rama."

Mark here how humble Hanuman was! How very devoted he was to Sri Rama! He never said, "I am the brave Hanuman. I can do anything and everything." Sri Rama said to Hanuman, "I am greatly indebted to you, O mighty hero! You did marvellous, superhuman deeds. You do not want anything in return. Sugriva has his kingdom restored to him. Angada has been made the crown prince. Vibhishana has become king of Lanka. But you have not asked for anything at any time. You threw away the precious garland of pearls given to you by Sita. How can I repay my debt of gratitude to you? I give you the boon of everlasting life. All will honour and worship you like myself. Your murti will be placed at the door of my temple and you will be worshipped and honoured first. Whenever my stories are recited or glories sung, your glory will be sung before mine. You will be able to do anything, even that which I will not be able to!"

Thus did Sri Rama praise Hanuman when the latter returned to him after finding Sita in Lanka. Hanuman was not a bit elated. He fell in prostration at the holy feet of Sri Rama. Sri Rama asked him, "O mighty hero, how did you cross the ocean?" Hanuman humbly replied, "By the power and glory of your name, my Lord." Again Sri Rama asked, "How did you burn Lanka? How did you save yourself?" Hanuman replied, "By your grace, my Lord." What humility Sri Hanuman

embodied! There are many who want wealth in return for their services. Some do not want wealth, but they cannot resist name and fame. Others do not want any of these, but they want approbation. Still others want nothing, but they boast of their deeds. Hanuman was above all these. That is why he is recognized as an ideal karma yogi and an unsurpassed adept in bhakti. His life is full of lessons. Everyone should try his best to follow the noble example of Hanuman.



3

Avatar

THE ROLE OF AN AVATAR

What is an avatar?

Swami Satyananda: In the four yugas, there have been nine divine incarnations. It is believed that divine power alone can bring out dharma, and that divine power has to incarnate in an ordinary human body. Such a person is called an avatar. The word *avatar* means 'descending'. There are many incarnations, but most are half or partial, meaning that the divinity incarnates only to a small degree. However, in certain people the divinity incarnates in all its power, and they are known as avatars.

When the higher values begin to decline in human society and the lower values become dominant, when animal or demonical qualities spring up in humankind, when good, honest, simple people are oppressed and cruel people rise rapidly to power, when individual freedom is completely restricted, at that time divinity incarnates in the human form in order to set dharma back into motion. It is said that an avatar incarnates in every yuga.

Why do avatars incarnate on this earthly plane?

Swami Sivananda: Whenever there is a wide-scale catastrophe on Earth, whenever righteousness decays and unrighteousness prevails, when the undivine forces seem to

be stronger than the divine forces, when the word of God or the commandments of His messengers are forgotten or disobeyed, when religious fanaticism follows the letter of the scriptures, killing their spirit, then God incarnates on Earth to save man and to save righteousness. He takes a human form when He comes down on the physical plane, and is called an avatar. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:7–8):

> *Yadaa yadaa hi dharmasya glaanir bhavati bhaarata;*
> *Abhyutthaanam adharmasya tadaatmaanam srijaamyaham.*
>
> Whenever there is decay of righteousness, O Arjuna,
> And rise of unrigheousness, then I Myself come forth. (7)
>
> *Paritraanaaya saadhoonaam vinaashaaya cha dushkritaam;*
> *Dharmasamsthaapanaarthaaya sambhavaami yuge yuge.*
>
> For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked;
> And for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age. (8)

There is descent of God for the ascent of man. The aim of every avatar is to save the world from some great danger, to destroy the wicked and protect the virtuous.

Is the purpose of an avatar to destroy evil?

Swami Niranjanananda: Why do humans take birth? Why do dogs and snakes and other life forms take birth? The purpose of their birth is simple: to manifest the unmanifest God. If one understands this statement, one will discover the *virat swaroopa*, the universal identity, the universal awareness of the Divine. In the *sakara* or manifest form of the Divine, the front of the Divine is the virtuous aspect, the benevolent, pious and dharmic aspect, and the back of the Divine, which nobody sees – just as one cannot see one's own back – is the adharmic nature.

The purpose of an avatar is not to kill or destroy evil, because evil cannot be destroyed or killed, but it can be

relegated to the background. When evil becomes the front of the body and virtue becomes the back of the body, the problems and strife take place. When virtue comes to the front and evil goes to the back, then virtue is all around. Avatars bring the virtuous, dharmic nature to the forefront, which is initially overshadowed by the negative nature. The two, the good and the evil, represent the two sides of the same coin. If the face is virtuous, the tail is evil, and the coin is God.

There is nothing to negate in life. When one sees virtue, one should honour and respect it. When one sees evil, one should also do pranam to it, because that is the back. There is no need to avoid it, to shun it, and there is no need to rebel against it because that is a permanent reality which will always exist.

What is the mission of an avatar?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sometimes God descends on Earth and takes a human form. God is not a person; God is not an entity. 'It' is energy. The nature of a magnet is such that it will attract another piece of iron or another magnet. The nature of this cosmic energy is such that it can be attracted, using the right tools, to take a human form. The right tools are known as 'prayers'. Not the prayers said in one's daily life, but the prayers that come from the depth of one's being. Normally it is the mind crying but whenever the soul cries and its prayers are heard, God descends.

When atrocities are being committed and there is an increase in suffering, people seek a solution in liberation. When this desire is not just mental, intellectual or rational but real, that feeling is converted into a prayer that attracts the cosmic energy. This has been stated in the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana*. At the time of Sri Rama's birth, there was so much atrocity and suffering in the world that the pious people prayed. It was their prayer which acted like a magnet to attract God in a physical form. Furthermore, it has been stated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, "I came down to Earth for the joy of the pious

people, and for the eradication of evil." For the joy of the pious people and in answer to their request God comes down and spreads the message of peace, wellbeing and joy.

In the Indian tradition the process is known as *avatar*, the descent of divine grace. The grace that comes down can take various forms. In the case of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna and other gods and goddesses, the energy that descended became the cause for a global, political and social transformation of civilization. The same energy that descended in the form of Buddha, Mahavir, Christ or Mohammed, became the cause for a change in the mental, emotional and religious beliefs of the world.

Why does the Divine incarnate in a human body?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Krishna says that there are three reasons. First, for the happiness of the virtuous people. Second, for removing and eliminating people who create obstructions on the path of virtue. Third, to re-establish the eternal dharma which connects the individual to his higher nature, to the supreme God or the Supreme Self. These are the three reasons why the cosmic power, the cosmic identity, the cosmic universal Self manifests in a physical body.

Many people across the world ask, "What is the purpose of us taking birth? Why did we take birth? What is the goal of life? Why do we come into this life? What do we need to do?" Well, the answer to all their questions and the efforts they should make in their life to achieve the goal of their life is contained in these three statements of Krishna.

For the happiness and upliftment of the virtuous. If that is the first intention, then one has to become that virtuous person first. One has to bring virtue into one's life in the form of a pious and pure state of mind, emotions, thinking, behaviour, expression, performance and action. One should live what one knows and believes in. Therefore, cultivation of virtue is the first goal for a human being. One lives in this world and is coloured by the world. One's culture, country, society, nation, humanity, everything gives one a direction,

a mindset, a concept of life and living. Yet as an individual, what is one's contribution to life? One cannot just be an expression of what other people have made one to be. What is one's contribution to the betterment of one's life? It is the willingness to cultivate virtue in life. That is what one contributes to beautify one's own life. The first aspiration and goal is to become pious. Once one has become pious, one's heart becomes the seat where the Divine descends.

To eradicate evil, Evil is created because of one's association with the six *vikaras*, mental impurities: *kama*, *krodha*, *lobha*, *moha*, *mada*, *matsarya* (passion, anger, greed, infatuation, pride, envy). They colour one's responses, awareness and perception. When they colour one's perceptions, thoughts, actions, responses and behaviours, one moves into darkness. When one moves into darkness one follows the path of adharma, which is detrimental and opposite to peace, bliss and the purity of self – all that is the reflection of our transcendental nature. Once one begins to eradicate the ill effects of the six vikaras, to use their strength to propel oneself forward in life and connect in a better manner with the environment and within oneself, the evil character is relegated to the background, and the virtuous and positive character comes to the forefront.

As a result, dharma is established – *Dharma sansthapana arthaya*. Once the virtuous and the positive comes to the forefront, whatever one does reflects and represents dharma; one's thoughts and actions uplift everyone, one's path and luminosity bring peace and joy to the life of everyone, and make the individual one with God. These are the three efforts or *purusharthas* that everybody should make in order to realize that the 'divine is in me'. This is the message of *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the stories and the glories of Sri Krishna.

If God is all-powerful, why does he have to appear himself?

Swami Niranjanananda: Emperor Akbar once asked the members of his court a question, which no one could answer. Akbar then summoned his wise minister, Birbal, and said, "I

want the answer to my questions. My first question is, 'Where does God live?'" Birbal answered, "Your Highness, God is all-pervasive. God is omnipresent. He has no place of His own. He lives in all places but devotees see God in their hearts. Therefore, we must accept that God lives in the hearts of devotees."

Akbar said, "Birbal, your answer is accepted. My second question is, 'What does God do?'" Birbal replied, "Maharaja, I need to sit on a high seat to answer this question. You are the seeker; therefore, you should sit on the ground to listen to the answer to your question." Akbar said, "All right." He seated Birbal on the throne and sat himself down at Birbal's feet and asked again, "Now tell me, what does God do?" Birbal said, "Your Highness, God brings down those who live high and elevates those who live low. You were sitting high, God made you sit low. I was at first standing low, now God has seated me on your throne. This is what God does. He never gives constancy. Continuous change and transformation is God's work."

Akbar asked, "All right, now tell me, what does God eat? The laddoos, bananas and other food offered to God, is this all He eats?" Birbal replied, "No, Maharaja. God does not even look at the laddoos, food, fruit or flowers you offer; only the priests consume them. Instead, God eats man's ego. As long as a person is egoistic, closeness to God cannot be attained. The day that freedom from the ego is attained, God will be experienced spontaneously. That is why God feeds on the ego and not on laddoos, coconuts and the various foods offered to him."

Akbar said, "Birbal, now the fourth question. Hindus say that God incarnates as an avatar and comes to the Earth Himself, whereas we believe that Allah does not need to come Himself. He can command anyone. On His command, messiahs come down to Earth to bring the message of the Almighty. Hindus say Ishwara manifests in a form to dispel all sorrows and eradicate evil. Why does He come Himself?" Birbal said, "Maharaja, to answer this I need a day's time."

This question is on avatars. Why does an avatar incarnate? In the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is said that an avatar manifests to establish *dharma,* the righteous, natural order, to destroy the wicked and to delight the hearts of good people and saints.

Doubt lurked in Akbar's mind, 'If God is all-powerful, why does He have to appear Himself?' Birbal asked for a day's time and went to the place where Akbar's little son was playing with his nanny. He told the nanny, "In the evening, when Emperor Akbar strolls in the garden and comes close to the lake, you must throw a wooden doll into the water and raise the alarm that his son, the little prince, is drowning." After saying this, Birbal went away.

In the evening when both Akbar and Birbal came to the garden for a stroll, the nanny threw the wooden doll into the lake, as instructed, and raised the alarm that the prince had fallen into the water. As the noise reached Akbar's ears, he ran to the spot and, looking neither right nor left, jumped straight into the water to save his child.

When he found that it was merely a wooden doll, he asked Birbal what this was all about. Birbal replied, "Maharaja, you have so many servants. There are so many courtiers walking with you. Why did you not tell someone to jump in and save the child? You could have told any of the courtiers or guards that the child had fallen into the water and that they must save him. What need was there for you to jump into the water yourself?"

Akbar said, "Birbal, you don't understand. I am his father and he is my son. I have the sentiment of love, of 'mine-ness'. Why should I tell the guards to go and save my son when I can save him myself?"

Birbal said, "Maharaja, you have answered the fourth question yourself. God comes down to Earth because of love, the feeling of mine-ness. He knows, 'This person needs me, he is thinking of me.' Love and oneness are the reasons God comes and it is this that inspires Him to take on a human form."

How can the unborn God assume a human form and does He have the same physicality as an ordinary human being?

Swami Sivananda: The advent of an avatar, the incarnation of God upon Earth, is a law of nature. This law is the same at all times, everywhere. Some ignorant persons object: "How can the unborn God assume a human form? How can the Ruler be limited in a perishable, human body? How can God, who stands as the Witness only, put on a finite body?" These are vain, worthless, illogical discussions. The doctrine of avatarhood is perfectly rational, logical and tenable. God is the Indweller, the Inner Self of all beings. He is not an absentee landlord of this world. He is not an extra-cosmic or super-cosmic deity. He pervades and permeates all atoms and the whole universe. He is the Lord of the breath, mind and organs. In Him we live, move and have our very being.

Some people ask, "How can we take Sri Krishna as God or Bhagavan? He took birth and died. He is only a man." This is a false statement, the utterance of an ignorant child. Sri Krishna only manifested himself to affect the solidarity and wellbeing of humanity and then he disappeared. Sri Krishna is Hari himself. There is no doubt of this. Sri Rama is the Supreme Soul, the Indweller, the protector of all beings. He is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. He is Hari. He was never born, he never died. Hari simply manifested in the form of Sri Rama to work for the welfare of the world and then vanished.

Sri Rama and Sri Krishna had divine forms, not physical bodies made of the five elements. They had bodies of consciousness, though to all appearances it looked like flesh. They had no real birth and death like human beings. They appeared and disappeared, just as a yogi does. Their bodies were not left in this world. Just as a tailor who makes coats for others can make a coat for himself, God who has created bodies for others can create a body for Himself as well. He is omnipotent and omniscient. As He has control over maya, He is fully conscious of His divine nature though He assumes a form. Still He is infinite and unconditioned.

An avatar puts on a body out of his own free will for the ascent of man. He is quite independent, while the jiva is a slave of nescience, *avidya*, as long as he has no self-realization.

Is an avatar a force, a spiritual energy manifesting in a human form?

Swami Satyananda: Energy is formless and nameless but sometimes this energy takes a form and a name. In the same way Babaji or Christ are eternal forces, but sometimes they assume a form, not because they have a form, but because man's intellect can only understand and recognize name and form. Therefore, Babaji and Christ are eternal forces without name and without form, but for the sake of devotees they assume a form and a name.

How many avatars will appear during the human lifespan?

Swami Satyananda: It was said that during the human lifespan, there would be ten divine incarnations. Of these ten, nine have already come. According to the Puranas, the tenth incarnation of that divine power will be Kalki, who is depicted on a white horse, sword in hand. Kalki avatar is destructive in nature. The prophecy of Nostradamus also mentions a white horse, a sword and destruction. Kalki is the tenth avatar, the ninth was Buddha, the eighth was Sri Krishna, the seventh was Sri Rama.

What do the ten avatars of Vishnu symbolize?

Swami Niranjanananda: As far as evolution in creation is concerned there is a good system of marking the various evolutions in form of the ten avatars, the ten incarnations of Vishnu. The first incarnation of Vishnu was Matsyavatar, the fish; not an ordinary fish but a fish which could survive under water and in air both. That was the first breakthrough of life – to be able to survive under water and above water. There are certain fish which survive in air, and that generation of fish is the incarnation, the breakthrough in evolution from water to land.

The second incarnation was Kachchap, the tortoise. The tortoise is another breakthrough for it is the only animal which can survive in both elements, under water and on land. Varaha, the boar, is more a land animal finding its place and the strength of survival. They all represent a breakthrough in consciousness. The fourth incarnation was Narasimha, half-man and half-lion. This is the emergence of the human intelligence from the animal instinct, however, the animal instincts are still more powerful than the human component. The transition from animal consciousness to human consciousness is marked in this Narasimha avatar.

The fifth is Vaman avatar. Vaman is the dwarf, the little man. In this little man there is no trace of animal nature, but it is not a fully matured person, he is just a Vaman, a human experimenting with being a human. After Vaman comes Parashuram. He is that angry primitive man who is insecure in the environment, who is searching for security, order and stability in life. Parashuram represents that.

After that angry man comes the ideal man, Rama. Rama represents peace, the stage of breakthrough after anger and frustration. He was not disturbed in any condition or situation, always having his balance and presence of mind. Rama is an ideal man. After Rama comes Krishna, the playful man, one who experiments. Krishna was the first scientist of the world. He suffered the first bone fracture in the history of humanity when he lifted the mountain on his little finger. After Krishna comes Buddha, the peaceful man, and after Buddha comes Kalki, the one who is yet to come. He is the man responsible for transformation and taking the human evolution to another dimension. This has been the Vaishnava theory of evolution as contained in the *Dasha Avatara*, the ten avatars.

It seems that the world is in a time of suffering. Will the next avatar be born soon to alleviate it?

Swami Niranjanananda: This question can be answered in two ways: firstly, at the level of avatar and secondly, at the level of the individual human being. Mythologically, the

Vaishnava tradition speaks of various avatars or incarnations of Vishnu. In the trinity of gods in the Indian pantheon, Brahma is the creator, Shiva is the destroyer and Vishnu is the preserver. Vishnu has been given the mandate to sustain and nourish creation, and the maintenance of creation is a multidimensional activity. The strength and mental energies of many beings have to be stimulated, nourished and kept alive. The subtle energies and states of consciousness continue to interact with each other in the subtle and psychic dimensions. Therefore, there is a need for maintenance at both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels.

Vishnu takes birth to change the negative tendencies and to establish joy and righteousness. Ten avatars have been described in the *Bhagavata Purana*: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Ramachandra, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki. Nine avataras have appeared, the ninth being Buddha only 2,500 years ago. The tenth, Kalki, is awaited and will come at the end of Kali Yuga, which is still a long way away. We are at the beginning of Kali Yuga, which has a very long cycle of 432,000 years.

The process of bringing joy into people's lives and establishing dharma is expressed differently in each avatar. Buddha used the instruments of serenity and adherence to the ideals of non-violence and peace, *ahimsa* and *shanti*, patience and forgiveness, *dhairya* and *kshama*, to deal with the negative tendencies existing at that time. This approach and attitude was adopted by many other luminaries of the past.

A radical, lord-like approach was adopted by Parashurama who, according to mythology, wiped out twenty-one generations of the ruling class. Then Sri Krishna appeared and expressed love for life. He said that happiness is not alien to spiritual life, that one can live a full life and be spiritual at the same time. Therefore, different methods have been adopted by different avatars to bring joy, to establish dharma and to deal with the prevalent environment and situation of the time.

One also needs to look at the role of the individual in eradicating suffering. First, one has to define what is evil on

Earth. Why is there suffering? What are the causes? Many thinkers, seers and aspirants have conceived of different processes to eradicate human suffering and find solace, peace and fulfilment in life. Historically, the outcomes of their thoughts and understandings have been religions, which have developed the idea that peace can be attained through connection to God, through bhakti and surrender. Religious ideas, including those of *tyaga*, renunciation, and *tapasya*, austerity, indicate this drive and motivation. These different processes lead to the eradication of suffering in life, the root of suffering being the human mind.

The Earth has the potential to create anything. That potential can be depleted by misusing the Earth and increased by uplifting the Earth's energy. Similarly, there are virtues in the mind, yet the negative tendencies of tamas cloud the virtuous, wisdomful aspect of sattwa. The thought processes and ideas, which became entrenched in people's memories as religions, belief systems, philosophies or lifestyles, are an attempt to alleviate suffering. As individual suffering is alleviated and the mental tamas is reduced, not only God, but also human beings must play their role in the eradication of evil.

Human nature is resilient; it can survive. It can find its peace, then be hypnotized by the next achievement and become disturbed, then again find its peace, until hypnotized by the next success and the rajasic effort to maintain that success, and again find peace. The human mind is not a rigid force. The cause of suffering is the tamas of the mind. Tamas, rajas and sattwa are the constituents of prakriti or nature. These three qualities are intertwined and combined in all the spheres of creation and in each individual personality. Sattwa, rajas and tamas are the natural evolutes contained in the process of creation and evolution. Therefore, it is not only avatars but also the individual human being who has a role to play in the eradication of suffering from life.

Will an avatar come again in the Kali Yuga?

Swami Satyananda: In the *Bhagavata* and other Puranas it is written that the time is not yet ripe for Kalki avatar to descend on Earth. Kalki is deemed to appear at the end of Kali Yuga. All the avatars have come at the end of the epochs and are said to be the culmination of that epoch. This is written in the scriptures. The coming of an avatar should not be disclosed. His coming needs to be a closely guarded secret. Otherwise he will be on the hit list of the superpowers, which is what happened in the case of Sri Krishna. Sri Rama denied that he was an avatar when Hanuman asked him, and kept telling Hanuman that he was the son of Dasharatha and Kaushalya. Even though he was an avatar, he hid this identity.

Therefore, this phenomenon is out of the ordinary. I do not see its likelihood in the near future, nor do I feel its necessity. An avatar comes when man is incapable of handling his own problems. Now man is not incapable or helpless. He is beginning to reform society. The judiciary and legal systems have not yet toppled completely, nor have human rights. There is no need for the avatar to arrive just yet. When the time comes everyone will think the world has become so bad that it needs drastic measures. I do not think that this is the situation. I am not a pessimist, nor do I think that the world is so bad that it can be reformed by none less than God.

The *Bhagavata Purana* mentions many avatars. Who are they and what was their purpose?

Swami Sivananda: The *Bhagavata Purana* is a chronicle of the ten avatars of Vishnu. They are: Matsya, the fish, Kurma, the tortoise, Varaha, the boar, Narasimha, the man-lion, Vamana, the dwarf, Parashurama, with an axe, Ramachandra, the hero of the *Ramayana*, Sri Krishna, Buddha, the prince ascetic and founder of Buddhism, and Kalki, the hero on a white horse who is to come at the end of the Kali Yuga.

The object of the Matsya avatar was to save Vaivasvata Manu from destruction by a deluge. The object of the Kurma avatar was to enable the world to recover some precious things which were lost in the deluge. The tortoise gave its back to support the churning rod when the gods and the asuras churned the ocean of milk. The purpose of the Varaha avatar was to rescue the Earth from the waters after it had been dragged down by a demon named Hiranyaksha. The purpose of Narasimha avatar, half-lion and half-man, was to free the world from the oppression of Hiranyakashipu, a demon who was the father of Prahlad. The object of Vamana avatar was to restore the power of the gods which had been eclipsed by the penance and devotion of King Bali. The object of Parashurama avatar was to deliver the country from the oppression of the kshatriya rulers. Parashurama destroyed the kshatriya race twenty-one times. The object of Rama avatar was to destroy the wicked Ravana. The object of Sri Krishna avatar was to destroy Kamsa and other demons, to deliver his wonderful message of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and to become the centre of the bhakti schools in India. The object of Buddha avatar was to prohibit animal sacrifices. The object of the Kalki avatar, who will appear before the end of the Kali Yuga, is the destruction of the wicked and the re-establishment of virtue.

In addition to these ten avatars there are fourteen other avatars. Together they are called the twenty-four lila avatars.

1. Yajna, born of Ruchi and Akuti. The Suyama Devas were born of Yajna. He removed the fears of Triloki.
2. Kapila, born of Kardama Prajapati and his wife Devahuti. He founded the Samkhya system of philosophy and taught Brahmavidya to his mother.
3. Dattatreya, the avatar of the three murtis: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
4. The Kumaras – Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanat-kumara – the four mental sons of Brahma. They retired into the forest for tapas and meditation as virgin youths, and attained self-realization. They disseminated Brahma-vidya or knowledge of the Self.

5. Nara-Narayana, born of Dharma and his wife Murti, daughter of Daksha. They practised intense tapas in Badrinarayana. Celestial nymphs could not allure them.
6. Dhruva, a boy devotee like Prahlad. Not able to bear the words of his stepmother, he went into the forest and did severe tapas. He received the twelve-syllabled mantra *Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya* from Narada and had direct darshan of Hari. He attained *Dhruvaloka*, the region of the pole star.
7. Prithu, who took out riches and eatables from the Earth.
8. Rishabha, born of Nabhi and Sudevi, Meru Devi. He roamed about as a paramahamsa.
9. Hayagriva, the horse-headed avatar appeared in the vedic yajna and promulgated the Vedas.
10. Hari, who saved the elephant King Gajendra.
11. Hamsa, who narrated bhakti yoga, jnana and *Bhagavata Purana* to Rishi Narada.
12. The presiding deity of each Manvantar.
13. Dhanvantari, who disseminated ayurvedic science.
14. Vyasa, who narrated the Vedas and set them in order. He also wrote the eighteen Puranas.

Do avatars come to show people how to live?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Rama and Sri Krishna are the two most prominent and outstanding figures in Indian culture. They are remembered not because they are avatars of divinity, but because of the lives they lived, which have become examples for everyone to emulate. The Indian mind is permeated with the laughter, games, wisdom and personalities of Sri Krishna and Sri Rama.

When Sri Krishna was asked why he had come down to Earth, he replied, "Because here I will find abuse and suffering. In heaven nobody abuses me and there is no suffering. In my dimension there is nothing except peace and bliss, but here on Earth there are people who can abuse me and reject me and people who can love and adore me. On Earth suffering coexists with pleasure." Therefore, Indian

thought has always seen God existing everywhere, whether in peace, *shanti*, or the absence of peace, *ashanti*, whether in pleasure, contentment, happiness or in suffering.

When one lives a principle in life and goes to the end of that path, one becomes a luminary for human society. Avatars, the sages and siddhas indicate the completion of that human journey, where a human being experiences his own true nature, and not what is imposed by the mind and by society.

Are avatars beyond matter?

Swami Satyananda: A prophet, a mahatma, a rishi and an avatar are all considered beyond the three gunas. An avatar, a divinity incarnate, or a divine person, or a mahatma like Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Christ, Guru Nanak, Mahavir, Gautama Buddha, or Ramakrishna did not belong to matter; they were above matter. Certainly they had a physical body, but that physical body was not controlled by the laws which control the three gunas: sattwa, rajas and tamas.

That is the reason why, when Mirabai went into higher ecstasies, she just became light. Kabir's body became a matter of controversy between Hindus and Muslims, who each wanted to dispose of him in their own way, but when the room was opened the body was not there. The same is said about Christ's ascension to heaven, about Sri Rama, about Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

What are the rays that different avatars are said to represent?

Swami Sivananda: Whenever there is the decay of righteousness and the rise of unrighteousness, God manifests Himself for the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness. Sri Rama and Sri Krishna had divine forms, chinmaya bodies, *aprakritika*. They had no real birth and death like human beings. They appeared and disappeared, just as a yogi does. Their bodies were not left in this world. There is no destruction of their bodies.

Avatars are rays of God. They are born of Ishwara or Hiranyagarbha. When the work of *lokasangraha*, the good of the world, is over, they disappear from the world. There are *poorna avatars* with full *kalas,* rays. There are *amsa avatars*, part avatars. There are avesha avatars, like Narasimha and Parashurama. There are lila avatars, like Sri Krishna. There are maya guna avatars. In creation these maya guna avatars are tapas, Brahma, the rishis and the nine Prajapatis. In preservation, they are dharma, Vishnu, Manu, Deva and kings. In *pralaya* or destruction they are adharma, Shiva, serpents and asuras.

God who is an ocean of grace incarnates out of compassion for humanity to do supreme good. He takes a body of His free will. God spreads His yogamaya and engages Himself in sports or *lilas*. Who can comprehend the secrets and mysteries of avatars? Where, when and in what manner and in how many forms is He sporting? It is the genuine tears of a devotee that trickle down his cheeks out of *virahara*, separation, that bring the descent of the Lord in the form of an avatar. How powerful is a devotee? How potent is his tapas?

The rishis of yore have expounded the doctrine that the God of the universe exists in sixteen expanding kalas, rays or digits of manifestation: one digit of His life manifests in the vegetable kingdom, two in the animal and from five to eight in the human, as man passes from the savage at one end of the scale to the highest evolved state at the other. God's manifestations in His avatars range from nine to sixteen digits or rays, and the shastras speak of ten digits or twelve to fourteen digits. Avatars as well as the full or *poorna* avatars are those in whom the kalas or rays are present. Sri Krishna was a poorna avatar.

What is a kanishta avatar?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are four categories of gurus: the *vidwan guru*, the knowledgeable guru, the yogi guru, the tantric guru and the *brahmanishta guru*, the enlightened guru.

There are very few brahmanishta gurus. They are people in whom the energy of God is fully awakened. They are not called avatars, but they can be called small avatars, *kanishta avatara*. The brahmanishta guru has nothing to do with the world, but forever remains in communion with God. He can see God all the time before him, just as we can see each other. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Ramana Maharishi were the kind of people who belong to this category.

How does tantra explain the evolution of an avatar?

Swami Satyananda: After Shiva and Shakti were married Shakti accompanied Shiva to Kailash, Manasarovar. This is not the story of a god marrying a goddess. It is the awakening of a particular force within. Shiva represents consciousness. Parvati represents Shakti, the primal moving energy. There are two concepts: ascent and descent. From mooladhara up to sahasrara is the ascending shakti. Kundalini ascends from mooladhara to sahasrara. There Shiva and Shakti unite. Shiva and Shakti, through the same passage, descend to mooladhara. This is the concept of avatar. Avatar is known as incarnation. In Sanskrit the word *avatar* means 'one who comes down'. Shiva and Shakti in union descend automatically to mooladhara. Avatars are those people in whom the kundalini has attained its final goal in sahasrara, and then descended to mooladhara with Shiva. This is the tantric concept.

Is it a rare experience for man's kundalini to reach sahasrara?

Swami Satyananda: Yes, very rare. It happened in people like Christ, Buddha, Shankaracharya.

Who was Dattatreya?

Swami Satyananda: Dattatreya was the son of Atri and Anusuiya. He was a great yogi like Jesus Christ, Shankaracharya, Buddha and Moses. He initiated hundreds and thousands of ordinary people into spiritual life. He did

not consider caste, creed, religion, ability or inability. He said, "Do you want spiritual life? Get in!" "Do you drink? I don't mind." A prostitute came and he said, "Do you want spiritual life? Come on! This is your mantra and this is the method. Now, go and do what you like." He had a very great following.

Dattatreya's tradition is that of the *naga babas*, who remain unclothed. He himself used to remain unclothed. Dattatreya is the *avadhoota* guru. The story is that his father was a debauchee, who went to prostitutes every night. His own wife, Anusuiya, was devoted to him. The time came when he had arthritis and could not walk. His wife said, "Do not worry, I will carry you on my shoulders to the prostitute's den." Sometimes she would wait outside for him, or else come back in the morning to collect him. Such a woman's son became a great man.

In India, Dattatreya is respected as God. A wife taking her husband to a prostitute – can you believe that! Such a strong mind, such a strong lady, such a pure woman is extraordinary, rare and unique. Therefore, she was able to give birth to a genius. Dattatreya told his mother, "I won't stay at home; I'm going away. I've come here only to awaken people to the higher spiritual life." His mother asked, "What is higher spiritual life?" Dattatreya replied, "Where there is no duality, no diversity; where there is only one substance, God, atma, paramatma." He threw away all his clothes and started on his journey.

Dattatreya went to four places in India. At Mount Abu there is a cave where he practised constant japa. Another place Dattatreya went to is Girnar in Junagadh. This forest is the only place where you can see lions in India. There was a cave there and the swamis invited me to stay. I liked that place very much, but water was scarce and water is my life.

Why do avatars have different forms and personalities?

Swami Sivananda: The philosophy of Jesus Christ, the yogi of Nazareth, is the best of its kind for the European world, as is the philosophy of Buddha for Thailand, China, Japan and Ceylon. So the philosophy of Mohammed is for Arabia. They are the sons of God made in His image. They give to the different parts of the great wide world a message of peace and of the secret of life. They are aspects of one Ishwara or God. Under whatever name and form, it is Ishwara who is adored. Worship goes to the Indweller, the God in the form. It is ignorance to think that one form is superior to another. All forms are one and the same. All adore the same God. The differences are only differences of names due to differences in the worshippers, but not in the object of adoration.

The real Jesus or Krishna is in one's own heart. He lives there forever. He is the Indweller. He is the partner always. There is no friend like the Indweller. Resort to Him, take refuge in Him, realize Him and be free.

Did avatars exist?

Swami Niranjanananda: People have asked in the past, "Are avatars real or are they stories from mythology? If they have happened, when did they happen? Is there any link between those people and the present day?" Many debates have happened as to whether Sri Rama or Sri Krishna or others lived. From my perspective, the point is simple. They were historical people once upon a time. They are your ancestors and you live today because of your ancestors. Rama had a lineage or *vamshavali*. Krishna had a lineage, and there is evidence of where his progenies migrated and settled; there are historical records.

It would therefore be improper to say that they are mythology or a creation of somebody's mind. They are historical people and history becomes mythology in the

course of time. Today you accept the existence of Buddha, Christ, Prophet Mohammed, yet three thousand or five thousand years down the line, they will have become symbols of inspiration for humanity. These people who have lived today will become mythology in the course of the next five or ten thousand years, but their existence can be proved by the lineage they leave behind. Rama has left a very strong lineage; there are Ikshvaku vansha and Raghu vansha and so many other *vanshas*, lineages, that continue to exist even today. The people of Andhra Pradesh, the Telugus for example, come from the genealogy of Sri Rama. All the Telugus are descendents of Rama, so if Rama did not exist once upon a time, then how did they appear on the scene?

What is the difference between Christ and Buddha and a guru?

Swami Satyananda: It is true that Buddha and Christ were not gurus. They were incarnations, divine beings, who came to the world not to teach but to save humanity. They are known as saviours. Whenever virtue declines and viciousness arises and when the higher values of life are challenged and the petty values of life are acceptable, at that time in order to save the good and in order to eliminate the criminals, God incarnates from time to time. He is endowed with special powers because he is powerful. Christ and Buddha are such people. In their own lifetimes they must have lived as gurus to many people, but their role was much greater than that of a guru. Every aspirant must have a guru whom he can understand, whose language he can follow. The basic and fundamental mistake that people often make is to keep an ideal which is difficult to follow.

Great people like Christ and Buddha came with a special mission and a greater awareness. They were divinity, not human beings. Even the physical body they had was not a gross body but a divine body, *chinmaya* as it is called. Their body was not composed of the five elements of nature, the *pancha tattwa*. Human bodies are composed of the five

elements of nature and will die, but the body of a divine being does not die; it automatically turns into light. Their death is just magic, just a show, an act. Ordinary, ignorant people think that someone like Christ died, but for the wise he did not, because he was immortal. His physical body was created of divine potentials. Something similar happened to Chaitanya, to Mirabai, and many others. They were not human beings and to consider Christ and Buddha as gurus is to belittle them.

Simple people can be gurus because they are finite, they can understand people's problems, and their language and path can be understood. Therefore, it is important that there should not be much of a gap between the wisdom of a guru and the understanding of a disciple.

Are there indications that an avatar is soon to be born on Earth?

Swami Satyananda: Whether it is the star of Bethlehem or the star of David, they are all powers of the higher hierarchy of *devatas* or divinity. When Buddha was born lotuses bloomed; that was an event. According to a story, Padma Sambhava was born from a lotus. The word *padma* means 'lotus', *sambhava* means 'blooming'. Similar things happened when enlightened saints like Mohammed, Moses and Krishna were born. Although Krishna was born in a prison in Mathura, things started happening in Gokul where he later shifted. It is written in Balakanda of the *Ramayana* that the day Sri Rama descended into the womb, auspiciousness and beauty spread everywhere.

What is auspiciousness? The air became pure and fragrant, the trees and plants began to bloom, the cows began to give milk, the sick became well again. Auspiciousness manifested everywhere. Whenever an incarnation of God descends on Earth, certain signs appear. A sign becomes apparent, which is the evidence. Since there is historical evidence, it cannot be dismissed. The event of Ganesha drinking milk in 1995 should also be understood in that

light. It is a kind of proclamation or announcement that a higher power is now on Earth. Either a mother is bearing him or he has already been born.

There are many great people in this world, but the incarnation of God is entirely different. The incarnation of God means the energy of God enters into a womb. This happens whenever righteousness and dharma decline and demonic forces increase. When righteousness is destroyed, God incarnates in a human body to relieve suffering.

How is an avatar recognized?

Swami Satyananda: The incident of Ganesha drinking milk was to let people know that an incarnation of God has been born, or is about to be born. He has descended either into the womb or onto Earth. When God descends, He does so in a very humble way, not like a leader, prime minister, president, king or monarch. All the great prophets such as Krishna, Christ, Moses and Mohammed were born incognito so nobody would know. Today it is known that Sri Krishna was born, but during his childhood nobody knew whether he was born or not, or even who he was. Kamsa was searching for him but could not find him. Even in Gokul, Nanda and Yashodha, who raised him, did not know who he was. Only the saints knew where God was born.

When Mohammed was born, no one knew who he was. He worked in a wayside inn where the camel caravans stopped, bringing water and fodder for the camels, helping the travellers put up their tents and arranging for their food. The whole day he worked as a servant, and in the middle of the night he would go with his black blanket up on the mountain to meditate. He would meditate and fast in secret, so nobody knew he was a great man.

Jesus Christ was born amongst bundles of hay in a stable where oxen and cows were kept. His mother nursed him there amidst the hay and then she had to flee. His father was a simple carpenter. Christ appeared to be so ordinary that later, when the Roman soldiers captured him, he had

to be identified. They did not know who Christ was, and somebody had to say, "This is Christ." Although he was popular among the masses, still the authorities did not know his face. Somebody had to identify him by touching his feet or kissing him, indicating that he was Christ, and in this way he was arrested.

However, Christ was not a Christian by birth; he was born a Jew. Similarly, Buddha was not a Buddhist; he was born a Hindu. The founders of every religion did not belong to that religion from birth. Just as Krishna, Christ and Mohammed were born, the incarnation of Ganesha will be born into the family of some poor, suffering person. He won't be born into the family of a rich man.

What are the signs that an avatar may be coming?

Swami Sivananda: There is a grand possibility of the descent of God in human form as an avatar. This has occurred several times in the past and will continue to occur in the future as well. There are some premonitory signs that indicate the advent of an avatar. The ground is well prepared for his descent. People take an interest in sankirtan and some pious people disseminate sankirtan bhakti far and wide. Some great souls are born beforehand and train people in selfless service and right conduct.

In the divine scheme of things, avatars are indispensable for the upliftment of humanity. In this Kali Yuga, Kalki avatar is expected. May he bring supreme joy and peace to the world!

How often do avatars incarnate?

Swami Satyananda: God assumes the form of an avatar in every age. In every age, God has a chief avatar, as well as amsha avatars and archa avatars. However, his poorna or complete avatar comes only once in an age. Sri Rama was one of them. It was not necessary that Sri Rama burnt Lanka, killed Ravana, crossed the ocean or built the bridge across it. What is important is that Sri Rama was a person worthy of honour and worship.

How does one recognize a true avatar?

Swami Sivananda: Some people want to have contact with avatars without being endowed with the proper qualifications. Even if an avatar appears, he will not be found, because no one has the eyes to see him as such. He will be taken for an ordinary man only. How many were able to detect the divinity of Sri Krishna? Did Jarasandha, Sishupala and Duryodhana recognize him as the avatar of Hari? Very few people, like Bhishma, recognized Krishna as the avatar. That is the reason why Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:11):

> *Avajaananti maam moodhaa maanusheem tanumaashritam;*
> *Param bhaavamajaananto mama bhootamaheshvaram.*
>
> The foolish disregard Me when clad in human semblance, ignorant of My supreme nature, the great Lord of beings.

Only a saint can understand a saint. Only a Jesus can understand a Jesus. How can a patient know the merits of a doctor? A neophyte or beginner on the spiritual path should prepare himself gradually. He must receive spiritual instructions from spiritual teachers and follow them strictly. He should make himself fit to approach a spiritual guru, to practise meditation and to see the divine in meditation.

If one is endowed with the four means for salvation, if one has burning dispassion like that of Buddha or Rajah Bhartrihari, if one has forgiveness and patience like the Avanti Brahmin of Ujjain, if one has devotion to the preceptor like Trotaka or Padmapada, if one can serve like Florence Nightingale, if one can obey like a soldier on the battlefield, if one can be generous like Ranti Deva, if one can spend sleepless nights in devotion to God, like Mira, if one can do tapas like Dhruva, if one can stick to one's convictions like Mansoor and Shams Tabriz, if one can be fearless like the sage who met Alexander the Great on the banks of the river Indus, one will have self-realization this very second!

One will contact avatars and full-blown yogis this very second. First deserve and then desire.

What are the signs of a false avatar?

Swami Sivananda: Pseudo-avatars are abundant. Their disciples pompously advertise these avatars as bhagavans, torch-bearers, perfect masters, adepts, to collect money and build ashrams for their own comfortable living. They have a downfall soon. All that glitters is not gold. People have now lost faith in these charlatans. Truth alone can be victorious. How long can falsehood stand? Pseudo-avatars dress as Sri Krishna with crown and peacock feathers on their heads and appear before credulous disciples and say, "I am Sri Krishna. Drink the water which has bathed my feet. I shall give liberation."

Any saint who wants to rise up should not allow his disciples to advertise, otherwise he will soon lose respect. These pseudo-avatars who live in the midst of utter darkness but profess themselves to be wise and learned, go round and round deluded in many crooked ways, as blind people led by the blind.

Are avatars born in every land?

Swami Satyananda: In every land, many people have been born like this, and they are known as avatars. *Avatar* means one who has descended, who has come down from the spiritual heights. Buddha, Rama, Krishna, Vivekananda, Christ, Mohammed, Zoroaster are the lights from higher consciousness, who come to guide humanity from time to time.

Were Buddha, Christ, Mohammed and others compelled to come down to Earth by their own karmas or due to a natural flow of love and compassion?

Swami Satyananda: Buddha, Christ and Mohammed did not have any karmas, which is why they are called sons of God or incarnations of God. There are two types of human

beings, one who is ascending the steps of evolution and the other who has descended from the supreme heights of evolution. Those who have descended from divinity are known as incarnations, prophets or avatars. They came down because it was the will of God. Strictly speaking, they were not compelled to come down because they had become one with that will. In a previous life, they had attained a state of oneness with the divine flow and the eternal compassion of God flowed through them. They descended only because they could not keep away from suffering humanity – due to cosmic compassion – and so their descent was not an obligation but a natural flow.

These avatars retired from society for a while, and when they were free from all physical bondage they found that they were not ascending but that they had descended. At the same time, they had to perform some kind of *lila* or play. All great men play their parts perfectly so that man can follow them. It was not necessary for Buddha, Christ or Mahavir to practise so many austerities, but they did it to give people a guideline and set an example. In the Hindu scriptures it is said that avatars like Sri Rama and Sri Krishna came to the world and worked, not in order to purify their karmas because they were divinities and had no karmas, but for the divine lila.

How do avatars play their part?

Swami Satyananda: Jnandeva, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda, were all avatari purushas. What does avatar mean? Suppose you are a man who lives in Bombay and one day somebody asks you to play a role in a film that is being made next door. You go and play the role, and in the course of that you get married and have children; yet you have not violated your celibacy. Avatari purushas come only to enact a *lila*, a play. If an avatari purusha gets married, it is part of the play; if they have children, it is part of the play; if they steal, it is part of the play; whatever they do, it is part of the play.

An *avatari purusha* means a man who has been born with a part of God in him to fulfil a particular mission on Earth. He is a messenger of God. God has sent him in the form of a messenger to go and do a piece of work and return. That is why to ask why they were a certain way or not another way, why Prophet Mohammed married or why Jesus behaved as he did, is all meaningless. Avatari purushas descend at a particular time, perform a certain task and then depart. Ordinary people do not understand this.

When Shankaracharya arrived, a political upheaval was underway because of Buddhism, and the political scenario was very grim. When Gandhi appeared, the Indian people were thirsting for freedom, but could not see the way. There were no guns, no cannons, no educated people. The educated elite sided with the British. The people said, "Burn the British, kill them, lock them up in dungeons." This is what people were saying and doing, but no one could see the way ahead.

Mahatma Gandhi was an avatari purusha; he came with a thought, did the job, and went away. Supposing Gandhi had not come and Subhash Chandra Bose had arrived with his Azad Hind Fauj, what would Indians have done then? Their 303 rifles would not have worked with the British. After all, the British force had defeated the mighty German army, so they would have made short work of the Azad Hind Fauj. The British would not have proved weak in that arena, but faced with Gandhi they fell short, because Gandhi discovered their weakness.

To defeat an enemy, one should not look at one's own strength, rather for the enemy's weakness. Gandhi did not weigh his own strength, he weighed the weakness of the British, and South Africa was his first experiment. There, he measured his enemy's weakness. Gandhi followed one road, satyagraha. This way of *satyagraha,* civil disobedience, worked with the British. A fitting reply to the British was not military might, but law and order. Gandhi found their weak spot and made *ahimsa*, non-violence, the foundation of his

movement. In Indian parlance, if someone says that they will fight an institutional fight using legal strategy, nobody will understand it. However, everyone understood ahimsa, no explanations were required.

That is why he was never in agreement with Subhash Chandra Bose and the other revolutionaries. He always repeated 'ahimsa' like a mantra. Alongside, he would talk about the upliftment of the *harijans* or the untouchables, widow remarriage and basic literacy, for he knew that the mistreatment of the lower classes by the upper castes was wrong. His dream for the betterment of the untouchables has been realized today. His movement for home-grown cloth was very good. Every single act of Gandhi was an attack on the British rule, whether it was the salt issue, satyagraha or something else. Gandhi was born with a mission. He was not an ordinary man. I have seen him. I have stayed in Sabarmati and Wardha. He was not an ordinary man; he was an avatar. An avatar comes with a mission and upon completing it, departs. Gandhi had only one mission, to free India. He was indeed an avatari purusha.

Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda and all the avatari purushas before and after them have descended with one glorious attribute of God, performed their work and departed. They are not concerned with anything else. We have taken birth to enjoy the fruit of our last birth, but they have not come to enjoy any fruit of any life. They are designated for a certain task. They return as soon as they finish the job.

Why do enlightened beings have to suffer in their life?

Swami Niranjanananda: As long as enlightened persons have a body and mind they have to follow the laws of karma. Let us look at the examples of various enlightened beings, starting with one in recent history, Jesus. He was an enlightened being. There is no doubt that he had attained a high level of union with God, yet he had to suffer. He had to work and act in a certain way in order to fulfil his karma.

Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, another enlightened being, had to satisfy the law of karma. If you look at the history of all enlightened people, one will find that each one played their role according to their particular karma.

It was not necessary for Christ to run around the Middle East trying to preach the path of God. He could easily have sat in a corner on some mountain and led a peaceful and quiet life. It was not necessary for Ramakrishna Paramahamsa to take on the karmas of other people and eventually die of cancer. It was not necessary for Swami Sivananda to start a mission and go through the pains and problems of this endeavour. It was not necessary for all such people to go through the process of life in which there is pain and suffering; however, they did it because they were moved by compassion on seeing the karma of other human beings.

There are different kinds of people, those who are simply educators, those who are working wholeheartedly to uplift and reform society, and those who are sitting in remote corners of the world, unseen and unheard, involved in their own thing. Each is playing out his or her karma or role in life according to the inspiration which they receive from the Divine. To speculate exactly what the role of those people should be is not proper. Rather, one should try to imbibe the teaching which they have given.

Are avatars subject to the law of evolution?

Swami Satyananda: Avatars are not subject to the law of evolution. Avatar means that the higher reality descends in human form. Therefore, Shankaracharya, even at a young age, renounced. Buddha renounced his wife. It was not wrong because he had descended. Great people who were not an outcome of evolution have no rules, no code, no limitations. They can renounce or marry, do whatever they like, but one should not think that one can follow them. Therefore, an avatar has a physical body born from a mother, but it is pure to the extent that nature has no control over it, and so it can be converted into light.

Mirabai jyoti me sammaje dego.

Mirabai became light and became one with the light.

It can be said she went directly to heaven as is said about Christ or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

What is the difference between a great yogi and an avatar?

Swami Satyananda: When yoga practitioners leave this physical body, they come again when the proper time comes, in order to work out their karma. The karmas have to be worked out in order to fulfil the commitments for the evolution of the soul. When their evolution is complete, these yogis leave the cycle of evolution and become creators, what is called co-creators, junior gods or avatars. Until they are able to complete this evolution, they follow the course of birth and rebirth. As they grow great and are able to project their consciousness homogeneously, they become aware of life, society, the future, but they know everything because the yogi's consciousness is all-pervading and can understand the depths of happenings in time and space.

What is the difference between a jivanmukta and an avatar?

Swami Sivananda: A simple jivanmukta is like a star that glitters at night. He throws a little light only. Somehow or other, he has crossed to the other shore through some tapas and sadhana. He cannot elevate a large number of people. Just as the waters of a small spring can quench the thirst of a few pilgrims only, so also the jivanmukta can bring peace to a few persons only. An avatar is a mighty person. He is like a big Manasarovar lake. He removes the veil of ignorance of thousands of men and women, and takes them to the land of eternal rest, bliss and sublime.

Why do avatars often have to endure a lot of suffering in their lives?

Swami Satyananda: Christ, Sri Rama and Sri Krishna were powerful people. They could have avoided tragedy, but

they realized that pain was a blessing. For one who wants to become a superman, pain is the crucible or cross. In the words of Swami Sivananda: "Pain is a crucible into which Nature throws a man whenever She wishes to mould him into a sublime superman." This applies to Christ, Sri Rama and Sri Krishna.

Sri Rama was born into a royal family, with all its riches, but how was his life spent? For many years, Sri Rama lived in the ashram of his guru, Vasishtha, where he slept on the floor, tended the cows, cleaned the ashram and worked day and night. When he returned home afterwards, he was married. That was a joyful part of his life. After that, he was exiled to the forest for fourteen years. Then Sita was kidnapped by Ravana, and Sri Rama had to organize an army and fight to get her back. When he got Sita back and they both returned to Ayodhya after fourteen years, there were scandals, and ultimately Sita had to be abandoned. Isn't this story that is told in the *Ramayana* a tragedy?

What is the story of Christ's life, if not a tragedy? Sri Krishna's life was also a tragedy. Before he was even conceived by his mother, he was on the hit list of Kamsa, who was his uncle and the king of Mathura. Throughout his life he was on the run, and in the end he was assassinated. If these great men were avatars, why were their lives filled with tragedy? If Christ was the son of God, why did he have to undergo suffering? Because without suffering nothing improves, nothing grows, nothing evolves, nothing becomes brilliant and illuminating. That is why sannyasins and monks are told that if they have no suffering in their lives, they must impose suffering on themselves. They must live lives of suffering. Look how Saint Francis of Assisi suffered.

Many people have been born on this Earth, who have endured suffering and thereby risen to greatness. What did Mahatma Gandhi achieve for India? Without weapons he brought freedom to this country with dignity, pride and gentleness, but one fine evening an assassin shot him down. Why don't these people avoid tragedies? Because if they were

to avoid suffering, they would set a bad example. Everyone would try to avoid suffering. If there is no pain in life, suffering and poverty should be imposed in order to purify the mind.

At an esoteric level can Shiva be compared with Christ and Krishna?

Swami Satyananda: At an esoteric level all three can be compared. Christ consciousness, Krishna consciousness and Shiva consciousness are the higher currents, the higher forms of energy that develop in a human being. Therefore, the characteristics are similar. Christ died for the sins of humankind and Shiva drank poison to save humanity.

KAKA BHUSHUNDI

During the war in Lanka when Sri Rama was ensnared in the Nagapasha by Meghnad, Sage Narada sent the king of birds, the eagle Garuda, to his rescue. Garuda immediately dealt with the snakes that made up the snare, yet a doubt arose in his mind, 'How can the all-powerful Almighty be caught like this by a demon? How can He be considered all-powerful?' Garuda visited many places and learned scholars to dispel his doubt, yet did not find any satisfactory answers. Eventually it was Shiva who directed him to the ashram of Kaka Bhushundi. The spiritual power of that ashram was so strong that Garuda's doubts melted away as soon as he entered the place. It was there that Garuda heard the whole story of Sri Rama from Kaka Bhushundi.

In an age long past, Bhushundi had taken birth as a shudra in Ayodhya. Due to a terrible drought that plagued the place, he went to live in Ujjain. There he was initiated into the Shiva mantra by an honourable and devoted Brahmin. In those days, Bhushundi's mind was under the sway of differentiation and division. Since he had become a worshipper of Shiva, he felt he

was right to criticize and always put down Vishnu, Rama and Krishna. His guru, the Brahmin, was a true saint and was greatly disturbed by this. He explained the essential unity of the Divine and tried to make Bhushundi see that Shiva and Vishnu were not separate from each other, that they were indistinguishable as they both adored the other. Shiva performed japa of the name of Sri Rama. The guru told Bhushundi to abandon this wrong mentality and not persist in seeing Hari and Hara as different. He even said that criticizing one or the other is a grave crime for which one would suffer terrible consequences.

Bhushundi was not just stubborn, he was arrogant about his beliefs as well and disregarded his guru's teachings. Eventually he even started looking down upon his guru. One day, while seated in a Shiva temple and performing his japa, Bhushundi ignored his guru who happened to come. He did not greet him or pay his respects. The guru, being a saintly person did not take any offence. However, Shiva was outraged by this rude and disrespectful behaviour. A heavenly voice proclaimed a curse upon Bhushundi that he would have to pass through a cycle of one thousand births of insect life.

When the guru heard this curse, he felt sorry for Bhushundi and begged Shiva to have mercy on this ignorant fellow. Shiva was touched by the guru's concern for this undeserving disciple and said that Bhushundi would suffer no pain during the cycle of births and deaths, that he would retain full memory of these events and that he would finally take birth as a Brahmin. During that last birth, he would be deeply devoted to Sri Rama and never face any obstacles in attaining the ultimate goal – the Divine.

According to the curse, Bhushundi passed through the many incarnations and was finally born as a Brahmin. Despite losing his parents at an early age, he was blessed with the grace of Shiva and had a trouble-free life. He visited the ashrams of many rishis and munis, and wherever he went he received the teachings of the formless, attributeless, ever-present Brahman.

His heart, however, was focussed on having darshan of the beautiful form of the Divine.

On his travels, he went to the ashram of Rishi Lomasha. Seeing him as a potential spiritual successor, Rishi Lomasha began instructing the young Brahmin boy in the mysteries of the *nirguna* or formless Brahman. Whenever the Rishi spoke of the formless eternal tattwa, Bhusuhundi would argue about the superiority of the divine form. He would ignore Rishi Lomasha's teaching and insist on asking for the means to attain the darshan of the divine form. Eventually Rishi Lomasha's patience ran out and he became furious with Bhushundi. He cursed him to inhabit the body of a crow and instantly Bhushundi turned into a black crow. He bowed down to Rishi Lomasha and seeking his blessings flew away.

Surprised by the humble acceptance of his curse, the Rishi called him back and initiated him into the *Rama* mantra, instructing him to meditate upon the form of Sri Rama as a child. He blessed Bhushundi that the presence of Sri Rama would be constantly in his heart and said that Bhushundi could take on any form he wished, giving him also the boon to choose the time and mode of his death. Bhushundi would become imbued with knowledge and total renunciation and whichever ashram he would go to, there would be no ignorance around for miles. This with the blessing of his guru.

Kaka Bhushundi flew to the Neelanchal mountain. When Sri Rama was born, Bhushundi went to Ayodhya and was witness to the lilas of Rama's childhood until the age of five. His daily activities were performing japa, meditation, mental pooja and teaching the stories of God to the royal swans. It is said that even Shiva himself took the form of a royal swan and came to stay in Bhushundi's ashram to listen to the tales of Sri Rama.

The sermon given to Garuda by Kaka Bhushundi on the devotion to Sri Rama is found in the Uttarkand of the *Ramacharitmanas* and is a testament to bhakti.

SRI RAMA AND SITA

What was the life of Sri Rama like?

Swami Satyananda: Sri Rama is the darling of this land. His name has come down through history, a name that represents the name of God. Sri Rama was born into the family of an emperor who, according to historians, ruled over the whole continent many thousands of years before Christ. Rama was the eldest of four brothers who were born of three mothers. Sri Rama was the son of the eldest queen. The second queen also had a son, named Bharat. This queen was beautiful and accomplished, and the king loved her very much. The youngest queen had twins, Lakshman and Shatrughna. Dasharatha, his three queens and their sons are the basis of the story of the *Ramayana*. Sri Rama is the hero of the story. His life, behaviour, responses and reactions were all divine.

How does devotion to Sri Rama help the devotee?

Swami Sivananda: Sri Rama was the best of men with a sterling character. He was the very image of love. He was an ideal son, an ideal brother, an ideal husband, an ideal friend and an ideal king. He can be taken to embody all the highest ideals of man. He led the ideal life of a householder to teach the tenets of righteousness to humanity. He ruled his people so well that it came to be known as *Ram Rajya*, which meant the rule of righteousness, the rule which bestows happiness and prosperity on all.

The means of attaining the final release from the great cycle of births and deaths is devotion to Sri Rama which is a great purifier of the heart. From devotion arises knowledge. From knowledge comes the realization of the pure Self. Knowing this perfectly, one goes to the Supreme Abode and merges in the Supreme Self.

The name of Sri Rama is the greatest purifier of the heart. It wipes away all one's sins. With or without knowledge, correctly or incorrectly, when the word 'Rama' is

pronounced it showers a rain of good upon the devotee. Sri Rama is Brahman who takes one across the ocean of worldly existence. Sri Rama is also a wish-fulfilling tree. He will bestow upon you whatever you want.

Was Rama the ultimate man?

Swami Satyananda: In Sri Rama's time few people considered him to be a great man. Of course they considered him a great man in respect to duty, society and the fulfilment of his dharma. Some considered Sri Rama as representing the divine qualities, but in the *Ramacharitamanas* Tulsidas depicted Sri Rama as the ultimate figure in creation. Tulsidas did not consider Sri Rama as an ordinary mortal with the highest qualities. He considered Sri Rama as the highest being in a mortal frame. However, people said completely the opposite and thought that he was a man with very high qualities, whereas Tulsidas said he was God in a physical body.

The second point is that philosophies like Vedanta say that *Paramatman*, the Supreme Soul, plus the individual soul are the same, not different – like man and his shadow, atman and his reflection. Other philosophies like Christianity say that God is beyond everything. God has created man, but man is not His shadow, not His replica. God and man are both different. This is the fundamental philosophy of Judaic religions. God is elsewhere and man is elsewhere. Man is only the creation of God, but not at all a shadow, or a replica, a representative of God. That is what they believe.

The third philosophy is that man is a shadow of God. Just like the light in the room is an expression of the sun, although the sun is not there. The light emanating from the sun is not the sun. It is a quality, an attribute of the sun, not the sun itself. In the same way, man is not God but he is an expression, an attribute, of His divine qualities.

These philosophical ideas have been discussed for many centuries in India in order to find out the truth. In the *Ramacharitamanas* the basic theme is that Sri Rama is

the Supreme and he can be reached by love and devotion, whether he is in a divine form or human form. Man is so limited in his mind that he cannot conceive of the Divine without form, *nirguna,* and therefore he has to think of and contemplate a form which his mind can comprehend.

What is the role of sattwa in the life of Sri Rama?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Rama was born out of sattwa and was endowed with the qualities of sattwa. Tradition says that as one acquires more and more sattwic qualities, one transforms oneself, becomes more transcendental, and can eventually be labelled 'divine'. When one moves into the dimension of sattwa, one is separate from the tamasic influences of life, the senses and the world, and is able to manage the rajasic behaviour, mind, thinking and expression. Tamas and rajas cease to have any influence at all in one's life and the qualities of sattwa emerge.

It is said that in Sri Rama's life there were twelve qualities of sattwa. In Sri Krishna's life there were sixteen qualities of sattwa and in Buddha's life there were four qualities of sattwa. In the lives of Swami Sivananda and Swami Satyananda there are four qualities of sattwa. When the quality of sattwa enters one's life, one becomes different from those who are subject to the influence of rajas and tamas. It is this quality of sattwa which makes a person a saint, a siddha or an avatar.

When one is born, one is a regular person, with the same mind and the same senses to interact with the world. However, as one grows up and the nature and character of one's personality evolve and develop different traits, samskaras and behaviours are expressed and observed. They identify one as different. Sannyasins, sadhus and realized beings possess up to four qualities of sattwa. The siddhas have four qualities of sattwa. Some other people might have five, six, seven, eight, twelve or sixteen qualities of sattwa. All these different attainments make one realize one's higher nature and higher potentials. God is the source

of infinite sattwic qualities, and so He is transcendental. Therefore, the position of God is always above everybody else. He is the creator, observer, seer and actor of everything that is perceivable and non-perceivable. Consequently, when these qualities manifest in human life, in behaviours and expressions, the person becomes an avatar. Those who have more than ten qualities of sattwa become avatars. Sri Rama had twelve, he is called an avatar. Sri Krishna had sixteen, he is called an avatar.

When Sri Rama was born, he was an ordinary human boy, but his genius trait began to manifest over time. He went to his guru's ashram to study at the age of eight. In the *Ramayana*, it is mentioned: *Alpa kala sab vidya payi* – "In the shortest time possible, he knew everything." According to history, Sri Rama spent time in his guru Vasishtha's ashram from the age of eight to the age of fourteen. That is six years. Tradition says that one has to spend twelve years in learning at the guru's ashram, but Sri Rama completed his syllabus of study in six years.

By the time he was fourteen, he knew everything that the guru had to teach about society, kingdom, ruling, governance, spiritual life, mysticism, occultism. That was possible due to his samskaras. Sri Rama lived, imbibed and realized.

What is the symbolic meaning of the birth of Sri Rama and his marriage to Sita?

Swami Niranjanananda: The story of Rama is a simple one. He was born to a king who was old and had three wives. The name of this king was Dasharatha. *Dash* means 'ten', *rath* means 'chariot'; *Dasharatha* is a chariot pulled by ten horses. You are the chariot which is pulled by ten horses, the ten senses, and there are certain desires within you which are inherent to the body.

The spiritual traditions have classified desires into four groups. First, *lokeshna* or recognition, the need to be recognized. Second, *viteshna*, the desire to be secure in life,

socially, financially, in every way. Third, *putreshna*, the desire for progeny, continuity of life, one's DNA or genes, one's blood. Fourth is *dareshna* or the desire for pleasure. The human desires are classified in these four groups: pleasure, progeny, security and recognition. Some people have one less, some people have two less, some people have all four, some have one, but something is always there. In the body of King Dasharatha, the chariot with ten horses, there was a desire for offspring.

Just as people have come to different sadhus and sannyasins asking for the fulfilment of their desires, this king Dasharatha goes to a yogi. The yogi performs a yajna, creating the right ambience. As the outcome of this yajna, Rama is born to his first wife who represents the sattwa nature. Bharata is born to the second one, Kaikeyi, who represents the tamasic nature and Lakshman and Shatrughna, the twins, are born to the third wife, Sumitra, who represents the rajasic nature. This body of the ten senses also has three wives – or husbands – sattwa, rajas, and tamas. When one is under the sway of a particular wife one's responses become like that. This is how the birth of Rama takes place; pure consciousness will only come down if there is sattwa. It will not come down in rajas or tamas, but in sattwa.

Sri Rama gets married to Sita, in the course of time. Rama represents consciousness or the pure Self and Sita represents the individual self. The union of the individual with the cosmic or pure consciousness is the marriage between God and the lover, the devotee.

What does the marriage of Sita and Rama represent?

Swami Satyananda: The marriage of Sita and Rama takes place in various dimensions. One dimension is between a man and a woman. A wedding is one dimension of marriage, but there is another dimension where the spirit joins the higher transcendental experience. The mind is wedded to the Self, to the spirit.

Sri Rama represents the Indweller of all beings. He is the all-pervading, ever-permeating, omnipresent reality and Sita is the spirit. God is not alone. God has a power within Him and that power is called Sita. Many people think that God is alone, that He is a bachelor. The gods have consorts – Rama has Sita, Vishnu has Lakshmi, Brahma has Saraswati and Shiva has Parvati.

What is symbolized by Sri Rama's exile and the capturing of Sita by Ravana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Dasharatha, the king, comes under the sway of Kaikeyi, the tamasic one, who says, "Send Rama into exile." Of course it is only tamas which will ask to send pure consciousness away, for in the presence of pure consciousness, tamas cannot exist. Since she is so glittery, the aged king says, "All right," and Rama is sent into exile. Pure consciousness is sent away from the body under the sway of tamas.

When the loved one leaves the room, the lover will also leave, so Sita and Rama both leave, although the exile is for Rama only. For a good thirteen years Rama and Sita have a great time in the forest; the beloved and the lover, the pure Self and the individual self are together, consorting with each other, happy with each other. They are not worried about what is happening in their country, whether somebody is ruling, whether somebody has attacked, whether it is thriving and prospering, whether it has been burned down. They are happy wherever they are just admiring each other and being happy in the company of each other.

If these two principles are together, there cannot be creation anymore. If the individual self, if the confined, finite self is with the cosmic Self, how can there be creation? Therefore, the finite self has to be brought back down into the cage of ten again. Who appears on the scene? A ten-headed monster. The ten are the five *karmendriyas* or organs of action and the five *jnanendriyas* or organs of cognition. Each one has its own ego, so they are identified as the ten

heads. It is the *indriyas*, the senses, which now capture the individual self away from God.

As Rama goes after a golden deer, the object of attraction that is sent to lure Sita away, the ten-headed monster, Ravana, comes and captures Sita. He takes her to his city, Lanka, which is made out of gold, and places her in a garden which was known as *Ashoka Vatika* which means 'where sadness can never enter'. The city of gold again represents the ego, and the ten-headed monster living in the city keeps Sita in a place which is known as 'the place of no sadness'.

Where is the place of sadness in our body? All the tears come from the heart, don't they? The heart is considered to be the seat of the individual soul. In order to discover Sita again, Sri Rama engages Hanuman who represents devotion. The way to bring the individual consciousness back to the pure Self is through devotion, which is represented by Hanuman. Bhakti is the last transformation in human life in order to experience the Divine, bhakti in its purest form, and Hanuman is the one who discovers Sita.

Which aspect of Sri Rama should one relate to?

Swami Satyananda: Which Rama does one worship? One Rama is the son of Dasharatha, another Rama is the Indweller of people's hearts, yet another Rama is the creator of the cosmos and yet another Rama is transcendental. The easiest, quickest, safest and best is the Rama who is the son of Dasharatha. If one goes after the transcendental Rama, one might lose sight of the path. The fully charted path of the transcendental highway is unknown, so one might get lost. Just one degree south and one is in Antarctica, one degree north and one is in the Arctic instead of in London. This amazing spectacle of the world is created by Rama, and that Rama is in me and I am in him.

Indweller of the Heart

This life is spent without remembering God.
What is the use of having a well without water,
A bird without feathers?
No use.

Which Rama do you worship?
There is Rama – the in-dweller of the heart;
Rama – the creator of the cosmos, sun, moon, stars;
Rama – the transcendental.
The surest, the easiest, the safest
Is Rama – the in-dweller of the heart.

You have wasted your life without remembering God.
Without remembering God's name,
you cannot get peace.
God is immanent as well as transcendental.
It is foolish to say, do not worship God with a form.
I call Him Rama – the in-dweller of the heart.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

What role does the discussion of duty play in the *Ramayana*?

Swami Satyananda: The life of Sri Rama is depicted in the *Ramayana* in a superb style. His life is told in the form of a discussion about the nature of duties or *dharma*. What is the obligation of a son towards his parents? What is the obligation of the son to his wife? If these two duties conflict with each other, what should be done? In the same way, what should the duties of the head of a family or of a king be?

Throughout the *Ramayana*, the dharma of a human being is discussed in the different contexts of his life, through the actions of Sri Rama. Therefore, Rama has come to be respected as the highest ideal of a human being. The *Ramayana* says that Rama is dharma personified. The *Ramayana* was written in various Indian languages. The most ancient version is by the great poet Valmiki. This *Ramayana*,

the story of Rama, was narrated during Rama's own lifetime by his two sons.

During a particular period in Sri Rama's life, he had to abandon Sita. It was a tragic event in his life, and of course it was tragic for her. He risked his life to rescue her. An emperor was vanquished and thousands of people died because he loved her so much and she loved him so much. Sri Rama always thought of Sita and Sita always thought of Sri Rama. During her period of captivity, Sita did not change her clothes or do her hair. She was in tears the whole time, because the husband symbolized total love for the wife. Husband and wife are two bodies but one heart and one soul.

What conflict did Sri Rama have to face?

Swami Satyananda: The same Sita had to be abandoned again after some time, and Sri Rama had to do it, although it was a tragic event. She was pregnant at that time and Rama's brother Lakshman told him, "How cruel you are! How can you renounce Sita when she is pregnant? You are renouncing the wife who is one hundred percent your own soul!" Sri Rama replied, "As a king my duty to my subjects is above my personal relationship to Sita."

This is a conflict between love and duty. Sri Rama had to choose between his relationship with his wife and his relationship to his subjects as a king of a country. It is a complicated situation regarding obligations. Most people are not aware of these complications, because personal interest is considered to be far above the interest of the community and the nation.

When Rama abandoned Sita where did she go to live?

Swami Satyananda: Having been abandoned by Rama, Sita took shelter in Valmiki's ashram. There she gave birth to twin boys, who were raised without knowing who their father was. Of course they were royal princes, but they lived like sannyasins. In the beginning, Valmiki was an ordinary swami with an ashram and disciples. He did not become a great poet until later.

When did Valmiki become a poet and to whom did he first teach his *Ramayana*?

Swami Satyananda: One morning, while out walking, Valmiki happened to see two birds in the ecstasy of mating. At that moment a hunter shot and killed the male bird. As the male bird fell to the ground, the female bird cried out in anguish. Seeing her sad plight, Valmiki was greatly moved and on the spot he spontaneously composed four lines of poetry:

Oh, cruel hunter,
Was that an appropriate time to kill your prey?
Could you not have waited a little longer?
What if you were killed while mating with your wife?

After this, Valmiki became a poet. He wrote the first *Ramayana* and taught it to Sita's two boys. After a few years, Sri Rama conducted a sacrifice. Sita was still living in Valmiki's ashram and, according to Hindu rites, a man cannot conduct a sacrifice without the presence of his wife, so Sri Rama made a gold statue of Sita to fulfil the sacrificial formalities. When the sacrifice was in progress, the two children were sent to the capital to sing the *Ramayana* composed by Valmiki.

When Sri Rama heard through certain people that two young boys were singing beautifully in the streets, he had them brought to the court and there they narrated the entire *Ramayana* before Sri Rama. It said how difficult it is for an ordinary man to decide what his dharma is, how difficult it is for a wife to decide what her dharma is. Only Sri Rama can decide what dharma is, even though he is facing the greatest tragedy in his personal life. His wife is living in the ashram all alone. His children are walking through the streets, singing like birds, but throughout Rama's kingdom the subjects are happy.

After hearing this, the whole population was moved and they asked Sri Rama to bring Sita back, but she was offended and would not make a compromise. She said, "No, I will not live with you now." By her superior willpower, she caused the earth to crack open and disappeared into it.

Who is Sita?

Swami Satyananda: Sita was born out of earth. The basic element of mooladhara is earth. The same Sita is kundalini and this awakens many times. She travels to *swadhisthana*, which means 'one's own house'. She sleeps in mooladhara, swadhisthana is her home and from there she travels upwards. Upon reaching the top she stays for some time with Sri Rama and Shiva and then returns. She descends, raining nectar all around. The same thing happens with yogis. A yogi's kundalini also falls down. Shankaracharya speaks of the ambrosial flow raining nectar and delusion in his hymn to Devi, *Saundarya Lahari* (verse 10):

> *Sudhaadhaaraasaaraishcharanayugalaantarvigalitaih*
> *Prapancham sinchanti punarapi rasaamnaayamahasah.*
> *Avaapya svaam bhoomim bhujaganibhamadhyushtavalayam*
> *Svamaatmaanam kritvaa svapishi kulakunde kuharini.*
>
> Having drenched the pathway of nadis with the streaming shower of nectar flowing from Your feet, having resumed Your own position after descending from the resplendent lunar regions, and assuming Your form of a serpent with three and half coils, You sleep in the hollow of the kulakund.

Kundalini ascends and then it goes down to earth. Didn't Sita return alone? Didn't she descend into the earth? Kundalini sleeps in that cave. This is the birth of Sita from the earth and this is what is meant by her returning into it.

Sita was found in the earth while the land was being ploughed. Nobody knew who her mother and father were. She was found in a place about seventy miles north of Munger, on the other side of the Ganga. Therefore, she is known as the daughter of the Earth. Of course, there is a mythological story behind her birth. However, at that time, there was a great controversy about Sita, because, according to tradition, her chastity was questionable.

What is the grace of Rama?

Swami Satyananda: Rama is a name which symbolizes the ultimate perfection of jivatma, the individual soul. Untainted in spirit, pure in all conditions is the soul of Rama. His body may appear to be human like a man, but his soul is the full and unreserved expression of the divine being which is transcendental. The body of Rama is not the avatar. It is his inner being which has chosen the medium of a body for the descent of light, power and perfection.

One should worship his all pervading spirit, his eternal doings, his sweet assurances. If one fails to do it and merely limits one's devotion to the outer physical expression, it would be erring terribly. That eternal spirit descended. The collective spiritual efforts of the pained and suppressed masses shook the very core of the divine being. He came down from the unmanifest state to an embodied arena, from timelessness to a timed and limited body, and from namelessness to a named personality. People named him Rama.

What is his real name? Who knows this? Infinite are his names. All names are his names, yet he is nameless, formless and eternal. His essence is our earth, water, fire, air and ether. Earth is the essence of his body; water is the essence of his lila; fire is the essence of his spirit; air is the essence of his vibration; ether is the essence of his mind.

Rama is the central and primitive origin of all sounds, of all that is written and read. Languages, rhythm and symbols are all manifestations of Rama. When blessed by the divine light, the mind and body serve Sri Rama, contain him and carry him within them. Mind and body, senses and prana, and reactions arising there from, are material, fictitious forms of Rama the eternal.

When the mind has surrendered, the senses are purified, the pranas are given to serve him, and the body is discarded, he is seen as one sees one's own body. All that happiness is the cheerful smile of Sri Rama.

Why do you have a particular fondness for Rama?

Swami Satyananda: I consider Sri Rama to be the hero of my life. I was born in the lineage of Ikshvaku. When I was born, I was given the samskara, or baptism, of a kshatriya warrior with wine and sword. Therefore, Sri Rama is, always has been and always will remain my hero.

Rama has such lovely attributes. He is brave and courageous. He has fortitude, perseverance and patience. He is honest, restrained, self-controlled, shy and very clever.

SRI KRISHNA

What was Krishna's purpose in coming to live on Earth?

Swami Satyananda: Sri Krishna descended as an avatar, not to live life but to guide life. He lives with the gopis not to enjoy, not to live with them, not to affect their destiny, but in order to guide the whole of humanity. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the gopis are the shakti of Sri Krishna, the Supreme Being. They incarnated in the form of girls and boys in the village of Mathura. Sri Krishna, the Supreme Being, played a lila with the gopis.

What makes Krishna a recognized avatar?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Krishna was born 5,520 years ago. Before Krishna's birth there was a prophecy in relation to Kamsa, a tyrannical king, that the eighth child of Kamsa's sister would be the cause of his death. This child was Krishna, the son of Devaki and Vasudeva, born in a prison in Mathura. His childhood was spent in Gokul and Vrindavan with Yashoda and Nanda.

Krishna proved to be a child with extraordinary abilities. He was recognized as an avatar. What is an avatar? Does God actually take birth in the form of a human being? According to all conclusions, certain parameters have been defined that determine who a yogi is, who a siddha is, who an acharya is, who a sannyasin is and who an avatar is. In the course of Krishna's life, all the qualities of an avatar were seen in him.

As thinkers, not as devotees or bhaktas, one can accept that he had certain qualities which people at large do not have. He expressed himself in certain extra-human ways and was therefore endowed with extraordinary qualities.

Krishna's extraordinary qualities were seen when he was just a child. There is a purpose in everyone's life and the purpose of those whom are considered to be avatars, siddhas or yogis is a humanitarian one. The aim is to improve the quality of life, to indicate a way, a process, a direction by which one can attain harmony, satisfaction and contentment.

What does Krishna lila mean?

Swami Satyananda: *Lila* means acting a part. Krishna is divine, beyond all attachments, and the creator of millions and billions of universes. Why should he love the small children he played with? That is his lila, his Krishna lila.

His lilas are remembered for all times. A bhakta or devotee believes that God is infinite, beyond name, form and mind. He can never be reached with the mind. He is so far, but for sake of His devotees He comes down a little, for if He doesn't, He cannot be reached. What does a mother do with her child? A child cannot behave like his mother, so the mother has to behave like a child. She has to come down. If the mother behaves like a woman of thirty-five, the child will be at a distance, and there will be no link.

The devotee cannot break his limitations, so God has to come down to his level. When the unmanifest and formless God comes down to the level of man as a matter of grace and blessings, it is called a divine incarnation or an avatar.

Sri Krishna descended to the level of the children. Why should that unmanifest reality, God, play with little children? Why should He collect a few boys and girls and break into someone's house and steal curd, butter and milk? According to the level of the devotee, God has to act. That is lila.

Why is Krishna called a god?

Swami Satyananda: Whether or not one considers Sri Krishna a god is a personal feeling, not a historical feeling, but the question is a historical question. The historical Krishna was not the divine Krishna; however, he did have a personality that was not affected by anything he experienced. He watched life as if it were a cricket match.

What can be learnt from Krishna's life?

Swami Satyananda: Sri Krishna was an incarnation of God, not an ordinary child. He had to take birth to give lessons to children. Sri Krishna led a natural life like a child should lead, being a good child, a great child, a powerful child, being a philosopher, being God, being a friend, being a warrior. At the same time, he loved all the girls of his time. The gopis did not marry because Krishna loved them all.

In Sri Krishna's life can be found a new social thought, a new religious thought and a new philosophical thought, which is not found in Semitic civilizations. Educated people in India have not been taught vedic philosophy and culture. Their way of thinking and behaving, the morality they practise, the dos and don'ts they follow are not part of the vedic lifestyle. They follow the path shown by foreign cultures. What they practise now is the result of three or four hundred years of compulsory education along these lines.

One can learn from Sri Krishna's rasalila how a child should be born, how he should be nurtured and cared for. This can be seen in the rasalilas that are performed.

How can one prepare for the birth of an avatar?

Swami Satyananda: Become a good doctor, earn money and let the children enjoy some part of it. In between, go to ashrams, keep company with great souls, be kind to good people, exploit a little those who exploit others. Fulfil your karma to the best of your ability. Incarnations do take place, avatars are born, but the real objective of the avatar is realized only when his divinity reaches maturity in his body.

When Sri Krishna incarnated he did nothing in particular during his childhood, but when he loved Radha and the gopis his divinity reached maturity. It was only then that the mission of his incarnation was set in motion. God is hungry for love. He hungers for love because only when He is given love does He mature.

The Radha-Krishna episode was the culmination of Sri Krishna's incarnated life. It was only then that a flowering took place. After the fulfilment of love, one chapter ends and the mission begins. Sri Krishna went to Mathura and began his work. Sri Rama acted in a similar manner. Love matures an individual. From a worldly point of view, maturity takes place after interacting with love. A child who receives ample love matures better. A child who receives more hatred remains immature and makes many mistakes. Thus when one loves God, one matures.

However, even when God incarnates nobody knows it at the time. Though Sri Krishna was certainly an avatar, Yashoda was always anxious about his welfare. When Kamsa sent for Sri Krishna, she was frightened, Akrura was frightened, everybody was frightened in spite of knowing that he was an avatar. Thus one perceives things in accordance with one's own limitations.

CHRIST

Who was Christ?

Swami Satyananda: Christ is the inner light, the light of the soul. This light had to remain amongst the Jews who represented the mental *samskaras*, the impressions of the past, the superstitions, motives and tendencies that a person has. Christ roamed amongst them and he tried to tell them the truth. In the same way, one's pure reason tells one not to smoke or drink, but the mind does not care. Christ is the light, the pure reason of man which tells him where he is wrong, but man does not care to listen. Ultimately man's worldly attachments and motives suppress the soul and

then it goes to the cross, but the soul does not die, it rises again. The cross is not death. It symbolizes the awakening of kundalini, the spiritual power in man.

Christ was crucified on the cross, but he did not die. That night he was taken down along with the criminals who were crucified by his side. The soldiers speared him in the side. In the Bible, it says, ". . . and the water flowed out." Christ was not dead when he was taken from the cross, for water or blood does not flow from a dead body. His body was put in a cave and a large boulder rolled over the opening. Many people were guarding the cave, but Christ's disciples knew very well that he was still alive, so they came to the cave at night to dress his wounds and nurse him. By the third day he was all right and he left the cave.

Therefore, it is said that Christ rose from the dead, but what it actually means is that he regained his senses. Later on Christ saw his disciple Thomas going to the village and he followed him. Thomas looked around and asked, "Who are you?" and Christ replied, "I am Christ come again." Thomas said, "No, you were crucified." Christ said, "I am the Christ." Then Thomas said, "I don't believe it; you are dead." So Christ showed him the signs and then the belief came that he had descended from heaven.

When Christ went to his disciples, many had left him because they were afraid of being persecuted. So he left Israel and went to Kashmir. In the Bible, it says that twenty-three tribes of Israelites migrated to Kashmir. After reaching Kashmir he died, because his body was emaciated after the crucifixion. There is a grave dedicated to Christ in Srinagar, with the name 'Isho Asap' written there.

Christ preached the Gospel not only to the people of Israel, he preached it also to his kinsmen in Kashmir. In fact, many places in Kashmir bear the same names that one finds in Israel, such as Galilea. From Kashmir, some of his disciples – John, Thomas and others, went to the west coast of India. There is the oldest church in the whole world, built by Christ's disciples. The first Gospel came to India

as early as the third or fourth century, but Christianity was first preached in India and then it went outside. That is my conclusion.

What are the main teachings of Christ?

Swami Satyananda: The philosophy of Christ is a combination of Buddhist ethics and Hindu bhakti: love of God, self-surrender and 'Thy will be done'. When Christ went to Nalanda he saw the imperfection in Buddhist ethics. He liked the commandments, but felt Buddhism lacked faith in God. So he decided that when he returned to his people he would teach them ethics plus faith in God.

Christ's philosophy was a happy blending between faith in God and ethics, which he found in Nalanda, in Benares and in Nepal.

What were the origins of Christ's philosophy?

Swami Niranjanananda: Christ was a human being in whom the divine consciousness had descended. This is known as 'Christ Consciousness'. Christ was a *sadhaka*, a spiritual aspirant. He was a brilliant boy in his childhood, a seeker of truth in his adolescence, and a master, a siddha when he returned from India and took on the role of 'the Christ'. Christ underwent four phases in his life. The first was as a very gifted person who, in his childhood, met people and discussed ideas about God and creation. Later on he was directed to perfect his own sadhana from the age of thirteen to the age of thirty. He came to India, and spent his time in Puri learning about the bhakti movement of the Vaishnava tradition. He also spent some time in Varanasi learning about the Advaita philosophy of the Vedantins. In Tibet he learnt about the Buddhist philosophy. Combining these three ideologies he came up with a philosophy known as *Krishna Neeti*, the way of Krishna, which later on became Christianity.

This is well documented. It is not something unknown, even to the Vatican. The Vatican archive has sixty-eight versions of the Bible, which contain stories of Christ in India.

Officially only one is published, which is read today and which includes only the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

After perfecting himself, Christ went back to his people and started his work. Some people did not like it, of course, so they crucified him. But Christ did not die on the cross. He went into the deepest levels of samadhi, away from the experience of pain and suffering. Later on he was brought down from the cross and cared for by his disciples.

How is Christ viewed from the Indian perspective?

Swami Niranjanananda: When one looks at all these events from the Indian perspective, one can understand that through his intense sadhana, Christ was able to come to certain realizations, and he was able to communicate with God. It is a realization in which one is able to connect with the cosmic energy, the divine energy. In the life of Christ, these realizations played a major part. His statement, 'I and my Father are one' is the statement of Vedanta, *Tat twam asi* – 'I am That'. When he said, "I am the way, and through me you can attain heaven," it was another vedantic statement of Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* – "I am the path. I am the road by which you can attain me." As a person he may have had a tough life, but as a siddha he had experienced God's energy and had submitted himself to God's will. Therefore, Christ is also considered to be an avatar by the Hindus.

Pictures of Christ used to adorn the temples in India. Indians never felt that Christ was some alien who had come into their culture. They have always recognized that Christ was an enlightened being, a part of the Indian pantheon of siddhas, gurus and avatars. He is seen as a person who, through trials, efforts and difficulties, attained enlightenment, who followed his purusharthas and his call in life and was established as a luminary of the modern age.

How did Jesus become Christ?

Swami Niranjanananda: Jesus was born and grew up as an ordinary person, but the light was within him. How he was

guided is not mentioned in the Bible, but that is the story of the lost years of Jesus. He was propelled onto his path by a group of ascetics known as the Essenes.

The word 'Essene' is derived from the word *Ishan* meaning 'follower of Shiva'. The Essene sect of ascetics was a group who had perfected hatha yoga. One may wonder how the Essenes or yoga appeared in that time; yoga represents a tradition of sadhana common to all philosophies, cultures and traditions. Meditation, contemplation and postures are sadhana, and meditation, contemplation and postures are yoga. The practices done to guide, transform and transcend the mind form a common thread in every culture, belief, religion, philosophy and lifestyle. The Essenes had understood and were practising various components and aspects of yoga as part of their sadhana. In his early days, Christ was guided by them. One can also read about this in the *Dead Sea Scrolls*.

When Christ completed his spiritual education with the Essenes, they said to him, "Look, you have a great future ahead of you. People believe you to be a Messiah. Prepare yourself to help others." Christ was directed to India and the time he spent there is recorded in *Bhavishya Purana*. Documents have also been found in different monasteries which indicate that Christ learnt about the Vaishnava movement in Jagannath Puri, about the Buddhist tradition in Ladakh, and about Tantra and Shaivism in Kashmir. It was in India that he spent thirteen years of his life. When he had attained his realization he went back to Israel and started his teachings as a Messiah.

What similarities are there between the birth of Christ and other avatars?

Swami Niranjanananda: The coming of Christ was long awaited before his actual birth, and so was the coming of Krishna. People knew about the coming of Krishna eight or nine years before he was born, when a prophecy was made: 'The eighth son of Devaki will be the slayer of Kamsa'.

After the birth of Christ there was a period of child genocide, after the birth of Krishna also. Christ had to flee to a distant city, Krishna had to flee on the night of his birth, from the prison where he was born. There are many more similarities and events.

There are different qualities expressed in an avatar. Avatars who bring new ideas, new concepts, new definitions to the secrets of existence and life, tend to develop a nature which is austere. With their austerity and sadhana they are able to overcome temptations. Jesus was taken by the devil to the mountain top where he was tempted with the riches of the world, dancing girls, prosperity and wealth, but Jesus overcame these temptations, and was established as the Christ. Buddha also, during his austerities, confronted the demon Mara, Satan or the devil who tempted him with many riches and pleasures. Buddha resisted the temptation and became established as the Buddha. In the upanishadic drama of the *Kathopanishad*, Nachiketa was given three different boons, he was tempted thrice. Those who give way to temptation come under the control of the devil. Those who are able to master the temptation become the Buddha, the Christ, the avatar. One of the names of Jesus was Maranath. *Nath* means master, *mara* means devil, so Maranath means 'Lord of the Devil'. Buddha also conquered the devil called Mara, and is referred to as Maranath.

What is the crux of Jesus' teaching?

Swami Niranjanananda: Jesus as a person was an ordinary person, born to a humble family. Right from the beginning, he faced difficulties in life. This ordinary carpenter's son was a chosen one, a gifted one and he was able to bring about a revolution in human thought, in human perception and was able to create a shift in the mind of the society of that time.

As a young boy, he was guided and instructed by different masters and wise people of that time. Under their tutelage, Jesus was able to bring forth the potentials that were gifted to him by his destiny. When he brought forth the potential

of his life, he became the Christ. The word 'Christ' is a title. The word 'Swami' is a title, in the same manner, the word Christ is a title. In Latin, 'Christos' means 'the enlightened one'. When he was able to perfect himself under the tutelage and guidance of the wise men, and he was able to bring forth his own potential, he was baptized. In baptism, that higher consciousness unfolded itself in the body of Jesus and he became the enlightened one, Jesus Christ.

His teachings and his life continue to guide the human society and civilization even today. The teachings continue to bring hope, joy, peace and purity. In his own lifetime, he was known as the son of God. After his crucifixion, and the subsequent impact of the teachings, he was recognized as the prophet.

There have been many Christs in history. There have been many prophets, just as there have been many Buddhas. Jesus represented a way of thought which was radical in that-day civilization. In those days the way to God was controlled by the priests who were political powers. Jesus advocated a way to experience God by expressing love, compassion and by being a good Samaritan, a good person. The crux and essence of his teachings is to be good, to be a true Christian one has to be good.

Being good is not easy. One can put on the garb of being good, but to be good internally is difficult. Only those people can become good who have been able to douse the fires of the tamasic nature in their life. Although one may experience goodness and express being good for a limited time, the goodness is a fleeting experience. It is not a permanent experience. This goodness is ultimately attained when one is able to eradicate the tamasic nature in life.

Jesus embodied that state of goodness. He was able to overcome all the negative and tamasic tendencies and vrittis. He remained fixed in his awareness of Father, of God Almighty. That is the state of siddha, it is a siddha mind. This siddha mind is known as the Christ mind or Christ Consciousness. It is the inspiration of his life that continues

to guide millions across the world to tread the virtuous path. The love, compassion and goodness which he embodied is inspiring millions people. It is a day of rejoicing and reflection both.

One can become the recipient of God's grace. It is always possible to cross the river of life. The potential, strength and the ability is in everyone. It is only through *sankalpa shakti*, determination, that one can bring about a change in one's life.

Swami Sivananda used to say, "Be good and do good." He used it as a slogan for defining what divine life is, knowing full well it is difficult to be good and more difficult to do good. He made these two sentences the aim of every spiritual aspirant. This was the teaching propagated by Jesus Christ, so that one can open the heart to receive the light of God. Everyone can try to overcome limitations to connect with the goodness which will connect one with the Divine.

What is the life story of Jesus Christ?

Swami Satyananda: Christ was born in Bethlehem. He healed, he preached, he was crucified. Everyone knows this story. I need not tell you all this. What you need to know is the truth, which has been subjected to the biggest historical cover-ups in history. In the first and also the second quarter of the last century, Western travellers, particularly Germans, would visit the mounds, hillocks, caves and other sites of the famous Dead Sea. During their travels, they accidentally met some shepherds who sold them some paper bags. These paper bags were none other than the Dead Sea scrolls, which these innocent tourists realized were important. On their return to Germany, they sold them to the archives, no doubt at a very fair price.

The archives began to decipher and decode the paper bags, which are now historically known as the Dead Sea scrolls. Everyone has heard of these scrolls both in the East and the West. Many were deciphered, and it came to light that in the first century AD, that is, about nineteen hundred

years ago, there existed a *sampradaya* or sect, a group of ascetics, who lived along the Dead Sea coast like sannyasins. They were known as the Essenes.

The Essenes were a monastic sect who lived in seclusion in a monastery inhabited only by monks, not nuns. They were puritans and lived an austere life of celibacy, as they observed brahmacharya. What came to light through the scrolls is that Jesus visited these places. Jesus lived there during his early years, when he was eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, and questioned the senior monks, who had been living there for decades, about spiritual life. They taught him many things, but all of it was theoretical. When Christ wanted to learn the practical aspect, they said, "Young lad, for that you must go to India."

Jesus followed the merchants who frequently travelled to India to sell their goods. In India, he visited and lived at the Hemis monastery in Ladakh. This was discovered by German and Muslim professors who visited the monastery and documented their visit. These reports are available in the market. He lived there for a long time. The monks who lived in this monastery were Buddhist. Due to his exceptional personality, they accepted Jesus as one of the incarnations of Buddha. There are rock edicts and paintings which testify this. The edicts depict all the Buddhas as seated and wearing the traditional Buddhist matted locks, except for one Buddha who is standing and has flowing hair. That was Jesus, the twenty-second Buddha. From those Buddhist monks and scholars at Hemis, Jesus learnt Dhamma, the code of morality, virtue and spiritual duty, which is the mainstay of Buddhism. Buddhism is based on the tenets of Dhamma or Dharma. That is what you find in the Sermon of the Mount, too.

After Ladakh, Jesus visited Kashi, now known as Varanasi. At that time the Shaka emperor Shalivahan presided over the throne of India. He is the same Shalivahan in whose name the Indian calendar is accepted today. You may have heard of Shaka Samvat, the calendar followed throughout India, according to which we are in the 1927th year since

the Shaka rule. The emperor Shaka Shalivahan ascended the throne and started the calendar in his name 1,927 years ago.

The *Bhavishya Purana* has documented that the famous emperor of India, Shalivahan, who ruled 1,927 years ago, met Jesus in Kashi. Jesus introduced himself to Shalivahan as 'the son of God'. Shalivahan also addressed him as 'Isha Putra', which means Son of God. If you want to see this evidence, you should read the *Bhavishya Purana*, which has recorded this event in history.

The Puranas are the history of India fictionalized. *Purana* means 'once upon a time', and all our Puranas are records of a time in history. History does not remain history. It should not remain history. History becomes legend and legend turns into myth or fiction. History is and should always be fictionalized if you do not want political problems. Otherwise Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu and Shakti will always be fighting among each other. Today, we worship Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu in the same temple. There is no bitterness and no fights because they belong to fictionalized history.

There is documentation in the *Bhavishya Purana* of Jesus Christ's visit to Kashi 1,927 years ago. If this be so, a question arises: was he born two thousand years ago? If he met Shalivahan, it can be deduced that instead of 2,000 years ago, he was born 1,950 or 1,957 years ago. That is fifty years later than it is generally stated.

The facts should be recollected historically. Why this historical cover-up? Historical cover-ups are always done with a political motive. Krishna loved Radha. Shiva married twice. Fine. A god is always a god, no matter what he does. Electricity or electrical energy is always electricity, whether it is applied to a heater or a cooler. Electricity does not become the heater or the refrigerator. Electricity does not become anything other than electricity. In the same way, God remains God, whether he goes to Radha, Gauri or Lakshmi. However, there are some people who cannot accept it.

After Kashi, Jesus visited Puri, where he took part in the Ratha Yatra of Subhadra, Balaram and Jagannath. In Puri,

which was and still is a Vaishnava stronghold, he received instructions on bhakti, which is the core of Christianity today. Surrender, total surrender to God, is a tenet of Christianity and also the main focus of Vaishnavism. Bhakti or surrender to God is the foundation of Vaishnavism, which Jesus was exposed to in Puri.

Then he travelled to the Kaveri Delta in the South, which was the land of esotericism, mantra and tantra. Jesus remained in India for twelve years. I am telling you all this in brief, I can also go into great detail as I have the documentation on what I am saying. I am a widely travelled sannyasin. I can tell you everything in detail about every city and town in the world. I am a living geography and a living history. This is because all my life I have done nothing except travel and learn. I never managed the ashrams, I never counted money. I only travelled and learnt about this world. That has been my life and even now, it is the same.

So Jesus was in India for twelve years. He learned mantra and tantra from the South, Vaishnavism from Jagannath Puri, Advaita Vedanta and its core philosophy from Kashi, and Dhamma from the Buddhist monks in Ladakh. These influences are clearly reflected in his life-pattern and teachings. If you honestly reflect on the tenets and beliefs of Christianity, you will discern these influences.

In the Bible, there is absolutely no reference to these thirteen years which Christ spent in India. They only speak of his absence from Jerusalem, but they do not tell us where he went. Where was he for thirteen years? Nobody speaks about it. For twelve years, he was in India. When he returned to Israel, the scribes said, "Who is this boy? We are seeing him for the first time." This would mean that he was never in Israel prior to that. The scribes said, "Who is this boy? He is a Jew. Where has he come from? We have not seen him before. Somebody says, he is the son of Joseph. Oh, I see." This is how he was referred to at the age of thirty when he arrived in Israel after his sojourn in India.

After his return to Israel, Jesus led his ministry for three years. It is recorded that during that time he preached, he healed, he gave sight to the blind, he brought Lazarus back to life, and performed many other miracles which I do not have to mention, as they are well known to all. However, despite his extraordinary nature, he was crucified like a criminal.

Jesus was crucified like an ordinary criminal for opposing and openly criticizing the existing systems. He was made to carry that heavy cross through the streets, being jeered and scoffed at by everyone, and then he was nailed to the cross and left to bleed. After all that suffering, he was brought down and believed to be dead, put in a tomb and buried. But he did not die on the cross. He lived, he survived. Although he was very weak and had little strength, he survived, and there is evidence in the Dead Sea scrolls that Jesus lived after the crucifixion.

There is also the shroud or cloth in which the body of Jesus was wrapped after he was brought down from the cross and laid in the tomb. This cloth, which is known as the Shroud of Turin and is a relic of that time, has been preserved. The DNA of the bloodstains on it was examined by experts. The tests revealed that the blood on the shroud was not that of a dead person, but of one who was still alive.

There are two proofs that Jesus Christ survived the crucifixion. He did not die on the cross, but he lived, he survived. One is a scientific proof and the other is historical. You may or may not agree with them, but these are facts that are being presented by scholars who are researching the history. He was removed from the grave, and the next day there was the sensational news that he had bodily ascended to his abode in heaven. It was construed as a miracle. But instead, he was taken to the Dead Sea to the monks with whom he had lived in his childhood. There, he was treated with herbs and tonics, as he had become very weak due to loss of blood.

Jesus Christ had spent three days on the cross, with nails hammered into his hands, feet and chest, and a crown of

thorns placed on his head. It was a miracle that he survived. After managing to live through that ordeal, where did he choose to go? Back to Israel? Oh God, no! Then where could he go? Rome? Oh no! A militant, aggressive, decadent Rome – no one would go there. Only when an empire is in decadence does it become militant and aggressive. A nation never becomes aggressive and militant if it is not going through decadence.

Jesus Christ came to Srinagar in India, along with his mother, who was a very old lady by then. From the Dead Sea, he travelled to Kur in Iraq and then on to Srinagar. He lived quietly because he was never again in proper shape after the crucifixion. He had become very, very weak. There is also evidence that he breathed his last and died in India, where he was buried in a tomb. This is an open secret.

Rama was an avatar, Krishna was an avatar, Buddha was an avatar and Jesus was an avatar. *Avatar* means God in tangible form, a God you can see. Some people wonder, why is God born? He is born in order to help us all. We cannot apprehend his *nirakara roopa* or formlessness. It is not possible for the mind of man to comprehend the formlessness of God. Where will you base your mind? On what will your mind stick? God is formless, He has no form, He has no name, He has no place, He has no colour, He has no dimension. God realized that it is difficult for you to comprehend Him without a form. He thought, "This devotee is undergoing a lot of difficulties because I am formless. I create a form for you, my dear. I come as Rama, meditate on Me." The period of Rama passed, and then He came as Krishna. For the people of the West He came as Christ.

What lessons can be learnt from the life of Jesus Christ?

Swami Niranjanananda: The descent of higher consciousness in a person is known as avatar. Christ consciousness descended in the body of a person called Jesus. In the Christmas celebrations people remember a moment in history, when they became the witnesses of an avatar.

An avatar always comes with some signs, and signs were seen, such as the star which guided the three Magi. Other indications also foretold the coming of Christ, there was a clear enough indication that an avatar was coming, that higher consciousness was descending in the body of a person. At Christmas people remember the moment when that consciousness descended.

One aspect of Christmas is to make the attainment of Christ consciousness one's aspiration in life. The attainment of Christ consciousness is the attainment of a state of consciousness which may be translated in Sanskrit as samadhi, moksha or nirvana.

It indicates a higher state of mind, a higher state of consciousness, and the goal of everyone's life is to attain that higher state of consciousness where the beauty of life can express itself. That beauty of the effulgent, creative life, the integrated, harmonious and homogeneous life is what makes a person a complete person, a whole being. It involves a change of attitude, a change of mind, a change in the patterns of consciousness and perception.

The aim of any spiritual effort is to attain that purity, connection, love, compassion, which identifies one with all aspects of the created universe. It is expressed through seva. In the Bible it is said that by helping others you help God. When you feed others you feed God. If you are giving water to a person, you are also quenching the thirst of God who is in that person. It is by doing good that you yourself shine, and that is the way to connect with God.

What is the basic teaching of Christ?

Swami Niranjanananda: The three basic teachings of Jesus are love, compassion or seeing oneself in others, and lifting people out of misery. Everything else is superfluous. To love is not easy. People have learnt how to love their expectations, but they have not learnt how to love each other. If we love somebody, whether it be husband, wife, child or friend, it is because of some expectation.

Christ and illuminated masters try to indicate a path where unconditional love can be experienced along with compassion towards others. How can one be compassionate to others when one is unable to understand their misery and suffering? Being compassionate indicates an evolved state of understanding, a state of being where one can feel the pain and suffering of another person as if it were happening to oneself.

One has to realize love and compassion not by following a system of belief or ritual, but by learning them as part of sadhana. This takes time. The ideas conveyed by Christ represent the eternal ideas that have guided the basic philosophy of humanity at different times in different ages and these ideas represent the experience of the beauty of nature. Love is manifesting through nature. When you see it, when you feel it, when you express it, when you live in it, you are experiencing and expressing truth. That is the type of human consciousness foreseen by sages and seers. The teachings of Christ indicate a method by which one can attain it.

KRISHNA AND CHRIST

Were Christ and Krishna the same person?

Swami Satyananda: Christ was born in Bethlehem, Krishna was born in Mathura, in western India. They were two different personalities, not one. Christ and Krishna were born in different Asian countries, but somehow they were given a name which has now become one. Christ was known as Jesus in his lifetime, not as Christ. 'Jesus' means collector or organizer. He was given the name Christ later. Christ has no meaning at all. In India, Jesus is called Isho. Krishna and Christ were two great souls. Somehow or other, many things in their lives were identical.

Krishna died five thousand years ago, and, according to history, Christ died more than two thousand years ago. So they were two separate personalities, and we should not confuse this.

One school of thought believes that Christ and Krishna are the same, not two. They say the story of Krishna migrated; in West India, Bengal and Orissa, Sri Krishna is called Kristo, not Krishna. Therefore, historians say that it is the story of Krishna which migrated, just like the story of Sri Rama migrated from India to Indonesia and Southeast Asia, to Java, Sumatra, Cambodia, Borneo and Thailand. Even now the story of Sri Rama in these countries is the same as the story of Sri Rama in India.

What is the esoteric interpretation of Christ and Krishna?

Swami Satyananda: There is another school of thought which says that neither Sri Krishna nor Christ was born. Some thinkers of the past wrote a story on the individual soul, *atman*, the inner soul, the universe. Sri Krishna is the inner soul which manifests through this body. This body is a prison in which the individual soul is caught and this particular body, or this particular life, is always ruled by the will, the tendencies of the mind, Kamsa.

For people belonging to different religions and communities, the esoteric interpretation is necessary. Supposing this is the body, imprisoned is the atman. How this body is guided is ruled by the bad or evil mind. The mind does not allow the soul to come up. Whenever the soul wants to come up, the mind kills it. Somehow or other, there is a time in every man's life, whether the mind wants it or not, that the soul must manifest. When the soul manifests, it is the birth of Krishna. When the atman wakes up from sleep, it is the birth of Krishna. When good is awakened and the shakti is awakened, the evil mind is killed. Krishna's father was Vasudeva. He was inside the prison. This is the spiritual, esoteric explanation.

Christ was the son of a carpenter. Just as a carpenter makes a table and chairs out of many pieces of wood, in the same manner this body is given a form from many pieces of wood by a carpenter. Who is the carpenter? Nature.

Christ is the light of the soul, the light, pure reason, which tells man when he is wrong. Man does not care, and

ultimately what happens? Man's worldly attachments and worldly motives try to suppress the soul, but the soul does not die, it rises again and then it goes to the cross. The cross is not death, but the awakening of kundalini, the awakening of power in man. This is the esoteric interpretation of Christ and Krishna.

What are the main differences between Krishna and Christ?

Swami Satyananda: Christ led more or less the life of a puritan. Sri Rama led the life of a puritan, but Sri Krishna was a Casanova, not a puritan. Sri Krishna was full of fun, yet today millions sing his name. Radha was not Sri Krishna's wife. She was a young girl near him in age, the daughter of the local chieftain. They fell in love with each other when Krishna was ten or eleven and she was fifteen or sixteen. People have closed their eyes to that perversion of *prakriti*, of nature, and say that Krishna was pure.

When the girls bathed in the swimming pool, Krishna would pick up their clothes and run away to a tree. When they asked him to return their clothes, he would say, "Come and get them yourself?" They would reply, "How can we come when we are naked?" Krishna would insist that they had to come naked if they wanted their clothes returned. When the individual souls approach God, they have to come naked. Clothes are karma. All karmas must be shed before approaching the Lord. This was Krishna's life, but today he is worshipped, and the other aspects of his life, like telling lies, hitting other children, teasing the girls and stealing are overlooked.

Krishna would steal the butter, milk and curd from people's houses. If anybody accused him of stealing, Krishna would threaten the whole village. That was the kind of boy he was, but the young girls living in the area, who were Krishna's devotees during his lifetime, worshipped him because he had divine talents. He was no ordinary boy; he had divine powers even as a child. In every sphere Krishna

proved that he had superhuman powers, so his pranks were overlooked and he was worshipped as a divine being.

Sri Krishna is considered to be a complete, not partial, incarnation of God. Therefore, a man can be considered as God. He can be worshipped and one can give oneself to him totally, mentally, emotionally, psychically, spiritually, in every way. The mind becomes quiet. There is no joy in life unless the mind becomes quiet. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:71):

> *Vihaaya kaamaanyah sarvaanpumaamshcharati nihsprihah;*
> *Nirmamo nirahankaarah sa shaantimadhigachchhati.*
>
> The man attains peace, who, abandoning all desires, moves about without longing, without the sense of mine and without egoism.

BUDDHA

Who was Buddha?

Swami Niranjanananda: Once a prince was isolated from society by his father, the king. There was a prophecy that the prince would either become a renowned emperor or an ascetic. The king did not want his son to become an ascetic, so he protected him from outside influences and did not allow him to leave the palace. When the young prince reached adulthood, he expressed the desire to visit the kingdom. The king made the necessary preparations, cleaned up the streets, removed the squatters and beggars and decorated the streets. The young prince set out in his chariot and travelled through the kingdom.

At one point, he saw an old person with wrinkled skin, stooped posture, frail limbs, walking with the support of a stick. The prince had never seen an old person before and it came as a shock. He had been protected so that he would not see suffering. He returned home and started to think, "Who is that person?"

The next day again he expressed his desire to leave the palace. This time he saw a sick person lying on the road, his body covered with boils and flies, and he was unable to do anything about it. The prince went home again and started to think, "What was that?" He had never seen a sick person before.

On the third day, when he again went out to see the kingdom, he saw a body being carried to the cremation ground. He asked his charioteer what had happened to this man, and the charioteer told him the man was dead. The young prince asked, "Will I also die one day like that man?" The charioteer said, "My prince, one day you will be sick and suffer, one day you will grow old and frail, and one day you will die. That is the reality of life." The prince returned to the palace and started to think, "What is suffering? What causes suffering? How can suffering be overcome?" With these three questions in mind, he quietly left the palace at night, left his parents, his wife and young child, and went out into the unknown world all alone.

What were the teachings of Buddha?

Swami Niranjanananda: Later, this young prince became Buddha. He discovered that suffering is an experience of the mind, that the mind causes suffering due to its attachments, associations, expectations and ambitions. He discovered that the way out of this suffering is through realizing the mind and bringing it back to its natural state of harmony, where it is not influenced by stones thrown in the lake. When a stone is thrown in a lake, ripples are created. Our mind is the recipient of these ripples which are coming from outside, from society, from family members, from every direction. Our mind responds to them one by one. Disassociating the mind from the influences which are affecting it will lead to freedom from suffering.

According to Buddha, the mind is real existence. One has to work through the mind. The mind has to be balanced, guided and controlled. Buddha was so focused on this

thought that he did not answer other questions people asked him, whether on God, philosophy, lifestyle, or anything else. He said to forget everything, be a realist, learn to look at yourself and follow two principles: *karuna*, compassion, and *ahimsa*, the non-violent nature.

Compassion begins with yourself. You do not have to express compassion for somebody else. When you are going through a crisis, you need to have compassion for yourself. Learn to accept, rather than negate. Learn to acknowledge, rather than reject. Learn to live in harmony with your mind, rather than struggling with it. Buddha developed the philosophy of *nirvana*, transcending the gross tendencies of the mind which give the experience of suffering, through compassion and a non-violent nature. The way to develop compassion and a non-violent nature is through introspection, reflection and analysis, which became part of the meditative process.

Who is considered to be the sixth Buddha?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is the Buddhist belief that there have been many Buddhas in the past. The most recent one was Gautama, one of the names of Siddhartha, who was later acclaimed as a Buddha. The Buddhist teaching prevalent in the world today comes from the Gautama Buddha.

The Jains have had twenty-four gurus, the last one of whom was Mahavir. The Sikhs have had ten gurus. The Buddhists have had five gurus, the fifth guru lineage ending with Gautama Buddha.

A Buddha is one who has attained a state of enlightenment. There were prophesies that another Buddha was going to come and that, just as Gautama Buddha taught the concepts of *ahimsa*, non-violence, compassion and nirvana, he would give the world another concept of compassion and harmonious living. This reference is found in many of the Buddhist texts. This sixth Buddha was Jesus Christ.

Jesus was a renowned world teacher after Buddha, and there have been later additions to support this theory

of Christ being the sixth Buddha. Engraved on a large boulder in Kashmir are five seated Buddhas with a sixth one standing. It is widely believed that the standing figure engraved on the rock is the same as pictures found in other parts of Kashmir. Traditionally it is said to be that of Esu or Christ in the garb of a Buddhist with similar headgear to Buddha: an inverted lotus-shaped cap, and long flowing hair.

It is difficult to say when Christ was accepted as the sixth Buddha. According to history, when Christ came to the Indian subcontinent he stayed in Puri where he learnt the bhakti and Vaishnava concepts. However, due to the social environment prevalent at that time, he was chased out of Puri when he started becoming vocal about the faults of the Vaishnava brahminical tradition.

He went to Varanasi where he studied the monistic vedantic system, Advaita Vedanta, in which there is no difference between God and the One. In the Vaishnava system, he understood the concept of bhakti which is surrender, devotion and faith. In the Advaita Vedanta system, he understood the concept of 'I am that I am'.

When he encountered different ideas which were contradictory to his own realizations, he left Varanasi and came to Vikramshila, sixty miles from Munger, which is an ancient Buddhist monastery. In its heyday it was a university with no less than ten thousand students. The teachers were monks. At Vikramshila University he studied the traditions of Buddhism, Vajrayana, and so forth. At that time there was a delegation of wandering Buddhist monks going north to Tibet and he decided to join them. In the chronicles of Vikramshila, there is a reference to Christ as being a brilliant and outstanding student and scholar.

With the delegation he travelled through Ladakh and Nepal into Tibet. The documents of Hemis monastery are of that period. He had an open mind and knowledge of the various existing 'spiritual' traditions of the country, and understood how the people thought. He also understood their aspirations and had a global and universal vision. Since

that time, the Buddhist tradition has accepted him as the sixth Buddha.

Was Buddha an avatar?

Swami Niranjanananda: Approximately 2500 years ago, a prince left the palace and kingdom in quest of an answer, the Holy Grail of India. The quest was to understand, overcome and eradicate suffering. It was with this thought, with this idea, that prince Siddhartha left his palace and kingdom 2500 years ago and took on the robes of a renunciate. During his spiritual journey he came across many schools of thought, many traditions, and engaged himself in many spiritual disciplines, austerities, hatha yoga, raja yoga, and other higher sadhanas. In this process he dominated, controlled his body to such an extent that his body could not stand up to the challenges posed before itself by the owner of the body, Siddhartha. The austerities which he used to do were so intense that the body could not sustain it.

So one day he fainted, and when he came back to his senses, a woman was standing near him with a cup of kheer which she gave to him to eat. While Buddha was eating the kheer, he came to understand that too much exertion of the body is useless, for the body is not going to be able to maintain and sustain that effort. Too little effort is also not good. Too much strain on the mind is not good, as it can snap, and too little control over the mind is useless as it does not stop its dissipation. So he developed the idea of the middle path. Don't bother about your body, but have the senses in absolute restraint. Don't mess around with your mind, but have your desires and aspirations in absolute restraint.

Through restraint, one can overcome the negative effect of the karmas. Through restraint, one can overcome the negative expression of the mind and senses, and come to that state of freeness where one experiences nirvana. His thought, his idea became so powerful during his time that he was elevated to the status of an avatar. The word 'avatar'

is generally translated as an incarnation of the highest consciousness; however, there is also another definition of the word avatar. *Avatar* represents an impact on the human mind. Just as a speaker can influence a group of people, a philosopher can influence a bigger group of people, in the same manner, an avatar can influence the whole of humanity. Gurus can influence a community, avatars can influence the whole of humanity.

Buddha's thoughts altered the way humanity lived, acted, behaved and what it believed in. He was a catalyst for bringing about a qualitative change in the social, mental, sensorial and spiritual fabric of humanity. It was on the Poornima night, that after having eaten his kheer and having again sat down for meditation with a happy stomach and happy mind that he attained the final enlightenment and became Buddha. He had discovered the Holy Grail, the answer on how to end human suffering.



4

Krishna Bhakti

KRISHNA AND THE GOPIS

How devoted were the gopis to Krishna?

Swami Sivananda: The gopis or milk-maids of Vrindavan were burnt by the fire of separation. How devoted they were to Sri Krishna! They could not bear the separation even for a second. Sometimes Sri Krishna tested their sincerity by hiding himself suddenly. They would roam about here and there in the lanes and bowers of Vrindavan. They used to address the kadamba trees, "O kadamba trees! Have you seen our Krishna? We are burnt by the fire of separation from him. What message have you brought from him? Where is he now? How cruel he is. We are pining for his darshan." They used to shed tears profusely during the period of separation. They had no body-consciousness. When they started lighting their lamps at night, some even burnt their fingers badly but were not aware of it. Their minds were on their beloved only.

When they heard the sweet, soul-stirring melodious music of the flute of Sri Krishna, they rushed immediately with dishevelled hair and fallen garments to meet him. They were immersed in the love of Krishna.

Who were the gopis?

Swami Sivananda: Were the gopis not God-intoxicated beings who saw themselves also as Krishna? The sound of

the flute could throw them in a state of divine ecstasy or holy communion. They were above body-consciousness. Sri Krishna snatched away their clothes and rendered them nude. There is a great philosophy in this. He taught them, "O gopis! Have no attachment for anything. Give up the body idea and sex idea and attain to the bodiless and sexless Immortal Atman."

The gopis of Vrindavan were wonderful devotees of Sri Krishna. They totally surrendered themselves unto him. They blended with Krishna through their intense love. The love they bore towards Krishna was divine love. Sri Krishna played on his flute on a moonlit night. The gopis rushed forth immediately to where their lover was. Their minds were absorbed in Krishna. They forgot everything when they heard the flute. Some left their houses while milking the cow, some when they were serving their husbands with food, some did not take down the boiled rice from the fire and some did not wait till the milk was boiled. Some had been giving milk to their children, some were taking food, some were serving the guests with food, but they all left their work half-finished. Their clothes, hair and ornaments were all dishevelled. They ran to behold Sri Krishna. Krishna was their very prana and soul. They could not bear his separation even for a second! How devoted the gopis were! Can you imagine? It is beyond all imagination!

When Sri Krishna suddenly disappeared they roamed from forest to forest. They asked the trees if they had seen their lover. They enquired of the creepers, the earth and the deer. They imitated his actions and even called themselves Krishna. All their thoughts were directed towards Krishna only. They conversed about him only. They were full of Krishna. They were immersed in his love. They had no other thoughts, no other aspirations. They did not think of their homes or relatives. They went to the banks of the Yamuna and sang in chorus about Krishna and prayed fervently for his return.

How did Krishna respond to the gopis' devotion?

Swami Sivananda: Pleased with their devotion, Krishna suddenly appeared before them and addressed them thus: "Welcome, you great ones! What good can I do for you? Are all safe in Vraja? Tell me the object of your coming here. The night is fearful and wild animals are roaming around. Go back to Vraja. This is not the place for women. You have your mothers, fathers, sons, brothers and husbands. They are searching for you. Do not cause pain to anybody. What is more, you have now seen this forest adorned with flowers and illumined by the tender rays of the full moon where the trees and their tender branches gently move by the breeze from the Yamuna, stand in all their splendour. Now go back, O virtuous girls, speedily to your house, and look after your husbands. The calves and your children are weeping. Go and let them have their drink. If you have come here, forced by your love for me, it is only meet and proper, for all people have their love for me. Devotion to the husband is the one great religion for women. They should seek the wellbeing of their friends and bring up their children. The husband may be wicked, old, diseased or poor, but those who wish for heaven should not give up their husbands. The connection with one who is not the husband is disreputable and unbecoming. You may bear love for Me in other ways than by such a near approach. Therefore go back to your houses."

The gopis were struck dumb for a time. They were overcome with sorrow. They had given up everything for the sake of Krishna and they could ill bear to hear these harsh words. At last they broke forth, "O Lord, it is not for you to utter these unkind words. We have given up all objects and sought your feet. O you, who are so difficult to be reached, do not forsake us. O Love, you say of our duties to husbands, sons and friends as if you were a religious teacher, but you are yourself the goal of those religious injunctions. So let them rest in you. You are the greatest friend of all beings, for you are verily their own Self. What do we care for husbands

or sons, sources of misery as they are? We are attached to you, the constant source of happiness."

In these words the gopis expressed their deepest affection for Sri Krishna. We find in the gopis complete self-surrender in its true sense. They cared not even for their lives. How could they care for their relatives, friends and cattle?

If one wants to attain Krishna, one must serve him as a gopi. One must adore him with the mental attitude of a gopi. The devotee who worships Krishna with that attitude enjoys the madhurya rasa.

How did the gopis love Krishna?

Swami Satyananda: One must understand what the attitude of Radha and Krishna was and that between the gopis and Krishna. The latter is the most beautiful part, although many people consider the gopis as merely girls playing with Krishna. The gopis loved Krishna, not his physical frame, but his eternal body. Every time when the gopis were with Krishna, they did not feel they were with a human being. They always felt they were in the company of divinity. When one realizes that one is in the company of divinity, one is very much in touch and close to one's guru.

How did Krishna's flute music awaken the gopis' devotion?

Swami Sivananda: The flute is the symbol of the *pranava*, the sacred syllable *Om*. It is this flute that attracted the devoted gopis, the maidens of Vraja, to meet their beloved Krishna on the banks of the sacred Yamuna. The sound of this divine flute thrilled the heart with rapturous delight and instilled new life and joy. It produced God-intoxication in all beings and infused life even in insentient objects. The sweetness of the music was unsurpassed. He who heard once the music of Krishna's flute cared not for the nectar of heaven or the bliss of *moksha*, liberation.

Sri Krishna's flute and its music had stirred the souls of the gopis. They lost all control over themselves. The world was nothing to them. They felt irresistibly drawn towards Sri

Krishna. They had neither shame nor fear in leaving their homes. There was a soul-awakening in them. Their mind was not of this world. Their husbands and brothers stopped them in vain. Who can resist the torrent of love for Krishna?

The love that the gopis bore towards Krishna was a divine love. It was the union of souls. It is no union of sex. It is the aspiration of the *jivatman* to merge in the *paramatman*, it is the blending of the individual soul with the Supreme Soul.

What did Sri Krishna express through his flute?

Swami Sivananda: The saints, seers and prophets of the world have spoken of love as the end, aim or goal of life. The rasa lila of Sri Krishna is full of *prem*, love, and divine mysteries. The stripping of clothes of the gopis means the destruction of egoism. Sri Krishna has preached love through his flute.

What is the meaning of Krishna lila?

Swami Satyananda: After many, many years, Sri Krishna sent one of his disciples to Vrindavan. By that time the little children who were ten or twelve had grown up and were thirty-two. Krishna sent one of his special disciples to Vrindavan to teach them yoga. When they found out that someone had come from Krishna, they went rushing to ask him how Krishna was.

They asked, "Now Krishna must be an emperor. He must be having ministers, commanders and armies, and he must have forgotten us. Does he remember that during childhood we used to play on the banks of Yamuna? Does he remember that when we were children, we used to steal butter and milk from the villagers' houses? Does he remember that when we were children, we used to beat each other?" The disciple said, "Yes, he remembers all of you." They said, "We remember him not only once a day, not only twice a day, not only once a week, but with every breath we remember him. We do not only remember him when we are suffering. We do not only remember him when we have some desires to be fulfilled. We do not remember him only when we are pure in

body and mind. From dawn to dusk and from dusk to dawn, we remember him and his beautiful games and fun."

Then they asked the disciple why he came. He replied, "Look here girls, Krishna sent me here to teach you yoga." They asked, "What is yoga?" The disciple replied, "Close your eyes and concentrate on *bhrumadhya*, the eyebrow centre, in ajna chakra." They said, "Oh, we don't know all this." The disciple said, "I will teach you. Do it. I will teach you how to concentrate here and here."

The name of the disciple was Uddhava. The gopis said something marvellous, "Uddhava, we have one mind, one heart, one consciousness, and with that we have always been thinking about Krishna. Now you are asking us to concentrate here and there. By which mind will we do it? We do not have two minds. We don't have three minds. We don't have twenty minds. We have one consciousness, and that has been completely chasing the memory of Krishna. We do not see him and maybe we will never see him. We know he is busy with his jobs, but we are suffering from the pangs of separation every time we remember how we played with him, every time we remember how he used to take away our clothes when we were bathing in the pond. We remember every one of his pranks, funs and frolics of those ten or twelve years that we lived with him." That is called *Krishna lila,* Krishna's play or divine enactment.

How did the gopis' bhava affect their daily life and the quality of their awareness?

Swami Satyananda: The gopis had positive bhava. They considered Krishna to be their husband; they were aware of him all the time. The moment they heard Krishna's flute at midnight, they would run out of their houses to go and play with him. When Krishna left Mathura, which is near Agra, he travelled far to a place called Dwarika, which is in Gujarat, the westernmost part of India, and he never came back to Mathura. The gopis who had been his playmates in childhood felt sorry and they began to suffer very much mentally. They could not eat

and they could not sleep. They had all the same problems that a person has when he loses a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Sri Krishna himself was a great yogi. He lived with his guru for quite some time. The name of his guru was Sandipani. Krishna used to teach yoga after establishing his kingdom in western India. After a few years, he sent one of his emissaries back to Gokul. By the time Sri Krishna asked Uddhava to go to Gokul and teach yoga, all the gopis had grown up. When they heard that someone had come from Dwarika, the place of Sri Krishna, they were so happy. They thought, at least they could touch his feet. Even though they were not Krishna's, still they had trodden the land where Krishna had been walking.

In the evening, Uddhava sat down amongst the gopis and said, "I have come here to teach yoga. So all of you come tomorrow morning and we will practise." They asked, "What kind of yoga are you going to teach us?" He said, "One-pointedness of mind, *vairagya*, dispassion. This is what I am going to teach you." Then those cow herd boys and girls said, "No, we don't have to do all this, because our mind is always with Krishna through the medium of love. We not only remember his name but we always think about him with every breath we breathe. On account of this separation from Krishna, we are so overwhelmed that we are not aware of anything in life except him. And you are going to teach us *vairagya*, dispassion? We have only one awareness, and that is of Krishna, whom we loved and played with in our youth. Physically he may not be with us, but all the time we are thinking only about him. We are so much engrossed in love for him that we don't even care to put on good clothes, to eat proper food, to act in the proper manner, to sleep at the right time. We are very much struck by love for Krishna."

Is it natural for a bhakta to initially experience duality?

Swami Satyananda: In the early stage of bhakti, one must remember that duality exists. There is the lover and there is the beloved. This *dvaita*, or duality, is something that bhaktas do not want to part with.

When Sri Krishna, who is known as Yogeshwara, the Lord of Yoga, sent his disciple Uddhava to Gokul to conduct yoga classes for the gopis, they asked, "How is Krishna and why have you come?" Uddhava replied, "Do not worry about Krishna, I have come to teach you yoga. We shall start tomorrow." The cleverest of the gopis asked, "Which yoga are you going to teach us? We have only one mind and one awareness and they have gone to Dwarika where Krishna is."

How could one have a similar experience to that of the gopis?

Swami Satyananda: The gopis used to see only Krishna, not anybody else. That was the depth of their awareness, through bhakti, devotion and prayer. That means by love. If one's love is so true and sincere, one can arrive at the same point of experience.

Why is the relationship between Krishna and the gopis symbolic of the relationship between purusha and prakriti?

Swami Satyananda: In the spiritual realm, maharasa is the process of yoga where everything dissolves into one purusha, into one Supreme Self, one great spirit. The gopis have lost themselves and have become one with the form of Krishna. There is a substantial dialogue between Sri Krishna and his *sakhis*, his girlfriends, the gopis. Purusha and prakriti have that relationship. Prakriti is my girlfriend! She is everyone's girlfriend.

Sri Krishna played the flute; he is known as *bansidhara*, the flute bearer. When he played his flute, the gopis heard and they thought he was calling them. They went running after him in the middle of the night, on Sharad Poornima. Sri Krishna asked why they had come and he tried to discourage them in many ways. He told them to go home, over and over again, that it was not right that they should come to him in the middle of the night because he was young and they were also young. They were determined, they were adamant, saying, "No, you are our sole refuge. You are our centre and our goal of life."

Ultimately, they asked him a question, "Sri Krishna, did you not say to renounce everything and submit to you, to take shelter in you?" "Yes," replied Krishna. "Then why are you telling us to go home?" asked the gopis. Krishna had no answer. Gradually, he submitted to the demands of the gopis, and ultimately the rasa lila took place. Prakriti will come in conjunction with purusha and there will be creation. There will be that spiritual experience that yoga calls nirvikalpa samadhi or Bhagavat darshan.

How can the story of Krishna and the gopis be understood as an allegory of nada yoga?

Swami Satyananda: Nada yoga is illustrated in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. A symbolic and allegorical description of nada is given in the form of the story of Krishna. It says, "Sri Krishna left his place at midnight and went into the jungle. It was the full moon night of the first month of winter. He began to play the flute. The echo of the flute spread in the calm and undisturbed atmosphere. Music rose from the jungle and was heard by the gopis. When they heard the sound of the flute, they immediately left their houses and their husbands, forgetful of all that was taking place. They ran without consideration to the place from where the nada of the flute was emanating. They started dancing about the flute player. After some time, it so happened that each one found herself dancing individually with Krishna."

The story seems fantastic, but in fact, it is not properly understood by people of the world. It is understood only by nada yogis. They consider Krishna to represent that higher sphere of consciousness where the nada of that sphere emanates during the deepest state of nada sadhana. When the emanation of flute music takes place, the *indriyas*, the senses or the sense-consciousness, forsake their respective objects, and withdraw from their respective centres of pleasure and perception. They recede and go back to the place from where the flute sound or the nada is emanating. There, the senses dance around the nada. In that state, the

senses completely withdraw from the outer objects. In other words, a yogi may say that dharana has taken place and dhyana is about to dawn.

From a yogic perspective, what does the story of Krishna, his flute playing and the gopis represent?

Swami Satyananda: Sri Krishna represents the higher consciousness and his flute playing is the nada sadhana. The senses or the gopis, forget the outer reality or their husbands and withdraw from their sense organs to dance around the divine nada or the flute-like sound. The flute sounds belong to the *pasyanti* state where actual sounds are not heard but the frequencies, which are compared with the sounds of lutes and bells, are sensed.

What is the symbolic meaning of Krishna, his flute and the gopis?

Swami Satyananda: In Sanskrit the word *krishna* means 'that which draws' or 'that which attracts'. It is derived from the root word *karshan*. The word *krishna* means 'the puller', 'the withdrawer' or 'the attractor'. It also means 'farmer'. The word *gopi* means 'cow'. In Sanskrit, *go* means 'senses', 'cow', 'poor', 'humble' and the 'whole perceptible universe'. Ordinarily, the word *gopi* means 'the daughter of a cowherd family'. Symbolically, *gopi* means 'senses'. Who are the husbands of the senses? The gopas. It may be said that for the eyes, the form is the husband and for the ears, sound. When the music of a flute is heard, the sense of hearing leaves or withdraws itself from the outer audible sounds and merges itself in the inner nada. This process is called pratyahara.

How does the story of Krishna and the gopis represent the process of pratyahara?

Swami Satyananda: When the sound of the *murali*, the inner flute, is heard by practices such as nada yoga, pranayama, vajroli and other kriyas, the senses are withdrawn, which are

represented by the gopis. The senses leave their respective sense object: the five karmendriyas, the five jnanendriyas and the *pancha vishaya*, the five objects to the senses. They are completely disassociated. The sense objects are represented by gopa, gwalabala, and the senses are represented by gopi. The full moon, *jyotsna*, is represented by spiritual enlightenment at the time when one is in deep meditation. No other sound is heard. One just hears the murali. The senses are withdrawn and pratyahara takes place.

How can the love of the gopis influence those without the experience of divine love?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is a beautiful story from Krishna's life. Due to his duties he could not go back to his friends or to the village where he had grown up. However, he could feel the emotions which his foster parents and former playmates were having and those feelings would come to him in the form of waves. So he called one of his closest friends, Uddhava, and said, "Please go to Vrindavan and Gokul where the people are pining for me. Explain to them that right now it is not possible for me to come."

A beautiful discussion took place between Krishna and Uddhava. Uddhava was considered to be one of the greatest jnanis of that age. He was also arrogant about his knowledge. He would talk to Krishna and identify with Krishna but without form. In place of the physical form he would always see a light. When Krishna told him that the gopis were attached to the physical form, Uddhava could not understand. He said, "Why are they attached to your physical form? I will show them the way to identify with your formless aspect so that they can experience *shanti*, peace. If they identify with your physical form, they are identifying with *maya*, illusion. Because of maya they are experiencing *prem*, love, but that love is causing them a lot of pain and suffering."

Uddhava took a sankalpa to make everyone understand the nature of Krishna's formless divinity. When he reached

Vrindavan no one was willing to listen to him. Everyone was pining for the return of Krishna, for his touch, for his physical presence. They said to Uddhava, "You might be the biggest jnani, but you have not yet experienced love and, therefore, your knowledge is not complete. If you experience love and if you experience the suffering, pain and yearning that comes with love, you will know what we are feeling." Uddhava had not experienced that love for God, so all his wisdom and knowledge was halved. He got the message that knowledge itself is not enough.

In the highest state of bhava, is there any separation between the lover and the beloved?

Swami Sivananda: Some ignorant people say, "Krishna is not God. He is not an *avatar* or incarnation. He was a passionate cowherd who played with the gopis." What was the age of Krishna at that time? Was he not a boy of seven? Could there have been a tinge of passion in him? Who can understand the secret of rasa lila and *madhurya bhava*, the relationship between lover and beloved, between the devotee and God, the culmination of highest bhakti, *atmanivedan* or total surrender to God? It is only Narada, Sukadeva, Chaitanya, Mirabai, Hafiz, Ramananda, the sakhis or the gopis that could understand the secret of rasa lila.

RADHA AND KRISHNA

What does Radha teach us through her relationship with Sri Krishna?

Swami Sivananda: Humble salutations and adorations to Sri Radha, the world Mother, the inseparable devoted partner of that flute-bearer of Vrindavan, who took her birth in the sacred village Barsana near Mathura, and who was an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi.

Just as heat is inseparable from fire, just as coolness is inseparable from ice, just as shadow is inseparable from man, so is Radha inseparable from Sri Krishna. Worship

of Radha is really worship of Sri Krishna, and worship of Krishna really includes worship of Radha. Radha was an embodiment of love and devotion. She had no other thought than that of Krishna. She took birth to teach the world the true relationship of the lover and the beloved, the secret of madhurya bhava or madhurya rasa, which is the essence of Vedanta.

In the esoteric sense, the heart is Vrindavan, the mind is Radha, the gopis are the nerves and the senses, the *anahata*, or unstruck sounds that proceed from the heart are the melodious songs that come out of Sri Krishna's flute. Sahasrara chakra is the supreme abode and Sri Krishna is the Supreme Himself. The five *koshas,* sheaths, are the five fortresses, the pranas are the gatekeepers, the chakras are the gates, immortality is the Yamuna, the crown of the head is the kadamba tree, mind melts in Brahman, Radha is united with Krishna. This is the rasa lila.

Every nerve, every atom, every cell, every tissue, every pore in the skin of the body of Radha vibrated the name of Krishna. She could never forget him even for one millionth part of a second. She never slept at night. She sang Krishna's name throughout the night. She was a *gudakeshi*, one who conquered sleep, like Arjuna and Lakshman. A little sound from Krishna's flute at the dead of night would intoxicate her with Krishna prem and would bring her out into the dense forest to hear his sweet heart-rending music of the soul, the melody of Omkara. No power on earth could stop her. She taught to the world the gist of self-surrender, the very core of the highest bhakti, the highest rung on the ladder of devotion which begins from the first step of *dasya bhava,* the relationship of master and servant, and culminates in complete merging by total and perfect self-surrender.

What is the meaning hidden in the word Radha?

Swami Sivananda: There is a great deal of philosophy in the word Radha. If one imagines a circle on the blackboard and within the circle the letters R-A-D-H-A are written.

If one reads from the lower 'A' one will make out the word as ARADHA, and *aradhya* means 'worship'. Radha says, "O bhaktas! If you do aradhana of Sri Krishna, my sweet Beloved, if you sing his name *Radhe-Shyam* or *Radhe-Krishna* with *bhava*, *prema* and *shraddha*, feeling, love and faith, you will have his darshan soon and all your miseries will come to an end."

If one reads from the upper 'A' one will make out the word ADHARA, which means 'prop', 'support' or 'substratum'. Radha says, "O bhaktas! If you worship Sri Krishna with the feeling that he is the substratum or support for the Universe, he will free you quickly from this samsaric wheel of births and deaths."

If one reads from 'DHA' one will make out the word DHARA which means 'flow'. Radha says, "I shall tell you how to worship Sri Krishna. Bhakti should flow from your hearts like dhara, like the continuous flow of oil or water when it is poured from one vessel to another. Your minds should be steadily fixed at the lotus feet of the Lord always. Then alone will you get liberation and constant companionship of the Lord." Radha gives here a description of para bhakti.

The four magic words RADHA, ARADHANA, ADHARA and DHARA will help one to develop bhakti.

How does Radha lead the devotee to Sri Krishna?

Swami Sivananda: The gist of the rasa lila is the essence of devotion, *para bhakti*, or oneness, the merging of the lover and beloved. The secret of rasa lila is that men or women, while remaining in the world and doing all sorts of activities, can develop *Krishna prem*, divine love for Krishna, and can realize the Godhead at their threshold. It teaches, 'Give the mind to God, just as Radha did, and the hands to work. Sing and dance in divine ecstasy, but forget Him not'.

Even the Sufis have admiration and devotion for Radha and Krishna. Their philosophy is founded on Radha's devotion to Sri Krishna. They try to develop the same inner feeling which Radha had towards Sri Krishna.

Radha is Durga, Radha is Parvati, Radha is Rajeshwari. She is the world Mother. The whole world rests in her sweet bosom. She is the creatrix and generatrix of the whole universe. The whole divine play is kept up by her. She sways the world through her three gunas: sattwa, rajas and tamas.

She is the doctor, the nurse, the medicine, the patient, the cup. These are her manifestations. She is dynamic Brahman. She is *shakti* or power. Without her not an atom can move. She is the light in the sun, sapidity in water, shakti in electricity and will-force, fragrance and beauty in flowers and the Himalayan landscape, splendour in the stars, chivalry in warriors, devotion in bhaktas, revolution in electrons. She is ignorance, delusion and knowledge. She is the Vedas. Whatever is seen, heard, felt, tasted and smelt is Radha. There is nothing else in this world save Radha. She guides the seekers, She nourishes babies, She is the untiring gardener of the universe. Her glory is indescribable, her splendour is ineffable, her beauty, love and intelligence are unfathomable.

Without her grace no spiritual progress is possible. Without her grace no cultivation of devotion or darshan of Sri Krishna is possible. Control of mind can hardly be attained without her blessing. It is she who introduces the thirsty, sincere aspirants to Sri Krishna. She herself takes care of the sadhana of her devotee, if he obtains her grace. She herself leads the devotee by holding him in her hands. Even now she can be met in the Seva Kunja of Vrindavan if one has sincere devotion. Even now she roams about with Sri Krishna in the gullies and kadamba forests of Vrindavan, and on the banks of the Yamuna. A bhakta with the eyes of devotion, the real inner eye of intuition, can see her and her Krishna also. She has the collyrium to open blind eyes. She dwells in the chambers of the heart.

Run to her with all love and devotion, right now this very second. Don't delay even for a second. She is waiting on the banks of the Yamuna to embrace the devotee with outstretched hands. Find her. Thirst for her darshan, make

yourself fit to approach her lotus feet and melt in her divine love. Purify the heart by singing her name. Weep sincerely for her darshan in solitude. Pray now: 'O Mother Radha! When will that blessed day come to me to sit at your lotus feet? I am yours. All is yours. Your will be done, my Mother! Beloved of Sri Krishna, bless me!' Shed sincere tears of joy and love for her. Sing her name now with feeling, faith and love.

May Radha, the world Mother, the sweet untiring world nurse, help us in developing bhakti. May she guide the daily activities of life. May she introduce us to Her beloved Sri Krishna. May she explain the full secret of rasa lila. May she train us to become qualified students to partake in the divine rasa lila of Seva Kunja at Vrindavan that is going on daily even now, and to drink the nectar of immortality. May the blessings of Sri Radha Krishna be upon everyone.

The name Radha stands for *atmanivedan* or offering of heart, soul, mind, and the whole being, *sarva bhava,* at the lotus feet of Sri Krishna. Without her *anugraha,* grace, no cultivation of devotion, no darshan of Sri Krishna is possible.

What was the love of Radha for Krishna?

Swami Satyananda: It will not be possible for most Indians to understand the relationship between Radha and Krishna, because whenever people of this century and era think about the relationship between Radha and Krishna, they always think with love in their minds, and they think of a boy and a girl getting together. It is a limited approach.

Why don't you accept that Krishna and Radha were related to each other in the bond of love, but that love was not exactly the love you know and it was dedicated to something more?

Why can it be said that Radha is the personification of the supreme emotion, *mahabhava*?

Swami Sivananda: The supreme emotion, *mahabhava*, is the quintessence of *prem*, divine love. Radha is the personification of this supreme emotion. Radha is a Devi. She is the

queen of lustrous beauties of the abode of Sri Krishna's love-sports and worship. She beholds Sri Krishna in anything and everything. She sets her love-lit eyes upon him. Sri Krishna is the supreme matchless lover and Sri Radha is identical with him. She is part and parcel of Krishna and his love energy. Her sole object of existence and devout prayers is to fulfil the wishes of Sri Krishna. Hence she is named *Krishnamayi*, 'full of Krishna inside and outside'. Krishna is the charmer of all. Radha is Krishna's charmer and therefore she is the Supreme Goddess.

What were the qualities of Krishna and Radha?

Swami Sivananda: Sri Krishna is the embodiment of bliss. He is the source of and centre of real happiness. Bliss is divine elixir that bestows immortality. Sensual pleasure is a poison which causes disease and death. Sri Krishna has a certain energy called *antaranga* or *swaroopa* shakti, inner or essential energy. The shakti which has the power of giving delight to Krishna and his devotees is called *hladini shakti* or delight-giving energy. The essence of hladini is selfless Krishna's prem. The selfless love is called *ananda chinmaya rasa*. The quintessence of this rasa or mahabhava is Radha.

Radha is the embodiment of mahabhava. The word Radha etymologically means 'a devotee'. Radha is the chief of Krishna's sweethearts. She pervades the gopis in her subtle form in order to contribute to Krishna's enjoyment. Radha is Krishna's delighter, charmer and life's all. She is the queen of all the lovely maidens of Vraja. She is the crest gem of all celestial beauties. The culmination of bhakti is reached in madhurya bhava. The lover and the beloved become one through the intensity of love. Radha had this type of love.

What was the type of relationship that existed between Radha and Krishna?

Swami Satyananda: When Sri Krishna was in his teens he met a young girl of his own age, Radha. They saw each other on the banks of the Yamuna, and at that time Radha started

feeling love for Krishna and he started feeling absolute love for her. That was the first and last time they met. Radha had her own life and Krishna had his own life. That is another story. He became a great warrior, a statesman, a teacher. Radha never lived with him and he never lived with her, nor did they have any chance to see or talk to each other after that. He went away to the western part of India and she went somewhere else. She only lived a story, but he lived history.

RASA LILA

What is rasa lila?

Swami Sivananda: Sri Krishna spoke to the gopis, "You have cut all domestic ties for my sake. I cannot repay this debt of yours by serving you even for the lifetime of a celestial being. Please relieve me from this liability out of your own generosity." The Lord says in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* (10:46:4):

> The gopis have given themselves up to Me, their heart and soul. They think that I am their life. They have abandoned all their closest relatives for My sake. I ever support those who cast aside all worldly pleasures for My sake.

The secret of the rasa lila can only be understood by pure souls who are free from passion. Persons with a pure heart can understand the pure divine love of gopis. Gopis were exalted beings. They should not be judged by human standards.

The Vaishnava saints received their inspiration from this love of the gopis. Nimbarka, Jayadeva, Gouranga, Nammalvar, Sri Chaitanya, Jayadeva and Vallabhacharya founded their theology on this Vrindavan lila.

The gopis surrendered their actions at the lotus-feet of Sri Krishna. They experienced acute agony when they missed his presence even for a moment. When they heard the sweet, melodious flute of their Beloved they left their

houses while milking the cows. With minds absorbed in Krishna they rushed forth to where their lover was, without taking notice of each other.

A full and conscious realization of the grandeur and majesty of God increases all the more His supreme importance as an object of admiration and adoration in the eye of the devotee. Without a clear consciousness of the majesty and grandeur of God, devotion cannot operate as a persistent factor of spiritual development. Sage Narada says in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (sutras 20–21):

Astyevamevam.

Examples do exist of such perfect expression of bhakti. So it is. So it is. (20)

Yathaa vrajagopikaanaam.

As for instance, in the case of the cow maids of Vraja or Vrindavan. (21)

Although there have been great devotees like Sukadeva, Uddhava, Valmiki and others, Sage Narada mentions the illiterate women of Vraja, as examples of the highest devotion. They played with Krishna and identified themselves with him in complete devotion.

The gopis danced in the moonlight and played with Sri Krishna and yet they were not unconscious of his divinity, his omniscience and omnipotence even for a second. They recognized him as the soul of the universe and as their own atma.

The gopis surrendered themselves to Sri Krishna knowing him to be God Himself and the embodiment of Satchidananda. They said to Sri Krishna, "You are the primal Purusha or Purushottama, the protector of the devas. You are the witness of everything. You have taken an incarnation for the protection of the whole world."

What is the lesson of the rasa lila?

Swami Sivananda: The play of the gopis is a lesson for the worldly-minded persons, whose hearts are filled with passion, to rise above passion by listening to the divine and holy stories of Sri Krishna and the gopis of Vrindavan. These are allegories which contain profound spiritual truths.

The author of the stories which depict the lilas of Sri Krishna is the holy sage Vyasa and the narrator is his son, Sukadeva, the greatest sage and seer. Sri Krishna was a child. So there cannot be any tinge of unholiness in the lilas, attributed by some ignorant, dull-witted, worldly-minded persons.

The rishis of Dandaka forest wanted to embrace Sri Rama who told them, "You will be born as gopis of Vrindavan. You will embrace Sri Krishna who is no other than my own Self." This is the cause for the rasa lila.

Even though the gopis had physical attachment to Sri Krishna, the attachment was of the nature of supreme devotion. It was perfectly taintless too.

The gopis were absolutely unselfish. They were not jealous. The gopis were united to please Sri Krishna through their service. If the love was of a selfish type, no gopi would have tolerated Krishna's loving another gopi. The gopis did not seek a human lover but God Himself. The love of the gopis was saturated with the knowledge of divine glory. It was of a pure nature, *shuddha prem*.

The relation of the gopis with Sri Krishna is liable to be misunderstood as something physical by the sensually-minded. Rishi Narada warns the students of bhakti against mistaking the highest form of divine love for base passion. The gopis were in a drunken state. They were God-intoxicated. They were unconscious of their earthly existence. They were drowned in the ocean of divine bliss. The mind and senses ceased functioning. The external objects did not produce any impression on their minds. Divine love is true and pure. To love any creature as a creature and not as divinity embodied in it is unlawful. Impure selfish love taints the heart of man.

What is the yogic interpretation of the rasa lila?

Swami Satyananda: The rasa lila is commonly understood as the cosmic dance of Purusha and Prakriti or Ishwara and Shakti. Between these two, a constant dance or *rasa* goes on and that is samsara. Learned men have interpreted this rasa lila in various ways. This is the yogic standpoint.

In our body there is Purusha, the divine Krishna. Purusha also means the kundalini power. There is the illustration of Bhagawan Vishnu on the eternal Sheshnag. This image is based on the Puranas; it is not merely a figment of someone's imagination. Few people know that it is a reproduction of what is actually there. The Purusha arises on the Sharada Poornima night. Sharada Poornima is a great favourite of poets and means spiritual illumination. Our senses which constantly run after external objects, the gopis, give up their objectives when spiritual illumination, Sharada Poornima, comes. They hark back and unite with the Purusha within, or Krishna, and at that moment the ecstatic dance occurs, the rasa lila of Krishna and the gopis, of Purusha and the senses, or in other words the attainment of *chitta laya*, dissolution of consciousness.

When the full moon stage for Krishna-gopi love sport is set, at that time there is the call for the divine flute. This is nothing but the nada emanating from the sushumna passage when the chitta laya is complete.

It is said in the song of Dariya Sahib, "Who plays the flute under the canopy of the sky, at trikuti, where the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna occur?" These lines refer to the ida, pingala and sushumna passages, and the entire song describes the union of the senses with the Purusha, or in the language of bhakti marga, the Krishna-gopi rasa lila.

The dance has begun and it pervades every fibre of one's being. It is bliss supreme. It cannot be seen by the eyes. It can only be felt. When it occurs, 'the blind see it and the armless play the mridanga'. The gopis or senses wake up, that is, they become aware of their true function. They forget their clothes, meaning the habits they had fallen into. They forget their homes, meaning their inherent tendencies

of external perception: smell, sight, taste, touch, sound, and harken within to the call of the divine flute. Here is a paradox. The sadhakas will see the rasa lila even if they don't understand what I say, and the non-sadhakas will not see it even if they understand what I say.

The laya condition of the senses does not mean a state of complete inertia. It is like the electric wire, which is not alive when electricity is not passing through it, but is full of energy when charged. Similarly, the senses are inert and impotent because of dissipation, but when they become introvert, return to their source and unite with the Purusha, they are charged. There is tremendous power at that time.

The floods in the Yamuna river, the removal of the gopis' clothes by Krishna, this did not happen in actual life. Still, those with ecstatic experiences will maintain that it did happen and they are right. This is the mysticism of bhakti marga. The rasa lila is for the followers of the bhakti path. Yoga *melan*, or gathering, is for yogis. The names differ but the experience is the same. When one is too much with the world, it is viyoga. When one withdraws oneself and goes inside, it is yoga.

Here again is a paradox. One has attachment through detachment and detachment through attachment. When one is attached with the inner Purusha, one is detached from the world and vice versa. This is the mystical rasa lila of our scriptures. Listening to didactic discourses is dry, but going in and listening to the divine flute within is pleasant.

Why did Krishna perform the rasa lila?

Swami Sivananda: Rasa lila is divine sport, *kreeda*, with the devotees for bringing about their union with the Divine through *prem* or pure divine love. Rasa is the sweetest juice of prem. It is the manifestation of divine love or higher emotion which takes the devotee to the magnanimous height of holy communion with God.

Sri Krishna performed the rasa lila to destroy carnality by means of pure love. He taught humanity through the

rasa lila how to convert passion into dispassion and pure love, and how to wean the mind from sexual vasanas and instincts. He showed that through madhurya rasa one can effect total self-surrender or *atmanivedan*, and attain *sayujya* or absorption in God, the husband of our hearts.

Rasa lila was meant to build up the faith, to strengthen spirituality towards holiness, to improve the minds of the gopis in particular and humanity in general.

Krishna was ten years old when he performed the rasa lila. During the dance, the gopis saw Krishna only – within, without, around and everywhere. They forgot all about their homes, husbands, children and parents. Their hearts melted in Sri Krishna, the Supreme Soul. The fire of devotion brought about a fusion of hearts. Prem cemented their hearts with Krishna. The gopis were not ordinary women. They were exalted personages.

The whole rasa lila is pervaded by only pure divine love, or culmination of bhakti. It is a sacred yajna. The individual souls, the gopis, melt themselves in the Supreme Soul or Sri Krishna in their highest devotion. The two become one. It is the realization of oneness of Vedanta through para bhakti. The relation between Sri Krishna and the Vraja gopis was most sacred. There was not a tinge of carnality in it. Can there be a tinge of carnality in one who is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the three worlds, who is the womb of all created beings, who is an embodiment of purity itself, who is the protector or dharma and who is the world-teacher?

What is maharasa or cosmic dance?

Swami Satyananda: Those who have studied physics will know about the unified field theory. Maharasa is unified field theory depicted in Hindu mythology. Sri Krishna represents purusha, the gopis represent prakriti. *Go* means 'senses'. It is said in the *Ramacharitamanas*, *Go gochar jahan lagi man jai* – "When the self becomes involved with the senses, the goal of realizing the ultimate becomes obscured."

In the unified field theory, the elements of nature are centred at one point of the universe. Everything is here. That is the concept of maharasa. Maharasa is the cosmic dance of purusha and prakriti, which was in the past, which is in this age and which will continue in the future. It is eternal. This cosmic dance is a replica of the dance of Sri Krishna and the gopis. Radha is the agreeable power of God. Although she is a woman, still she is not so. She is the cosmic power. Purusha and prakriti are one and many too. It cannot be explained.

What is the sakhis' experience of rasa lila?

Swami Sivananda: The play of Radha with Sri Krishna is extremely deep and cannot be learnt from the *dasya*, servant, *vatsalya*, parent, and other bhavas. The sakhis alone are qualified for it. They alone relish this lila in full.

A sakhi does not yearn to play with Sri Krishna all by herself. She feels a keener delight in contriving Sri Krishna's dalliance with Radha. Radha is indeed the wishing creeper, *kalpalata*, of the love of Sri Krishna. The sakhis are the leaves, flowers and shoots of the creeper. The nectar of dalliance with Sri Krishna waters the creeper and the leaves take delight in it a million times more than if they themselves had been watered.

The sakhis do not long for Sri Krishna's embrace, but they exert themselves to make Sri Krishna embrace Radha. They send Sri Krishna to her for this purpose under various pretexts. They attain thereby a bliss that is a million times sweeter than that of selfish enjoyment. The unselfish devotion of these towards each other strengthens the deliciousness, or *rasa*. The sight of such unselfish, pure love pleases Sri Krishna. The love felt by the gopis is not really earthly passion which seeks sensual gratification for one's own self. The gopis abandon all idea of self and seek Sri Krishna's enjoyment. They did not yearn for their own pleasure. They embrace Sri Krishna only to please him.

Bhaktas cannot attain Sri Krishna, however much they worship him, if they only meditate on him as a divinity and do not serve him as gopis.

What was the experience of the gopis during rasa lila?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the life of Krishna, the historical Krishna, was one event. On the full moon of November when he was about sixteen years old he collected the gopis, the young girls, and they all went into the jungle and conducted rasa lila. *Rasa* means 'bliss', 'nectar', and *lila* is enactment by doing something to experience the ambrosia, the nectar. The consciousness of the gopis went so high that they became one with transcendental reality for that particular period of time as they danced.

This particular rasa lila was enacted by Krishna on the Kartik full moon, the full moon of November when the air is cool and crisp. At that time, in that freshness, consciousness or Krishna, the Purusha factor, dances with all the gopis. Through this dance creation comes forth, like the wheel moving, the spokes of the wheel all connected to the hub in the centre. When they move together, when they rotate together motion is created, and that is the beginning of creation.

Is it true that nobody can stay after dark in the place where the rasa lila was performed?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is a place in Vrindavan, in the area where Krishna is supposed to have lived, which has been maintained as a park. It is true that nobody can stay there after dark. It is surrounded by high buildings on all sides. Those who stay there are found insane the next day, if they are found alive at all. Many have tried to unravel the mystery of this place, as so many people have disappeared from there. Those who survive the night die within one month of going insane.

All the trees there are a maximum of six feet high. The contrast between the trees which surround the roads and houses and those in the park is incredible. They look ancient. Many people believe that the trees are the different gods which come alive at the time of Krishna's dance. That is the place where Krishna was supposed to have played his

dance, the rasa lila. On full moon nights, the music of the flute can be heard coming from there, as well as the sound of *ghunghroo*, ankle bells, as if many people were dancing there. There is a room in which they make up a bed and lock the door, but the next morning the bed is unmade as if somebody has rested there.

No animal stays there at night. During the day the place is full of monkeys, squirrels and birds, but by six o'clock they all leave. Inside the park there is a water tank covered with thick green algae and bubbles, but if one takes the water in a pitcher, it is crystal clear, totally pure and transparent. One can drink it.

The people who have lived to tell the tale before their death have said just one thing, "Dance! Dance!" That is all, and within a month they die. They die happy. Their eyes look as if they are seeing a different place altogether. There are many such spots around Vrindavan where one can feel that something mysterious is taking place, but one cannot quite put a finger on it.

What is the meaning of the cosmic dance?

Swami Satyananda: The cosmic dance of *purusha*, pure consciousness, and *prakriti*, manifest energy, is eternal. It is a replica of the dance of Sri Krishna and the gopis. The gopis of Vrindavan were milkmaids and Krishna's devotees. As a child Krishna used to dance and dance, and the gopi girls used to dance and dance. That dance has become immortal in Indian history and is called *maharasa* or *rasa lila*. In modern western terminology it is called the cosmic dance, the celestial dance, the divine dance.

The cosmic dance is purusha and all of prakriti dancing. Purusha is in the centre and prakriti is all around him. Prakriti and purusha are the two factors behind the entire cosmos, creation, sustenance and dissolution. Both are eternal. Once prakriti and purusha dance together, life springs into action and there is the spring of life. It is so in physical life, spiritual life, mental life and also in the psychological arena

of life. There has to be an association, a coming together of the two diametrically opposed forces. Prakriti is evolving, transforming, subject to change, but purusha is not.

In this cosmic dance the principles of the entire universe come together. Spirit and matter, purusha and prakriti, are not necessarily physical, physiological or material, they are also in the spiritual field. That is why they talk about the purusha in sahasrara; the kundalini, the shakti, in mooladhara; the five elements: ether, air, fire, water and earth; the twin forces of the sun and moon, ida and pingala; and the 72,000 nadis through which kundalini moves in the process of awakening. That is also maharasa, the cosmic play.

The cosmic dance is not an ordinary event. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam* it is depicted very well. The dance of Radha and Krishna with the gopis is eternal, universal and forever present. Even while I am speaking, in every iota of this universe, material, mental and spiritual, and maybe something else too, is dancing. Nuclear scientists say that atoms, molecules and electrons are dancing all the time. This dance is the bedrock of creation. Speech, action, feeling, experience, creation and dissolution of each and every aspect of matter is nothing but a play. The atom is one stage of matter, not ultimate matter. Although the literal meaning of the word atom is indivisible, the atom is divisible, it can be divided.

Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* that earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and ego are his eightfold companions, prakritis of mind. These eight prakritis are the lower forms of the manifest nature. There is one more prakriti, *para prakriti,* which is Radha. There is an unmanifest nature, *param buddhi*, beyond intellect. She is Krishna's transcendental companion and she represents Radha. Radha is para prakriti. The companions are the eight lower prakritis, and Krishna is the purusha who is the root of everything that exists.

In the spiritual realm, maharasa, the cosmic dance, is the process of yoga where everything dissolves into one purusha, into one Supreme Self, one great spirit. The gopis lost

themselves and became one with the form of Krishna. When he played his flute, the gopis thought he was calling them. They went running after him in the middle of the night, on Sharad Poornima. Krishna asked why they had come and tried to discourage them, but they were determined. They said, "No, you are our sole refuge. You are our centre and you are the goal of life." Krishna had no answer and ultimately the cosmic dance took place.

CHAITANYA

What is the life story of Chaitanya?

Swami Sivananda: Gouranga (1486–1533) was born in Nawadip district in West Bengal into a pious Brahmin family. He mastered all branches of Sanskrit learning such as grammar, logic, literature, rhetoric, philosophy and theology. He was a genius. He himself started a *tol*, a place of learning. He was only sixteen and the youngest professor to be in charge of a tol.

He was kind and compassionate, pure and gentle, sweet and loving. He was a friend of the poor, lived with them, served them and cheered them. He was very simple in his life. He excelled all the pandits and received many valuable gifts from pious and generous-hearted householders. He became proud of his vast erudition.

In 1509, Gouranga went on a pilgrimage to Gaya and met his guru, Ishwar Puri. A marvellous change of life came over Gouranga and he became a devotee of Sri Krishna. His pride of learning entirely vanished. He shouted, "Krishna, Krishna! Hari Bol, Hari Bol!" He laughed, wept, jumped, danced in ecstasy, fell on the ground and rolled in the dust. When he was in an ecstatic mood he never ate or drank. Ishwar Puri gave Gouranga the mantra of Sri Krishna.

The learned and the orthodox began to hate and oppose Gouranga, but Gouranga stood adamant. At the age of twenty-four Gouranga was initiated under the name of Krishna Chaitanya, usually shortened to Chaitanya.

Gouranga was a great Vaishnavite preacher and disseminated the doctrines and principles of Vaishnavism far and wide. He attracted thousands of people wherever he went. He converted all the leaders of Advaita and the heads of the Vaishnavas who came under his fold. The king of Orissa became Gouranga's ardent and devoted disciple, and recognized Gouranga as an avatar of Sri Krishna. He spent his remaining days in Puri. Disciples and admirers from Bengal, Vrindavan and other places came to Puri to pay their respects to Gouranga, who held kirtan and satsang daily.

How did Chaitanya develop the devotional aspect of his being?

Swami Satyananda: Five centuries back, a great sannyasin named Chaitanya lived in India. He was also known as *Gouranga*, fair-complexioned, because he was so fair. Gouranga was a great scholar and intellectual of his time, and he wrote an important thesis on economics. Suddenly he had a higher vision and realized that the intellect is a barrier in spiritual life. So he renounced everything and embraced sannyasa. He was intent on developing the devotional aspect of his being, and he found the system of kirtan effective for that. He used to sing God's name day and night as he travelled throughout the country. Whenever Chaitanya sang kirtan he would go into a trance and continue singing *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare Hare* for hours at a time. He always had a gathering of villagers following him, singing and dancing as they moved from one village to another.

What spiritual practice did Chaitanya use for transcending his lower mind?

Swami Satyananda: Chaitanya was a devotee of Krishna. He said that when man's thoughts are totally corrupted, and one does not find enough strength to control the mind, other forms of yoga do not really work. When the mind is

tossed by the desires and passions, even devotion to God is not honest devotion. When one is fantasizing about the sensualities of life, and the mind is filled with cruelties and terror, how can one really think about God and transcend the gross awareness of life? The easiest way is to sing His name, and other than this, there is no sadhana.

What were Chaitanya's last words?

Swami Sivananda: As a last message, Chaitanya said to his disciples: "The chanting of Krishna's name is the chief means of attaining Krishna's feet in the Kali Yuga. Sankirtan of the name is the supreme healer in the Iron Age. Sankirtan is tantamount to vedic sacrifice. It destroys sins, purifies the heart and creates bhakti. Chant the name while sitting, standing, walking, eating, in bed and everywhere. The name is omnipotent. You can repeat the name at any place, at any time.

I will tell you about the mental attitude with which the name should be recited. Hari's name should always be chanted by him who must be humbler than a blade of grass, which is trodden upon. It should be chanted by one who is more patient, forbearing and charitable than a tree, which does not cry out even when it is cut down, and which does not beg for water even when scorched to death, but on the contrary, offers its treasures to whosoever seeks it, bears the sun and rain itself but protects those who take shelter under it from rain and sunshine. It should be chanted by one who, however worthy of esteem, instead of claiming respect for himself gives respect to all, from a sense of God's immanency in all beings. He who thus takes Krishna's name gets *Krishna prem*, Krishna's love."

How did Chaitanya leave his body?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is said that when Chaitanya went to the temple in Jagannath Puri and started to dance in front of the statue, his body became one with the statue. His physical body merged with the wooden idol.

How did Mirabai express her love for Krishna?

Swami Satyananda: There are many stories of Hindu, Christian and Muslim saints who were great bhaktas. All these people were the same – they were crazy people, madmen. However, they were not bad people, they were very pure. One among them was a little Indian girl named Mirabai, who had immersed her total mind in God. She was the daughter of a great and powerful king in India during the fifteenth century.

When she was six years old, a swami came to her family and he presented this little child with an idol of Sri Krishna. Krishna is the most important figure in India. In every family his glories are sung. So a statue of Krishna was presented to her, and she kept that statue with her in total love. She began to feel that Krishna was her husband. She refused to get married, but as she came from the family of a powerful king, she had to marry. There was no choice for her.

She was given in marriage to a powerful prince, but she refused to recognize him as her husband. She said, "My husband is Krishna and nobody else." That small idol became a living reality for her, and although they tried to convert her, they could not. She broke the rules and systems of the royal family. She would compose her own songs and sing them during satsang and kirtan and go into ecstasy.

For her family, this was totally objectionable, so much so that they wanted to kill her. As a result, her husband sent her a cup of deadly poison. God only knows what happened; she did not die. In her song she wrote, "My husband sent me a cup of poison. I drank it and laughed at it." Her mother-in-law packed a cobra in a gift packet and sent it to her. When Mirabai opened it, it became the idol of Vishnu. It was not her miracle, it was the miracle of her bhakti.

One day her husband was told that she was talking in her room to somebody. He went to her door and overheard the conversation. She was saying, "My darling, whenever

you come, I am waiting for you." In a rage, her husband broke down the door with his sword in hand, and he found that she was alone. With anger he asked, "To whom were you talking?" She said, "To my beloved, to my lover, to my husband." He asked, "Who is that?" She replied, "Krishna." He said, "Krishna, he is in the temple." She replied, "No, those who love him find him in front of them."

It became difficult for her to exist, because she belonged to the most powerful royal family of India, and it was a question of family prestige. For her it was difficult as she could not go to kirtan whenever she wanted, she could not dance in ecstasy whenever she felt like it, she could not close herself away and talk to her husband all the time, and she never had any privacy with her husband. More than that, she had to wear elegant dresses when the big princes came; she could not dress casually. So she left the place which was in the Western part of India, called Chittor. It is near Kudipur, one of the beautiful fortresses of India with wonderful victory towers, all made in marble.

She walked the whole distance and finally came to Vrindavan, which is in the North of India, close to Delhi. That is the place where many centuries ago Krishna is said to have lived with the cowherd boys, played with the little children, made many types of childish mischief. That place is considered to be holy by Hindus. Even today, millions of Hindus go to Vrindavan just to touch the dust of that land and apply it to their forehead, because Krishna walked on that land.

So, she arrived in Vrindavan in search of a guru. At that time, a great guru, Maharaj Vijayakrishna Goswami, lived there. She went to meet him, but at first his disciples refused her because the guru never met any lady. Anyway, she sent a message, "I understand that there is only one Purusha, everything else is nature. Who is this guru who calls himself a spirit? Are there two spirits?" When this message was taken to the guru, he was overwhelmed. He initiated the lady into mantra and she lived there for the rest of her life.

At that time, India was ruled by Akbar the Great, the grandfather of Shahjahan and the builder of the Taj Mahal. Akbar was a great devotee of God. He was a Muslim and he respected every religion. He used to go to all the swamis and gurus. When he heard that there was a great lady who could sing the name of God and enter into samadhi or trance, he wanted to see her.

In India there is a tradition, whether you are a ruler or the wealthiest person, that if you have to go to a guru, you have to go there, you don't call him. When you go to meet a guru or a saint, you are common folk. You have to sit on the floor before the guru, no matter who you are, even if you are the commanding chief of the army.

So Akbar went to see her. He attended the kirtan and was completely overwhelmed. When she sang God's name in kirtan and bhajan, she would forget herself completely. When the mind is impure and tainted by passions, when one's mind is full of petty and insignificant worries, when even the smallest event of life becomes great, when one is not able to concentrate the mind, and when one's faith faces a crisis every time, at that time, if one sings the name repeatedly, ten to thirty times or more, one enters into a state called bhava samadhi, which is a little bit different from the samadhi of raja yoga.

Mirabai lived such a completely spiritual life that at the end of her career, her body completely dissolved into light. She did not die a natural death. She was neither burnt, nor put in a grave. She just entered into the shrine and became light. She was a simple woman, but on account of her innocent devotion to Krishna, she was able to turn matter into light. Light can be turned into matter and matter into light. How did she do it? She was able to separate the particles. There are hundreds of such people in our history.

The path of devotion is the path of affection, service, dedication, total surrender, love, giving of mind, body, soul and everything. Then what remains of you? Nothing. That nothingness is liberation; it is everything. Thousands of

songs, composed by her on intoxicated love, are sung by Hindus day in and day out. She was almost a mad woman after God.

What prompted Mirabai to leave her home?

Swami Sivananda: Once Akbar and his court musician Tansen came in disguise to Chittor to hear Mira's devotional and inspiring songs. Both entered the temple and listened to Mira's soul-stirring songs to their heart's content. Akbar was really moved. Before he departed, he touched the holy feet of Mira and placed a necklace of emeralds in front of the idol as a present. Somehow the news reached the Rana, her husband, that Akbar had entered the temple in disguise, touched the feet of Mira and even presented her a necklace. The Rana became furious. He told Mira, "Drown yourself in the river and never show your face to the world again. You have brought great disgrace on my family."

Mira obeyed the words of her husband. She proceeded to the river to drown herself. The names of Sri Krishna, 'Govinda, Giridhari, Gopal', were always on her lips. She sang and danced in ecstasy on her way to the river. When she raised her feet from the ground, a hand grasped her from behind. She turned around and saw her beloved Krishna. She fainted. After a few minutes she opened her eyes. Sri Krishna smiled and spoke these words to her: "My dear Mira, your life with this husband is over now. You are absolutely free. Be cheerful. You are mine. Immediately proceed to the bowers of Vraja and the avenues of Vrindavan. Seek me there, my child. Be quick." Then he disappeared.

Mira obeyed the divine call immediately. She walked barefoot on the hot sandy beds of Rajasthan. On her way, she was received by many ladies, children and devotees with great hospitality. She reached Vrindavan and found her flutebearer there. She went about Vrindavan begging for her food and worshipped in the Govinda Mandir which has since become famous and is now a place of pilgrimage.

Her devotees from Chittor came to Vrindavan to see Mira. Rana Kumbha came to Mira in the disguise of a mendicant, revealed himself and repented his previous wrongs and cruel deeds. Mira at once prostrated before her husband.

Is it true that Mirabai didn't have passion?

Swami Satyananda: Didn't Mirabai have passion? Why did she look upon Sri Krishna as her husband and not as her son, father or brother? She had passion, therefore she chose Krishna as her husband and lover. The words that Mirabai uses in her poetry are all charged with eroticism: *Giridhara mero sacho piya* – "Giridhara is my real husband"; *Main to Giridhara ke ghar jaoongi* – "I will go to the house of Giridhara."

The difference is that her passion was directed towards God, and so it elevated her; it took her to sublime heights. It was the same with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Even in Christianity, the idea of a conjugal relationship between man and God is present. Man is the bride and God is considered to be the bridegroom. Some Christian saints dress in black like the widows of Christ.

SURDAS

How did the bhakta Surdas transform his overwhelming sexual passions into bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: Surdas could not control his sexual passions. He was always looking at beautiful women. However, he developed a special emotion for Krishna. One day he became angry with himself. He took two thorns and blinded himself. He said, "No eyes, no women."

This man is eternal, immortal in India. His name is Surdas. Throughout the day and night, songs written by him are sung everywhere. The songs which he has written are so full of pictures. It is not as if he was thinking, but it is as if he was seeing. He had written a poem on each and every action of Krishna: how Krishna plays like a small baby, how he

smiles, how is his forehead and how are his cheeks; and when he eats curd, how it gets smeared all over the mouth, how it looks. He has drawn such clear pictures of Sri Krishna, as if he can see Krishna in front of him when writing his poems.

Nirguna-Saguna

Much was I able to grasp on my own,
But Hari, my master, the act of loving you
Was something I could never understand.
I travelled great distances to have a glimpse of you,
Forgetting that you reign everywhere
Inaccessible to thought, words and deeds:
That was the image I never sought to see.
Its traits are no traits; its form, no form;
Its no-name name they call Ram Hari.
Ocean of mercy, forgive the unbounded impertinence
That has made Sur spoil it all.

—*Surdas*

What was Surdas' experience and expression of darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Darshan is an experience of the inner spirit. Surdas, who was a blind saint, is one of India's most renowned poets. He saw visions of Krishna on his mental screen, which he described in his poems. These descriptions are unparalleled in their beauty and vividness. Surdas could clearly see all of Krishna's exploits. He would see him sporting, dancing, performing rasa lila. He would see every behaviour, mood and moment of Krishna's life in his inner experience. This means that God's grace is not received through the sense faculty. The vessel of God's grace is one's inner strength and force of spirit.

5

Pilgrimage and Sacred Places

> Transform your love, alter your vision, change your speech, search for Him from whom you have been separated since ages, for He is also searching for you.
>
> —*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

SACRED PLACES

How does a particular place become sacred?

Swami Sivananda: It is the strength of devotion that makes a common place special and sacred. Devotees turn ordinary bathing places into sacred places of purification, ordinary acts into pious deeds and words of instructions into holy texts. Their presence adds holiness to the place where they live. Their thoughts are dynamic and transform their environments, infusing them with peace and joy.

Then there are places sanctified by saints and avatars. The stones on which they sat, the paths on which they have trodden, the villages through which they have passed, the lakes in which they have bathed, the trees under which they have eaten are sanctified. Their names are even now associated with these places and objects. Guru Nanak's name is linked with Panja Saheb near Takshasila. His fingers are shown in the Kund. The bodhi tree in Gaya is associated with Buddha. Hathiaharan tank near Sitapur

is associated with Sri Rama. There are so many Hanuman kunds, Sita kunds and Lakshman kunds in various pilgrimage places.

What are your views on yatras or pilgrimages?

Swami Sivananda: Mahatmas and devotees go on pilgrimage and visit sacred places as a part of spiritual sadhana. They have different objects in view. Mahatmas come in contact with sincere devotees at various centres and impart their knowledge and experiences, and guide them. They select suitable places for meditation where they find inspiration and facility for intense sadhana. They clear the doubts of the householders, give their blessings and guide them. Devotees who take to pilgrimage get darshan of mahatmas and have their doubts cleared. They receive inspiration by seeing holy men and sacred places and develop various kinds of divine qualities by mixing with various types of people. They are trained to adopt a simple living and bear hardships.

There are some who spend their entire life in pilgrimage by wandering frequently from Kataragama in Ceylon to Mount Kailash in Tibet, Puri to Dwarika, Amarnath in Kashmir to Allahabad, Banaras to Rameshwaram.

I led the life of a wandering monk, just for a short period, in search of my guru and of a suitable place charged with spiritual vibrations for spending my life in seclusion and to do rigorous sadhana.

Why are important temples situated in remote places? Why weren't they built in places where they could be accessed easily?

Swami Satyananda: After all, if God is beyond our reach, His temples should also be beyond our reach! If you leave Rishikesh in the morning, you will reach Yamunotri by evening. It is only half a day's journey. Where is the problem? It takes half a day for you to reach Kolkata from Rikhia. If you say, "This is the situation now; it used to be

different earlier," you are mistaken. Even then, to travel from Rikhia to Kolkata was just as difficult. In those days, you had to climb a mountain and cross the Ganga by boat. Everyone had to face difficulty. It was as difficult for people from Kolkata to reach Bihar as it was for Biharis to reach Kolkata and for people from Rishikesh to go to Yamunotri. Whether you went to Rameshwaram or Gangotri or Kolkata, it was difficult everywhere. Today, the amenities are just the same. You take a taxi at four o'clock in the morning from Rishikesh and you reach Yamunotri at six in the evening, or you stay overnight at Ganesh Chatti and go to Yamunotri the next morning, have darshan and return to Rishikesh by evening. A pilgrimage to Yamunotri can be done in two days. You can visit all four dhams in five days. How can you say this is difficult?

Earlier, there were problems everywhere, not just in Yamunotri. The people of Madhya Pradesh used to visit Somnath. Mirabai went all the way from Chittor to Mathura and Vrindavan. It must have been so far, so difficult, and taken her so many days. What must she have eaten and drunk on the way, where must she have slept? This happened five hundred years ago. A young girl, the daughter-in-law of a royal family, how must she have reached there? She must have faced some difficulty. Just measure the distance of the road from Chittor to Vrindavan. How many days would it have taken her to get there? It is a road through the desert. You have to climb on a camel, walk some of the way and stop at heights. You meet all kinds of people. After that, she left Vrindavan and went to Dwarika, which is even further away. Finally she said, *Gunjanvana chhaari re, kahaan jaun Ghanashyama*. What could have happened to make her leave Vrindavan? History does not reveal this at all. History only talks of all the good and sweet stories about Mira. What was Mira's situation at the palace and in Vrindavan? *Gunjanvana chhaari re, kahaan jaun Ghanashyama* – "O, Ghanshyam! Where do I go now?" a tired and dejected woman is saying.

When Mirabai went to Saurashtra, she sang bhajans in their language. In Gujarat she would sing in the Gujarati language. Mirabai knew many languages. All this is not a part of history. She knew Hindi, Braj, Avadhi, Punjabi and Gujarati. She definitely knew Marwari and the languages from Rajasthan. She has written bhajans in all languages.

Mirabai faced difficulties. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu also faced many difficulties. In his time, it was so difficult to reach any place of pilgrimage. The person who wants no difficulties will never be able to go anywhere. The path to success is like climbing a mountain. You do not find success in your pocket. Everyone has to struggle.

When we went to Gangotri, we would carry our *khappars*, begging bowls. We would go to any house and the householders would give us two rotis and some vegetables, which we used to eat while sitting somewhere. It was a beautiful place. We should never say that it is an inaccessible place, because nothing is inaccessible. The nearer a thing is to you, the less is its value, and what is far away becomes more valuable. If Badrinath was close by, we would not even care to think about it. Since it is so far, we are discussing it. *Ati parichayaadavajnaa* – "What is close to us is less valuable." That is why it is better if it is far away.

How are people benefited by a pilgrimage?

Swami Sivananda: This question has to be answered by each pilgrim for himself. The spiritual benefit always depends entirely upon the heart's faith. Faith is the life-breath of the spirit in man. No spiritual endeavour can be fruitful without it. With it, no spiritual achievement is impossible. If a pilgrim heartily believed, was convinced, and was certain at heart that all his sins would be washed away, that he would attain moksha and get beyond the wheel of samsara, there is absolutely no reason why it should not actually prove to be so. A pilgrimage like Badri-Yatra can wash off all your sins and enable you to take great strides towards the great goal of self-realization if you have firm faith in its glory.

The test of this faith is what you are after you return from the pilgrimage. If, after the pilgrimage, you prove that you have been thoroughly purged of all your sins, that all the evil samskaras have been washed away by the holy waters of the rivers you have bathed in, and that you have been filled with the spiritual vibrations of the sublime atmosphere you have sojourned in, and if you live a pure life of righteousness, devotion, truth, love and purity, you have certainly been liberated. The pilgrimage has served its supreme purpose. Some pilgrims do rise to such spiritual heights, though their number may be small, and though they may not advertise their achievements.

Why do saints, holy men and sannyasins prefer the Himalayas to any other place in the world?

Swami Satyananda: In the Himalayas, the earth, water, air, vegetation, people – everything is pure. The atmosphere there contains more ions than anywhere else. The water flowing in the rivers is *amrit*, ambrosia. The purity that has descended from this holy place in the form of the Ganga, the Vedas, yoga and tantra, quenches the spiritual thirst of society.

When kundalini awakens, sadhus need such a place where the atmosphere is pure and they can meditate all day without being disturbed emotionally, mentally, physically or spiritually. This can be found particularly in the areas of Gangotri, Uttarkashi, Badrinath and Kedarnath. These are the four places where rishis and gurus live in absolute seclusion for many centuries in calm and quiet samadhi. The spiritual energy generated by them is so powerful that it even affects the physical ecology. Therefore, all aspirants should try to visit these places at least once in their lives.

Why are people attracted to the Himalayas? What makes them go there?

Swami Satyananda: It is the atmosphere. The influences are interpenetrating, the outer atmosphere influences the inner atmosphere and the inner atmosphere influences the outer

atmosphere. So, there is a spiritual magnetism, and there is an external magnetism as well. High up in the Himalayas just imagine the ions per cubic foot in comparison to the ions existing here at this place. The purity in the air which you inhale during pranayama and what you inhale in Bhilai, Danapur is not the same. Moreover, the Himalayas have herbs and minerals which create a magnetic atmosphere wherever you go.

When I went to Colombia, I wanted to bathe in the river but my host explained that rivers in Columbia contained dangerous fish. He went on to say, "Our Colombian rivers are not meant for anything." When the rivers are not meant for anything, what are they good for? After all the most beautiful creation of nature is a river. When you look at the river, the expanse just gives the idea of majesty and glory. But if that river is polluted by virtue of nature, then what is the point of having it?

If one goes to the Himalayas and sits down, one is in peace, even if one doesn't care for God. The nature is enough to withdraw the mind. One doesn't have to go to God, nature itself will switch the mind off.

Hemkund is the place where Guru Nanak performed tapasya in his previous birth. Across the Ganga and 14,000 feet above sea level the Sikh community built a beautiful dharamshala. They have built a heaven on earth there. Lompas is known as the valley of flowers. One should go in the month of September. There is no colour which one cannot see there, and maybe something more which one has never seen. The Himalayas and the whole valley is blooming with beauty and colour. That is enough if nature can draw the mind.

Why are the Ganga and the Himalayas places of pilgrimage?

Swami Satyananda: Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Yamunotri and other places of pilgrimage were very famous at one time. There used to be a lot of people living in these places,

including kings and saints. Only Kumaon and Garhwal were in Uttarkhand because these people's hearts are different. Even today, those who go for sadhana and sannyasa only go to Uttarkhand. If one wishes to go on a pilgrimage, one will go to these places, as the river Ganga is there.

The Ganga is India's sushumna nadi. The rishis and learned men wrote all the Puranas, the Upanishads, the *Brahma Sutras* and other holy books on the banks of the Ganga. Adi Shankaracharya has written very clearly, *Bhagavati tava teere nirmaatraashano'ham* – "Oh Devi, oh Mother, I am taking your blessings by sitting on your banks and drinking your water." The Ganga has the power to improve the mind. One begins thinking of the *Brahma Sutras* and of Sri Rama.

The Himalayas are sacred land. At one point in time, the Himalayas were not only full of greenery and abundance, but were also a well-populated kingdom. The kings of these places used to give shelter to sadhus and mahatmas. Giving shelter did not mean they had to perform the marriage ceremonies of their daughters. It was enough to give them four rotis at ten am.

There must have been someone to support the learned and spiritually advanced men who wrote such vast holy books. It is a proven fact that these books, as well as the commentaries on these books, were written in the Himalayas. Vyasa wrote his works in Badrinath. Shankaracharya's caves are located on the Saraswati, a little beyond Badrinath. The gurukuls of Rama, Lakshman, Bharata and Shatrughna were located in the Himalayas. At a distance of sixteen kilometres from Rishikesh, on the banks of the Ganga, are the Vasishtha Caves where Vasishtha used to live.

What is the significance of a dip in the Ganga?

Swami Niranjanananda: The Ganga represents purity, so a dip in the Ganga means a dip in streams of purity and reverence. Going to the Ganga is not only going to a river, it is going to a devi, a goddess, an experience of a pious state in which reverence, respect and faith, *shraddha*, are predominant. It is

a dip into one's own true feelings, which is why it assumes a special meaning.

Indians have associated a quality, a nature, a guna, with every river and every mountain, every tree, every aspect of creation whether external or internal. In the internal aspect, even the chakras have their own devis and devatas. The consciousness is controlled by Shiva, energy is controlled by Shakti. From an academic perspective and externally too, there is a governing devi and devata of every aspect of creation. The feminine force is called devi and the masculine force devata. Each deity represents a quality of nature and spirit, *prakriti* and *atma*. There is a special vedic Shanti Path for invoking peace in each and every aspect of manifest creation whether trees, animals, the sun, the planets, human beings, insects or birds, all animate and inanimate powers of creation.

These higher forces can be realized or experienced by simple means. One only has to connect with one's feeling of respect, reverence, shraddha and bhakti. One should always respect whatever one sees in nature or creation, and use discrimination, *viveka*, to manage and derive the most from a situation. Being appreciative in practical life is an important step in overcoming the restricting qualities such as guilt, apprehension or fear.

In order to lessen the intensity of the factors that inhibit growth, it is not necessary to struggle with them. It is necessary to recognize them and the role that they play in this realm. It is nature which is expressing itself, whether in you or outside you, because it has to. There is no need to justify this expression, there only needs to be recognition, appreciation and respect. By following this rule in life, you experience contentment and happiness.

Is it a special blessing to bathe in the Ganga?

Swami Sivananda: A bath in the Ganga removes sin when done with faith. The moon cools the body and mind. Satsang and darshan of mahatmas give peace. A mahatma is a living place of pilgrimage. The rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati,

Godavari, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri flow at his sacred feet. Feeding even one *jivanmukta*, one who is liberated, even once is feeding the whole world.

What are some good places to visit for meditation?

Swami Sivananda: Here are some suggestions of holy places that are worth visiting and will give great benefit to the pilgrim.

Simhachal (Andhra Pradesh): This is the next station to Waltair Junction. There are pineapples, coconuts and cashew nuts in plenty, many waterfalls and thick forests. This place is solitary and secluded. There are educated people leading godly lives. This place is quite suitable for meditation.

Puri (Orissa): Good places for meditation can be found near Chakra Tirth and by the seaside. The sea breeze is elevating.

Rainghat (Uttar Pradesh): This is on the banks of the Ganga in the Bulandshahar district. The nearest railway station is Babrala (Chandosi line). It is only three miles from Ramghat. Bhiksha can be had by sadhus and sannyasins. There is a kshetra where free food is given to sadhus, sannyasins, vanaprasthis and brahmacharis. Pukka kutirs can be had. Bihari Ghat is another place equally good near Ramghat. There is the Ganga also. Free food and kutirs can be had.

Karnavash (Uttar Pradesh): This is a place on the banks of the Ganga near Ramghat. Free food and free kutirs are available.

Achpal (Jammu and Kashmir): This is a nice solitary place in Kashmir. Bhiksha can be had from the neighbouring villages. There is a nice spring and a fine garden.

Bhrigu Kshetra (Uttar Pradesh): This is near Anupshire in the Bulandshahar district. There are good cottages on the banks of the Ganga. Free food can be had by sadhus and sannyasins. There is a kshetra.

Chitrakoot (Madhya Pradesh): Chitrakoot is a wonderful place for meditation and an ideal place for devotees of Sri Rama. It is on the banks of the Mandakini river with clear,

sparkling water. There are dharmashalas and good rooms. Tulsidas says:

> He who does japa of Sri Rama mantra here for six months
> living on milk and fruits will have darshan of Sri Rama.

Rajpur (Uttarkhand): This is at the foot of Mussoorie hills, eight miles from Dehradun. It is a cool place. There are pukka kutirs here.

Jhusi (Uttar Pradesh): This is a solitary place at the junction of the Yamuna and Ganga in Allahabad. There are good kutirs and dharmashalas. This is a beautiful place for divine contemplation. Just try for six months.

Naimisaranya (Uttar Pradesh): This is on the banks of the Gomati river. There is a railway station, good kutirs and dharmashalas. There is plenty of solitude. It is situated between Sitapur and Balamau.

Mohavan (Uttar Pradesh): This is a solitary place on the banks of the Yamuna near Mathura. Good rooms are available. Householders and vanaprasthis can also find comfortable accommodation in the above places.

What is the ideal place to do japa?

Swami Sivananda: Any holy place of pilgrimage, any place on the banks of holy rivers, caves, top of hills and mountains, confluence of rivers, huge holy forests, below the ashvattha, or peepal, tree, tulsi gardens, temples, seashore and solitary places, are all recommended as places fit for purashcharana. If none of these can be easily found, it may be done in one's own house, but japa done in one's own house will produce only as much effect as is common under ordinary circumstances. In holy places the effect will be one hundred times more. On river banks it will be one lakh times more.

How is the place of a temple chosen?

Swami Satyananda: In India, temples are not built just with money. There should be a magnetic force, a divine vibration in the places where temples are built. The stone of the idol is

not God. There is a force within the idol. Every idol, whether of Shiva, Kali or Ganesha, has a force within it. If there is a force, then build a temple. This is the first rule for building a temple.

Many places on Earth, for some reason, have a particular force or vibration. It may be because it is the site of a great soul's samadhi, or someone may have done some ascetic practice there, or when God incarnated on Earth He may have done something there. There is a reason why one place has more energy than another place. In the same way that one can notice a difference between people – someone is very intelligent and another is very foolish – one can also be aware that one place is ordinary and another is special.

Temples are built at such special places. Someone experiences the vibrations and is given the command to build a temple there. This is the main reason to determine where temples are erected. There must have been a great soul who had carried out some kind of worship and who died there. A temple dedicated to the devi or devata who was worshipped in that place is built. These are the reasons for building temples. Then, there is the *thakurbadi*. That is a small temple in one's house where one performs daily worship.

A temple is a special place, yet it is not personal. This is true not only of Hindus, but Catholic churches and Muslim mosques are also not considered to be personal places. They are social places. There are many mosques and churches built over a saint's residence, for example Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi. There are so many places in Bihar where a mosque was built over the residence of a mahatma and people started saying their prayers there. Important temples and spiritual centres are all centres of energy. In India, there are sixty-four places dedicated to Devi and twelve centres dedicated to Shiva. Besides these, the Vaishnava sect has its own places, like Dwarikadheesh, where Mirabai merged into light, or Jagannath Puri, where Chaitanya Mahaprabhu merged into light. A temple is, therefore, a place of worship and a place where one experiences energy.

KUMBHA MELA

What is the Kumbha Mela?

Swami Satyananda: Every twelve years, when the sun is in kumbha rashi, there is a great gathering called *Kumbha Mela*, a communion of saints and sages on both the invisible and visible planes. A planetary conjunction and communion takes place on the non-physical or invisible plane. During those three days, millions of Hindus bathe at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers. Saints and living sages, sadhus and sannyasins, monks, the heads of monasteries or *akharas*, the *nagas*, naked swamis and babas, holy men and women all gather in their hundreds of thousands with their tents, fires, flags, trishuls, their pomp and show.

Sadhus, sannyasins and holy men are powerful. They live alone, read the *Bhagavad Gita*, do their sadhana, disciplines, pooja and worship. Unlike other religions, sannyasins have made a decision not to enter politics or become politicians. Sannyasins should neither assist in politics nor oppose politics; in short, they should have nothing to do with politics. The power of sannyasins in India is great, but they are only concerned with God and with humanity.

The communion takes place on two planes every four years. Four places have been designated for this meeting: Haridwar and Prayag in Uttar Pradesh, Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, and Nasik in Western India where the river Godavari originates. It is held at exactly the same time as the celestial communion, according to strict zodiacal signs, when the sun enters Aquarius. This important time period of three to six hours is calculated and announced throughout India. To bathe in the Ganga or at the confluence of the rivers at that time is auspicious, and millions go there to bathe. It is such a large-scale event that the Indian Army and the police force are called upon to organize it. Trains, planes, buses and cars from every part of India go to the Kumbha Mela. Hindus come, not only from India but from every part of the world – Africa, England and America. Illiterate

and educated, the poor and millionaires, even boys and girls of the pop culture come. The main feature of this great gathering is that renunciates from the three sampradayas of sannyasins, vairagis and udasins gather there. These three sampradayas have eight main institutions. When they bathe in the Ganga they carry their own flags and banners at the head of their procession.

History relates that when the Huns invaded India, Harshvardhana, the ruler of India, was in Prayag observing the kumbha. In India, the Kumbha Mela is an ancient tradition from the pre-Buddhist, pre-Jain period. We are aware of this idea of communion, which takes place on the earthly plane to coincide with the communion taking place on the higher plane of the eighty-eight thousand rishis, saints and sages, including Vasishtha, Valmiki, Yajnavalkya, Bharadvaja and Agastya. The number is precise. Eighty-eight thousand seers, sages and munis meet on a higher level and we synchronize with that meeting by observing the Kumbha Mela.

What is the origin of the Kumbha Mela?

Swami Sivananda: The Maha Kumbha Mela is held during March to May once in twelve years at Haridwar, Allahabad, Ujjain and Nasik. There are fixed days during the period of the Mela for bathing in the Ganga and a bath on those days is considered sacred. Millions of people assemble there during these months.

Ambrosia, the nectar which confers immortality, was kept in a vessel, *kumbha*. To get the nectar, there was a tough fight between the asuras and devas for twelve days. During the fight, the kumbha fell on Earth four times at Haridwar, Allahabad, Ujjain and Nasik. At the end of twelve days when the sun was in Mesha rasi and Jupiter in Vrishaba rasi, Vishnu appeared and brought peace to one and all by distributing the nectar to deserving people. The Mela comes once in twelve years equivalent to twelve days of the devas. The *Vishnu Purana* says: "A bath in the Ganga on the kumbha

day will give the spiritual benefits of one lakh of pradakshina around the Earth."

In olden times the Kumbha Melas were started for moral and spiritual upliftment. Many mahatmas, sages, yogis and spiritual preceptors who were practising tapas and silent meditation in the caves of the Himalayas and forests assembled in these places during these days to impart spiritual instructions to the thirsting aspirants and householders. There was not much noise in those days. People went with *shraddha*, faith, and *bhava*, feeling, to have darshan of these mahatmas and to imbibe the teachings of those highly elevated souls. Religious classes were held, kathas and discourses were conducted and lectures were delivered by great men of practical experience. Real, sincere aspirants were initiated into the mysteries of yoga and kaivalya.

Is a visit to the Kumbha Mela a worthwhile sadhana?

Swami Sivananda: During these months people attempt to amass wealth in a variety of ways, trying their level best to become rich. The sanctity of the functions has vanished. The real spirit is gone, and it has become a mere fair. Real, silent mahatmas do not wish to attend the Mela. The Kumbha Mela or the All-India Religious Conference of a magnanimous, sublime nature of yore wherein rishis, sages and yogis assembled to exchange their thoughts and spiritual experiences and to disseminate spiritual knowledge to aspirants and householders at large has now degenerated into a big *tamasha* or a big fair with tumultuous noise, uproar and merry-go-rounds.

Nowadays, there is not much to be seen in the Kumbha Mela except crowds, noise, dirt, filth, quarrels and fights. The government has built a separate police station with a Reserve Police for this purpose. No religious propaganda can be done. People's minds become restless and agitated in the enormous crowd. They have to wander amidst all sorts of people and spend sleepless nights with poor accommodation.

They undergo a lot of trouble through infectious diseases that are common in all crowded places. People enjoy some show, colour, sound, blows and then return home with nothing substantial after spending money in useless directions. Yet millions of people are in anticipation of obtaining joy, bliss and spiritual benefits by attending the Melas. This is the trick of maya through the force of curiosity to delude people who have lost their power of discrimination.

As there is abundant free food for sadhus and sannyasins, beggars in orange robes flock in countless numbers to have an easy comfortable living for these months. Money is simply wasted. Worldly people are deceived. They are not able to find real spiritual souls. Systematic organized religious preaching must be done. Then the Kumbha Mela will become a blessing to humanity at large.

Worldly people nowadays entertain foolish ideas about a mahatma. To deceive them and amass wealth, many people put on geru cloth, grow jata and beards, and young boys and men throw away their clothes and loin cloth and walk naked in the midst of householders and pose as big *jitendriya yogis*, yogis who have conquered their senses. Many learned men waste their precious time in unnecessary discussions and sectarian quarrels and pass for jivanmuktas. People should not be carried away by the external appearances. They take a physically nude sadhu for a great mahatma in the beginning, but after close contact they lose faith in him. What is wanted is mental nudity, which is complete eradication of vasanas, egoism. Do not be deceived by appearances. A mahatma cannot be studied by a simple casual talk for a day or two, but must be closely lived with to make a correct inference.

Though the place may be filled with many sorts of people, yet there are some highly advanced spiritual souls, mandaleshwaras and learned pandits of the Sanatana Dharma Sabha, who untiringly work and clear the doubts of all aspirants and guide them on the spiritual path. They work for the spiritual good of the public. Again in some silent corners, one will find some great virakta mahatmas and tyagis. Such

great souls must be hunted out among the sadhus, sannyasins, yogis and naga babas. They will guide one in the right path. By having darshan of such mahatmas and obtaining spiritual instructions one will be spiritually benefited.

Grihasthas should not ask so many questions as to the previous name, caste, creed, qualifications, relations, age of sannyasins. Only if they talk on philosophical points with a view to clearing their doubts can they benefit from satsang with sadhus. Satsang is the easiest and quickest means to change the worldly mind towards the spiritual path and to overhaul thoroughly the negative and wrong samskaras. Live in the company of wise sadhus, as their company itself is the spiritual education. Serve them with bhakti and shraddha.

When going to Haridwar for the Kumbha Mela, make a point of completing some lakhs of japa during this time. Japa done in holy places on such occasions will have a marvellous influence and bestow spiritual benefits. For fifteen or thirty days observe anushthana. Have milk and fruits only. Do plenty of japa. Study the *Bhagavad Gita*, Upanishads, *Ramayana* and *Bhagavata*. Have satsang and hear the words of great men. Observe mouna. Do not wander hither and thither. Do plenty of charity. Charity destroys a multitude of sins. Serve the sadhus and mahatmas. Approach them with bhakti and fruits in hand. Pray for spiritual instructions. Serve and help the sick. There is a good opportunity to do nishkama karma yoga. Such spiritual sadhana must be practised at this sacred Mela. Generally pilgrimages to sacred places should be performed with the above discipline. Every year people go to Rishikesh and Haridwar, Badrinath and other places. Only when they observe the above discipline will they derive the benefits of performing *yatra* or pilgrimages.

Who are the people going to the Kumbha Mela?

Swami Niranjanananda: The Kumbha is one of the largest spiritual congregations in the world. The Poorna Kumbha or the 'full' Kumbha is held every twelve years and the

scriptures say that during this time, the gods, goddesses, siddhas and great souls from all realms visit the Mela in their subtle body. The place no longer remains just the Kumbha City, but becomes the city of gods, of liberation and grace.

There are two kinds of people in the world: householders and ascetics. Both groups gather at the Kumbha Mela. The first group is engaged and involved in society, family, professional life, ambitions, aspirations, obligations and commitments. The other group includes the renunciates, tyagis, sannyasins, naga babas, acharyas and mahamandaleshwaras of different ashrams and centres.

Not everyone who goes to the Kumbha Mela is seeking emancipation or *moksha*. It is enough for householders to have the *shraddha*, faith, that 'By visiting the Kumbha all our sins will be washed away. By taking a bath in the Sangam we will receive the grace of God and the blessings of saints. Our unhappiness, lack, pain and poverty will all disappear. Maybe I will discover someone who can become the medium for divine intervention in my life, to improve the quality of my life so I can become more pious, loving, kind and compassionate.'

Inspired by this sentiment, householders take part in the Kumbha Mela in millions. The poorest of the poor and the oldest of the old walk with faltering feet, carrying bundles on their heads and shivering in the cold. What is the force that is attracting them to the confluence, to the mela? The force is faith. There is no power stronger than faith. If a person has faith, the greatest mountain can be crossed. If there is no faith, one will accept defeat after walking ten steps.

There are also acharyas, mandaleshwaras and mahamandaleshwaras who live like kings, yet are infinite storehouses of knowledge, like walking knowledge banks. When they speak, they quote from the Puranas, the *Rig Veda*, the *Atharva Veda*, the Upanishads and the smritis. Through their attainments, new understandings, thinking and behaviour have developed. What they do with their attainment is up to them. They may choose to keep the knowledge

to themselves or disseminate it. Nevertheless, on the strength of *jnana*, wisdom, they have been able to develop new perspectives on life and acquire an understanding of the path of virtue and dharma. Not only do they try to follow this path themselves, they also inspire others to do so.

Householders, both poor and rich, come to the Kumbha Mela with some desire or wish, and the motor that drives that desire is shraddha, faith. If the motor of faith does not exist, then one will not be able to focus on the wish or desire. If one wants to see living faith, if one wants to see faith and devotion walking and moving in action, there is no better place than the Kumbha.

After all, thirty million people go there with pure faith, devotion and feeling. This is not baseless. Their devotion and faith is the energy that takes them across the sea of suffering and establishes them in the kingdom of grace and peace. Whether a householder or an ascetic, in essence all come to attain the compassion and grace of God, from which they receive inner strength, love, the power of endurance to face the struggles of life, and the learning to always keep smiling.

Is the Kumbha Mela a time when spiritual power is generated and distributed to the Earth?

Swami Satyananda: Just as electricity is generated and distributed from a powerhouse, similarly, the sannyasins who serve in the ashrams, and the few recluses who live in the solitude of the Himalayas, are actually the powerhouses. In their seclusion they reach such spiritual heights, such depths of sadhana that they become the generators of spiritual power. Sannyasins derive their energy from these power sources and distribute their thoughts and their energy among the people of the world. These sadhus and sannyasins may be unknown, but they are not just a few in number.

The Kumbha Mela is the occasion for spiritual congregation and the communion of the jnanis. At that time, hundreds of thousands of tapasvis, avadhootas, udasins,

vaishnavas and sannyasins descend from their mountain hideouts in the Himalayas. The naked nagas and the *bhairavis*, or naked women, also come out of their caves to be part of the Kumbha Mela. Only a real spiritual person can know the worth of these great souls.

These sadhus do not go to the Himalayas to do sadhana in seclusion until their respective gurus give them the proper clearance. My guru told me in 1947 that my time had not yet come and that I would have to wait for forty years. One cannot be self-willed in this matter, one has to wait for the command. If the guru is asked he may say yes, but there is a difference between that and the command the guru gives on his own. The guru does not give the green signal to just anyone. Sadhana is not a matter of merely one lifetime. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (6:45):

> *Prayatnaadyatamaanastu yogee samshuddhakilbishah;*
> *Anekajanmasamasiddhastato yaati paraam gatim.*
>
> But, the yogi who strives with assiduity, purified of sins and perfected gradually through many births, reaches the highest goal.

Who attends the Kumbha Mela and why?

Swami Satyananda: Kumbha Melas are held in Haridwar, Prayag and Tryambakeshwar. Every twelve years, when the sun is in a particular alignment with the stars, there is a Kumbha Mela. Each city's celebration dates are calculated in advance according to a special positioning of the sun in the zodiac. It is said that when this happens, the water in that place becomes like nectar.

Let me tell you a little bit about the Kumbha Mela. It is colossal, beyond imagination. Hundreds of thousands of people gather there: people in black, people with flags, people who are naked, meat eaters, bidi smokers, people belonging to all cults and sects. There are three types of sannyasins: sannyasins, udasis and vairagis. Vairagis wear white clothes, udasis wear black clothes and sannyasins wear

geru. Hundreds of thousands of people come to participate in this event. People from every community, every religion and every language attend. Gujarati sadhus, Marathi sadhus, Bengali sadhus, Punjabi sadhus, Madrasi sadhus – all the sadhus come. There are all sorts of people: those who eat just once a day, those who eat only fruit, those who smoke *ganja*, marijuana, and those who drink alcohol – all kinds of people visit. Satsang goes on day and night.

In the Niranjani Akhara, to which we belong, many well-educated people come to take sannyasa. The Puri Shankaracharya was the principal of the Sanskrit college. The faithful come from different villages; a minimum of forty to fifty million people visit the Mela. They bathe in the confluence of the three rivers, the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Saraswati.

If you get an opportunity, do go and visit and you will know what the Kumbha Mela is all about. Without going there, you will not be able to understand it. It feels as though the whole of India is huddled in a single place. The government makes all the necessary arrangements. Security officers are on duty. Special trains are added to increase the carrying capacity. Important people attend. People who are fabulously rich attend.

During the Mela, a new head or *acharya* is elected at the different akharas. Each group elects a new head and announces the name of the acharya who will henceforth be responsible for the running of the akhara. The result is formally given to the government. Thereafter, the logistics are then decided upon, such as who will be the first flag bearer: the Juna akhara, the Niranjani akhara or the Mahanirvani akhara. There is a line-up and the order is decided beforehand. Each akhara marches with its accompaniment of a band, horses, elephants, pandits, trident holders, mantra chanters and kirtan singers. First the sadhus bathe and then everybody else. It is very peculiar.

Where should one go to see the Kumbha Mela?

Swami Satyananda: The largest Kumbha Mela is held in Haridwar or maybe Prayag. If you want to see the Kumbha Mela, see the one at Haridwar. However, it is extremely difficult. Go along with a sadhu, or you will find it very difficult. It is overcrowded. It feels as though everyone has gone crazy. You forget whether you have eaten, whether you are tired or whether you have slept. If you feel hungry, walk into any tent and you are sure to be fed. There is no simple food, only puris, malpuas, halva, all the Indian delicacies and sweets. Everybody feeds everybody, everybody is generous.

There is a sect called the nagas. They are completely naked. They eat there, perform their ablutions there and sleep there, and people come and take the soil and apply it on their foreheads. People have amazing faith. Those troubled by skin disease, cancer or any other ailment come there with the hope that they will be cured. The nagas are very uncouth; they are not gentlemen. They will shout abusively, "Hey, you goddamned fellow, get out of here!" They do not speak the language of cultured people. They will say, "Is this your father's house? Why are you sitting here? Move away from here!" They speak like louts, but still people go to them. People from all over the world have faith in them. Catholics go there, Buddhists go there, Jains go there, wealthy people go there, all kinds of people go there.

When the sun is in a specific position so that it is in alignment with the zodiac sign of *Kumbha*, Aquarius, the Kumbha Mela takes place. It is said that when Garuda was escaping with the pot of nectar, he was being chased by demons. While running, he spilt some of the nectar in four places and these are the four places where the Kumbha Mela is held. People go there to resolve their problems and have their wishes fulfilled. It is an occasion when you can have darshan of saints from every cult and sect from all over India, from the most traditional to the most modern. Every saint and sadhu from the top of the Himalayas to the tip of Kanyakumari goes there.

With thirty to forty million people all in one small area there are unimaginable difficulties. In the Kumbha Mela, VIPs and ministers are not allowed. If they come, they have to come incognito. They cannot come with their flagged cars and entourage. There is a law against it. Once Jawaharlal Nehru attended and there was a stampede in which many people were killed. Since then, there has been a law put in place that whoever visits will go there as an ordinary person. They cannot go as chief ministers or presidents or heads of state. The government has nothing to do with it and rightly so; after all, what is the point of these positions in a holy place?

How far back does the tradition of the Kumbha Mela go?

Swami Satyananda: No matter what one may say about the British, one thing is for certain, they never interfered with religion. Among the Mughals, there was no interference in the reign of Shah Jehan and Jehangir, but in the time of Aurangzeb the interference began because he wanted to establish himself. Humayun was, of course, too weak. Akbar was tolerant and allowed everybody in his palace.

In the time of Akbar, Ramnavami was celebrated, all the festivals were celebrated, and all the people participated. Tulsidas, Mira and Ramdas were born during the reign of Akbar. Poets and poetry flourished, and this is only possible in a society where religion is not suppressed. In Akbar's time there was freedom, so people expressed themselves freely, and this is the reason why Tulsidas and Mira were able to express themselves. There is record of an instance where Akbar himself went for Mirabai's satsang.

In the same manner, during the British rule the Kumbha Mela still took place. The Kumbha Mela is very old, it dates back to the time of Raja Harshvardhan who went to the Kumbha Mela and donated all his personal wealth; not the state treasury, but his personal wealth. He used to sleep on the floor on a simple sheet and he and his queen ate from leaf plates and earthen pots. It is recorded in history. Chinese visitors to his court have written about it. At that

time there was a very close relationship between India and China. There were many travellers, like Fa-hien and Huien Tsang, from China. The Kumbha Mela took place in the time of Buddha too.

The Kumbha Mela's history is not recent, it is very old; it is described in the Vedas. The Vedas were written before Buddha's time. There is a beautiful description of the Kumbha Mela in the Vedas. There is also a description of River Saraswati. In those days, the Saraswati used to flow above ground. Today it is not visible; you can only see the two rivers, Ganga and Yamuna. The flow of Saraswati is now hidden. In the vedic times, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati all flowed. Now Saraswati has gone underground. Prayag is situated at the confluence of the three rivers and it is also called *Triveni*, which means three flows.

Prayag is the king of all pilgrimages. Many yajnas have taken place there. More recently, the Muslims have given it the name Allahabad. In the word prayag, *yag* means 'yajna'. Whenever people want to perform a *yajna* or sacrificial rite, they do it at the confluence of rivers in a place like Karnaprayag, Rudraprayag, Devprayag, Sonprayag. Karnaprayag is on the way to Kedarnath. Devprayag is close to Rishikesh. Every prayag is at a confluence of rivers.

SHIVA'S SACRED PLACES

Where are Shiva's places of pilgrimage?

Swami Satyananda: In India, Shiva is very popular. There is a particular sect, philosophy and tradition called Shaivism, which is strong in Kashmir and South India. Many hundreds of important books have been written on this philosophy and symbology. Shaivites in India believe that the easiest way to approach the reality is to worship Shiva. There are twelve important centres of Shaivism throughout India. One is in Kathmandu and is known as Pashupatinath. *Pashu* means 'animal' and *pati* means 'master', which is symbolic of the yogi who has gained mastery over his animal nature.

Another centre of Shaivism is situated in the southern corner of India, in Rameshwaram. One of the most important centres is in Deoghar, in Baidyanath. It is such an important place that Indians call it the criminal court of Shiva. A criminal court is a place where all kinds of problems are cleared up quickly.

What is significant about Rameshwaram?

Swami Satyananda: The Rameshwaram temple is right on the seashore and there is a train from Rameshwaram to Dhanushkoti. Sri Rama crossed over to Lanka from Dhanushkoti. Dhanushkoti is where the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea meet. The steamer for Sri Lanka leaves from this place. It is called Tallaiya Pier.

In Rameshwaram, there is a Shivalingam known as Balukalingam. It is made of sandstone. It is not a Narmadeshwar lingam. Rama had laid the foundation for a Shivalingam that was made of sandstone. What we see today was made much later and people worship that.

What is the link between Rameshwaram and Ganga Darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Rameshwaram has a special connection with Ganga Darshan. It was in Rameshwaram that Sri Swami Satyananda had the vision of Ganga Darshan in 1950 when he had gone for darshan with his guru Swami Sivananda. At that time he had the vision of a river, a hillock, and buildings on that hillock. When in 1977 the architectural plans and designs of Ganga Darshan were made and shown to him, this memory flashed before his eyes, and he said, "I have seen this construction, this place, this ashram before, in my vision in Rameshwaram in 1950. At that time I did not connect it to my life, I thought it was just something, but now I realize that the vision which I had in Rameshwaram was an indication of my work." He saw Ganga Darshan as it is today, and later he described that in the same way he saw Rikhia when in Tryambakeshwar.

What was your experience at Mahakaleshwar?

Swami Satyananda: In Ujjain, there is the Mahakaleshwar temple where Indra was cured of leprosy. In the Bhairava temple in Mahakaleshwar, one has to offer alcohol to the deity. This is where Bhairava is worshipped. Without alcohol the pooja is not complete. Once I went with a person who was a staunch Vaishnava. He was adverse even to the word 'alcohol'. I said, "All right, you don't go, I will." I offered a bottle, no problem. The idea was to have darshan and as I was already there, I might as well offer the bottle to God. It is said without that, one's wish remains unfulfilled. Shiva does not answer any prayers if one does not make an offering. Bhairava drank the whole bottle. Not just mine, but the offerings of all the people who were there. He drank everybody's offering. Two hundred years ago, during the British rule, people said, "There has to be a tube or a pipe behind the idol." They dug thoroughly and could not find anything. Beyond the throat, there is no opening or passage. Beyond the slight opening of the mouth, there is stone, so where does all the alcohol go?

If you can feed your child milk with your hands, then why not feed God with your hands? It feels good. You do not get the feeling that a priest or a spirit is around.

The Mahakaleshwar jyotirlingam used to be called Ujjaini. There is a story in the Uttarakanda of the *Ramacharitamanas* about a Brahmin child who took birth in Ujjaini. Guru Sandipani belonged to this place. Sandipani was a renowned Brahmin from Varanasi; however, for some reason he was unable to see eye to eye with the other Brahmins and teachers there, so he left Varanasi and went to Ujjaini. This is where he taught Sri Krishna. Sri Krishna's guru was Sandipani. Sri Krishna went from Mathura and Vrindavan to Ujjaini, and that is where he received his education.

That is the speciality of Mahakal Bhairava; give him the drink and perform abhisheka with the ashes from the funeral pyres.

Who goes to Kedarnath?

Swami Satyananda: Many years ago, I went to Kedarnath in the Himalayas, where there was a solitary temple built by Adi Shankaracharya. There was snow everywhere; it was freezing cold and extremely quiet. Something happened to my mind and I lost myself. I did not do anything; the atmosphere was such because there had never been sound vibration there. The only people who go there are a few hundred devoted pilgrims during the summer who offer worship to Shiva.

O Lord Kedarnath of Uttarakhand!
Thou art a jyotirlinga.
Thy temple is on the banks of Mandakini.
Thou art as pure as the Himalayan snow.
Thou art the source of light and life.
Thou art the dispeller of ignorance.
I have come pure in heart
To Thy holy presence.
Open Your doors.
Direct towards me
Thy gracious look.
O Jyoti that burns the desires.
Thou art my Lord, my Saviour,
My all, my King, my Life.
Kindle the light of love
In my heart.
Prostrations unto Thee, O Lord.
Om Namah Shivaya.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

What was your experience of the pilgrimage to Kedarnath?

Swami Satyananda: The river Mandakini keeps on flowing, like the fluid current of consciousness beneath all mutable names and forms. It is verily a river of nectar. Its mere sight gives rest and relaxation to the eyes, music to the ears, coolness to the body, happiness to the heart, and purity and bliss to the soul. This boisterous river, in the exuberance

of its youth, has been cutting its way through these proud mountains, just as the Mandakini of the mind pierces through the self-righteous pride of sadhus!

Upon this very route did the five Pandavas, their wife, Draupadi and a lone dog walk many millennia ago . . . This path is timeless and eternal. Everyone will have to walk on it sooner or later. Life is like a night spent at a wayside inn. After spending the night there, we'll look for another inn and eat, drink and rest there. And soon it will be time to leave that one as well. The traveller who is anxious about this coming and going will want to stay on in the same inn. But once his time is up, he will be booted out.

Therefore, O traveller! Go on walking despite the sweat, the fatigue, the hot sun, the cold wind, the gnawing hunger and the agonizing thirst. Keep on walking, for Kedar, your grand destination, is near.

Loaded with blankets upon blankets like mountain mules, leaning on sticks like blind men, and hobbling along like lame men, everyone was somehow dragging himself forward, shouting 'Jaya Kedarnath' now and then. We reached a height of 10,500 feet, the same as that of Gangotri. The mountain peaks encircling the path on three sides are sloping, not vertical as in Gangotri. That is why these slopes are amply covered with snow and it is much colder than in Gangotri.

Kedarnath at 12,750 feet high with sloping snow-covered mountains on three of its sides. Not a single tree or shrub is to be seen. Kedar is a symbol of courage and valour; a challenge to the long-cultivated laziness of humankind. Millions of brutish egos have been sacrificed in its courtyard.

The lingam in Kedarnath is rough and jagged. A critical archaeological evaluation suggests that it must have been an idol at some point in time, which for some reason was chiselled into its present shape of a Shivalingam. The temple seems to be from the post-Ashoka period. Two heads are carved on the right wall of the temple. The heads have large ears, and their chests have been chiselled out. The towering

Himalayan peaks all around have been the silent witnesses of antiquity. All these wondrous sights are nectar for the eyes.

Could you talk about your pilgrimage to Kedarnath?

Swami Niranjanananda: Gaurikund is at the base of the Kedarnath mountain. *Gaurikund* means 'the tank of Gauri'; it is Parvati's place. It has a hot water spring where Gauri is believed to have performed tapasya. The water is collected in a tank and people bathe in this *kund*, a natural hot bath. From Gaurikund, pilgrims take horses, or palanquins, or depend on their legs to go to Kedar.

In the temple, the main Shivalingam is different from the usual, oval Shivalingams. The Shivalingam in the Kedarnath temple is a huge, triangular rock, which looks like the hump of a bull, protruding from the ground. It is massive, about six feet by four feet, and is simply magical.

The pandit performing the arati was moving like a dancer, holding the lamp in his hands and moving them in an elaborate and beautiful manner, accompanied by the chanting of mantras. He started the arati first with incense, waving it in a dance movement, using hand mudras. Then he lit a single flame, then a double flame, then a triple flame, he kept increasing the number of flames until it came to eleven. These eleven flames represented the eleven aspects of Shiva. Finally, he took the big, pyramid-style lamp, and performed the arati with that, illuminating the entire sanctum sanctorum.

What are the most important seats of Shiva worship?

Swami Satyananda: In India, Kashmir is considered to be the historical scene of Shiva worship. Then, one third of South India is considered to be the second important seat of Shiva worship. In Tibet there is a big, snow-capped mountain called Mount Kailash which is in the shape of Shivalingam. Before China took over Tibet, Hindus used to go to Mount Kailash at least once in their lifetime.

At the bottom of Mount Kailash there is a great lake called Manasarovar. It is such an inspiring spot. There is no

temple, no priest, no idol and no habitation. It is all wild. On the northern side of the lake, Mount Kailash rises thousands of metres above the snow-capped ranges. One who goes there can feel clearly that there is someone watching, an invisible presence, which is absolute. The yoga of Shiva has emanated from this spot. The sixty-four scriptures on tantra are dialogues between Shiva and Parvati. Shiva is considered to be a sannyasin living in the wilderness, having no home, always remaining in the lotus posture in samadhi.

KAILASH AND MANASAROVAR

How did you journey to Kailash?

Swami Satyananda: Since early childhood I had thought of making the sacred pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, the holiest of the holy, but the actual plan didn't formulate itself in my mind until one summer when I was walking from Rishikesh to Badrinath. Within a few days I met several other sannyasins who were headed in the direction of Kailash, and we decided to make the journey together.

Badrinath is 11,000 feet high, and as we travelled higher the path became more difficult to follow and the cold increased. We could only cover a few miles per day under such conditions, but still we went on and on, crossing mountain after mountain. We had very little supplies with us and accepted bhiksha, mostly flour of roasted grains or a few potatoes, when they were offered. The nights we passed in small villages, if possible, and otherwise in caves or sometimes even out in the open when no other accommodation presented itself.

The most important part of the pilgrimage to Kailash is the thirty mile circumambulation around the base. We passed several days in the Kailash valley before setting out for Lake Manasarowar, fifteen miles to the southeast. The beauty and holiness of this lake which are well described in the scriptures continue to attract pilgrims from all over the world. It lies 16,000 feet above sea level and is surrounded on all sides by

black granite mountains whose peaks glisten with snow. After bathing in the lake we sat in contemplation for several hours, inspired by its tranquil beauty and spiritual vibrations.

How does one experience Shiva's abode at Mount Kailash?

Swami Niranjanananda: Kailash is majestic white and triangular in shape, like a pyramid. In front of it is Nandi mountain made out of black granite, looking exactly like a bull, the vehicle of Shiva. From the back one can see the tail, the hump, the head, the horns; one can visualize each and every aspect of Nandi in this granite rock, as if millennia ago somebody had carved the image of a bull on this massive rock.

To the left of Kailash is another mountain known as Ashtapad, which is holy for the Jain community, the followers of Mahavir. In the Jain tradition there has been a lineage of twenty-four gurus. The first guru is called Rishabhdeva. They say that this Ashtapad mountain is the place where Rishabhdeva, who is also an incarnation of Shiva, attained his siddhi and his moksha. It is an important place of pilgrimage for the Jain community, like the holy Mecca for Muslims and Kailash for the Hindus. Ashtapad means eight steps.

The journey of Kailash begins from the south side. Then it goes to the west side, then the north side, and then the parikrama stops; it ends there. If one looks at Mount Kailash from the south side, it looks like a house. One sees steps, windows and doors in the rock, as if this is the accommodation of Shiva and Shakti: the window of their room, the door of their room, the steps leading to their abode. When one has a glimpse of Kailash from the western side, one sees natural formations that look like elephants, horses, chariots, people standing in reverence, as if that is the darbar of Shiva, with people waiting to see him, to greet him, to meet him.

If one sees Kailash from the north side, it looks as if many clouds have been put on top of each other, layer upon

layer; that's how one sees Kailash, as layers of clouds. Or like ripples in the water, and one sees the waves, one after the other.

From the east side one cannot have darshan of Kailash. The east side is like the family quarters of old palaces, the rani vasa, where only females and children would live and males were not allowed to visit. What does one find on the east side? One sees the Gaurikund where, according to myth, Parvati takes her bath every day. One sees Chinchilla Kund, where the helpers of Parvati live and take their baths. On the east side one finds two mountains. One is known as Ganesha mountain, *Ganesha Parvata*, and the other is known as Kartikeya mountain, *Kartikeya Parvata*. These two mountains are named after the sons of Shiva and Parvati.

What was your experience at Mount Kailash?

Swami Sivananda: The Kailash hills in Tibet are a huge range with a central, beautiful, naturally carved and decorated shining peak, eternally clad with silvery snow. They are 22,980 feet above sea level, although some take the height to be 22,028 feet. One particular peak, Mount Kailash, is in the form of a natural, huge Shivalingam, a symbol of the gross universal form of God, which is worshipped from a distance as the form of Shiva. There is neither a temple nor a poojari nor a daily pooja there.

There is no place on all this fair Earth which can be compared with Kailash for the marvellous beauty of the everlasting snows. Of all yatras, the Kailash trip is the most difficult. It is called *Mount Meru*, the axis of mountains.

Kailash peak where the Indus has its origin is a picturesque soul-stirring scenery. One has to ascend from Didipha Guha, the first halting stage in the perambulation around Kailash. The Indus gushes out as a small streamlet through blocks of ice from behind the back portion of Kailash peak. Though pictures of Shiva show the Ganges flowing from his head, it is really the Indus that originates from the head of Shiva, or Kailash, in the physical plane. Perambulation around Kailash

covers thirty miles and takes three days. On the way comes the famous and sacred Gaurikund which is eternally covered with snow. One has to break the snow when one takes a bath.

Is there a special feeling about Kailash and Manasarovar?

Swami Satyananda: One feels an invisible presence, though one knows that there is nobody there. Manasarovar is a big, beautiful lake, with swans or ducks, water the colour of crystal and Mount Kailash reflecting on it. When there is no wind everything is clear; one need not see Kailash, one can see the reflection. There will be hardly ten or fifteen people, no more than that – a few Tibetans and a few Hindus here and there – but it seems the whole place is filled up with a divine presence. One knows very well that there is nobody there but this is the feeling.

What did you experience while visiting Kailash and Manasarovar?

Swami Satyananda: It is a lovely place. There is no temple, idol or poojaris, no ritual or formality, yet everything is there. You never feel that you are in a desolate region. Manasarovar is a crystal clear lake, overshadowed by the snow peak of Mount Kailash. You have nothing to do there, just sit down and close your eyes, like a god. There is no sound, no vibration.

MUNGER AND CHANDISTHAN

What is the significance of Chandisthan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Chandisthan is one of the enlightened seats of Shakti spread throughout the different regions of India. The sixty-four peethas of Shakti originated from a mythological story about Sati's death in the ceremonial fire of her father, the dance of Shiva and the ultimate chopping-up of Sati's body by Vishnu. Shaktipeeths are the places where the parts of her body are supposed to have fallen. In Deoghar, Shakti's heart has fallen, according to the myth. That place

is known as *hridayapeeth*, the seat of the heart. In Munger, the eyes are said to have fallen; therefore inside Chandisthan in the small rock temple there is the image of an eye carved in the rock face as the icon of Devi. Another important *peeth* or place of enlightenment is Guwahati, Kamakhya, where the yoni of the Devi had fallen. There are sixty-four *siddhapeeths*, or enlightened and illuminated places throughout India. The power in them is alive; it is not dead. These are places where the cosmic energy can be awakened and experienced. Many sadhakas have experienced the presence of Shakti in Chandisthan. The prevalent tantric practices involved eyes, meaning wisdom, intuition, perception and vision – awakening the dormant psychic faculties.

Why is vision so important to Ganga Darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: It was at Ganga Darshan that the direction of yoga became clear to Sri Swami Satyananda. When he was alone in the early days, he used to come to do his sadhana at Ganga Darshan. Here he had the realization that Swami Sivananda had departed, the moment he left his body. Here he also had the vision of the earth splitting open, and a white figure emerging and giving the slogan, 'Yoga is the culture of tomorrow', which he proclaimed at the first World Yoga Convention in 1964 in Munger.

Ganga Darshan became the catalyst for the development of the yoga work, and the symbol that Swami Satyananda adopted to preserve the yoga fellowship was ajna chakra. Ajna chakra is the third eye, the command centre, the guru centre, the eye. This association is with Chandisthan, the seat of the eye. Maybe the whole concept of using ajna chakra as the symbol of the Yoga Fellowship was inspired by Devi.

How has Chandisthan's history been linked with Ganga Darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: The king who ruled over this area 5000 years ago was Karna. He was the elder brother of the Pandavas of the Mahabharata. Karna as a person was a great

tantric and worshipper of the sun. He was a follower of *saurya tantra*, the tantra which is dedicated to the sun. He was a *siddha*, adept in this path. He also used to worship Devi, the cosmic mother, in the cave of Chandisthan.

There was a huge inverted pot or cauldron, about eight feet in diameter, made of three inches' thick iron. It is still there, protected and placed on a mound. As part of the tantric ritual Karna used to jump into that cauldron and sacrifice himself to Devi. Devi would then manifest and bring the king back to life and give him gold equal to the weight of his body. Karna would come with that gold to this place where Jyoti Mandir is at Ganga Darshan. From an ancient platform underneath the floor of Jyoti Mandir, which is still intact, he used to distribute the gold to his subjects, as prasad from the Cosmic Mother.

Chandisthan is vibrating with the energy of Shakti and the same energy is in Jyoti Mandir. Ganga Darshan is a place where, if one really tries to live yoga, one can experience yoga. It is not only a place where one can learn yoga. It is a place where one can live yoga and experience yoga because the energies in Munger are conducive to the experience of the inner Self. This is also one of the reasons why in the early days Swami Satyananda had indications that Munger would become the centre for yoga, where sincere seekers can experience yoga by living it.

What is the link between the old temples of Munger and Ganga Darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: The name of this place, Munger, appears for the first time in the *Mahabharata*. According to the story in the *Mahabharata*, Sage Mudgal, a rishi, had his ashram on the banks of the Ganga. The town or the locality which developed around the gurukul was known as Mudgalpur. One could say, in a sense, that the founder of Munger was a rishi, whose name appears in the *Mahabharata*.

During the Mahabharata time, this area was known as Angadesh, or the kingdom of Anga, whose ruler was Karna,

the brother of the Pandavas. His kingdom used to be in a place called Champanagar, about sixty kilometres from Munger. According to ancient records, he had an outpost or farmhouse in Munger. He would come to Munger to perform his tantric sadhana and worship Devi. There are three places attributed to Devi worship and to this king Karna of the Mahabharata time. The events of the Mahabharata, took place about 5560 years ago. Thus the first reference to Munger is as part of the kingdom of Karna, established by Rishi Mudgal. This is one part of the history.

The second part of the history is that subsequently all the kings who ascended the throne in this place were given the title of Karna. There may have been hundreds of kings and queens. For practically 3000 years, there was an unbroken chain of kings who had the same title, Karna. They followed the same tradition as the original Karna. The foremost qualification of anybody who sat on the throne was to be a tantric sadhaka.

They all had to come to Munger to do their worship which happened at an open altar. They had a ten-armed statue of Durga as the deity. From the style and design, from the expressions of the face and body, one can see that it is not a statue made in the last six or seven hundred years. The style of the statue predates all the lineages of kings in Bihar. That statue is attributed to the original Karna as the statue he used to worship and which subsequently the other kings used to worship as the family deity and the deity of the kingdom. After the worship of Durga, which is known as *Dashabhuji*, ten-armed Durga, he used to go to Chandisthan.

Historically, the tradition of the Karnas has always been associated with *daanvirata*, generosity; the entire lineage is remembered because of the act of giving to others. There is a story in the *Mahabharata* that, when Karna was dying in the battlefield after the battle was won, a beggar went to Karna to beg for alms. Karna says, "What can I do now? I am without anything, without my kingdom, friends or wealth. I can't give you anything." The man says to him, "Well, this

will be the first time that a beggar goes empty-handed from the doors of Karna." Karna says, "No, wait," and takes out his dagger. He had golden teeth, so he cut out his teeth and gave them to the beggar. That was the last act of Karna; after that he died.

In India, the act of giving has always been associated with Karna. If one draws a straight line between the places where he used to worship – the Dashabhuji statue, Chandisthan and Ganga Darshan – it becomes a triangle. Karna is the symbol of Shakti.

DEOGHAR AND RIKHIA

What is the story of Baba Baidyanath temple?

Swami Niranjanananda: The Baba Baidyanath temple has a mythological story associated with it. It is said that Ravana, the enemy of Sri Rama, was a great worshipper of Shiva. One day he was returning from the abode of Shiva with a Shivalingam in his hands. Shiva had told him clearly that on his return journey he should not put the Shivalingam down anywhere, for once he set it down he would not be able to move it again. When Ravana came to the spot where Baidyanath temple now stands he had an intense urge to relieve himself.

He saw a boy grazing his cattle and told him to hold the lingam in his hand while he went to relieve himself, telling the boy not to put it down. The boy agreed. Ravana gave him the lingam and off he went. Finding the lingam too heavy, the boy put it down on the ground, and just as Shiva had predicted, when Ravana came back he could not lift it up, and so he hammered it into the ground.

Some time ago, the government of India and Bihar tried to discover the depth of this Shivalingam stone. However, even with the use of different instruments, including X-rays, they were unable to locate the bottom of the cylindrical shaped stone. They do not know how deep it penetrates into the earth.

One day a man named Bhaiju, from the local tribe, came to that particular spot and found the Shivalingam sticking out of the ground. In the purity of his simplicity and devotion he began to worship it. Shiva, pleased with the man, appeared before him and said, "What do you want? Ask and it shall be given." Bhaiju replied "I want you to stay here in the form of a healer."

There have been many instances where people have gone to the temple and have made a vow. They have then had dreams in which whatever they desired was fulfilled and they began to change both externally and psychically.

There is a documented story about a British officer who was living in that region during the time of the British Raj. He had to go to the front during the First World War. His wife came to the temple and prayed that he be saved. When the officer returned from the war he told his wife about a very strange experience. He had been wounded and was lying on the battlefield, surrounded by enemy soldiers who were bayoneting those still alive. The last image he could remember was of a crazy man with matted locks and a trident in his hand standing guard over him. He did not allow any of the enemy soldiers to come near him. Then his wife told him about her worship at the Shiva temple. Out of gratitude he built the present temple around the Shivalingam. It is considered to be an awakened Shiva temple where one's innermost desire is fulfilled.

What is the history of Deoghar?

Swami Satyananda: Tirthas, like Ganga Sagar, Kashi Vishwanath, Prayag, Haridwar and Deoghar, are considered to be special because of their energy fields.

Baidyanath Dham is an ancient Shiva temple. Everyone – Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists – can go to the temple as there is no discrimination. During the monsoons, thirty lakh of pilgrims come for darshan. King and subject, rich and poor alike walk one hundred kilometres from Sultanganj, carrying a pot of Ganga water on their shoulders.

At Sultanganj, the Ganga reverses and flows north, like in Munger, so this is an auspicious place. This is an old tradition.

Deoghar is a land of Santhalis, the native tribe. The Santhalis are simple and nice people with a great culture. Their king was a follower of the vedic religion, like Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Harishchandra and others. Baidyanath Dham is a Santhali temple, but the Ganga water is brought from Sultanganj, which is outside the Santhali jurisdiction. This is regarded as a symbol of unity, because Sultanganj falls within the territory of Anga. People bring Ganga water from there and offer it in Deoghar. The priests come from Mithila. All this is a symbol of unity.

When Shiva was crestfallen at the death of Sati, he began wandering from place to place, carrying her dead body. As he moved about, the different parts began to drop away. In one place her hands fell, in another place her legs, in Munger her eyes. In the end, only her chest, where the heart is located, remained with him, and this was cremated by the people here. There were no rites performed for her other body parts anywhere else. That is why Deoghar is known as Sati's burial ground, not Shiva's. Shiva's burial ground is Varanasi. As the cremation ground of Sati, Deoghar is venerated as one of the sixty-four shaktipeethas.

What is special about Deoghar and Baidyanath Dham?

Swami Satyananda: Deoghar is a great pilgrim centre. *Deoghar* means the 'abode of God'. Deoghar is a spiritual town, not a commercial one. Baidyanath Dham, the temple, is large and magnificent. Deoghar is an awakened town. People from Nepal to Kanyakumari, at the southernmost tip of India, come to pay their respects and ask for their wishes to be fulfilled there. Deoghar is the cremation ground of Sati and therefore has great importance. After Kamakhya, it is considered to be the second tantric seat of Devi. Since it is a tantric seat, there is no prohibition on drinking liquor and eating meat, as is the case with all Vaishnavite places.

What is the significance of the Baidyanath yatra?

Swami Satyananda: Baidyanath Dham is spiritually powerful. During the month of Shravan, the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor walk one hundred kilometres to Deoghar from Sultanganj, which is situated on the banks of the Ganga. They fill a gourd with Ganga water at Sultanganj and carry it here on their shoulders. It takes three to five days to reach and during this time they dress like sadhus and live like sannyasins. They are householders from different strata of society: men, women and children, rich, poor, happy, unhappy, as well as people suffering mentally and physically. They carry the gourd of Ganga water on their shoulders; it is never placed on the ground. Throughout the journey, they repeat the mantra: *Bol Bam*, *Bol Bam*, *Bol Bam*, *Bol Bam*. When they arrive in Deoghar, they enter the temple and pour all the Ganga water on Shiva. This tradition has been going on for so many centuries that, with the amount of water poured on it for so long, the *Shivalingam* has flattened, as if it were thumped into the earth.

There are no religious barriers; and anyone can go on this journey. The government machinery stops functioning during this festival. For one full month, all government officers have to attend to lakhs of devotees, who arrive every day, walking those one hundred kilometres. They see to their security, food, shelter, places for hanging the water pots, provisions, vegetables, snacks. People set up stalls along the way to sell tea, food, shoes, and make enough money for the whole year in one month.

Many rich people walk on the road from Sultanganj and because they are affluent, they send their servants ahead by car with cooking items, bedding and other necessities. When they arrive at the resting place, the servants are already there cooking and the beds are ready. The entire road becomes a walking street for that one month. Rich or poor have to walk as well as have self-restraint or *sanyam* for that period. The diet has to be sattwic without onions or garlic. The *yatris*, the pilgrims, all have to sleep on the ground.

SHIRDI

What makes Shirdi a place of pilgrimage?

Swami Satyananda: Sai Baba was a Muslim, yet when he reached Shirdi a Brahmin family welcomed him and made arrangements for him to stay. The people of the village started benefiting from his presence, as he was an enlightened soul. He had followers who were sweepers, Brahmins and people of all kinds. Everybody started looking after him. He used to do namaz anywhere except in the mosque. When he died, people made a tomb close by and now thousands visit the Sai Baba tomb.

All the films made in Bombay have their *muhurat*, the first auspicious shot, taken in Shirdi. There is not a single film that does not have its muhurat shot there. Whenever one goes there one will find actors, producers and bigwigs. Sai Baba had a special gift. Somebody would go up to him and say, "Baba I have this difficulty." "It will be all right," he would reply, and the difficulty would vanish. His stories are famous all over the world. Once he was sitting in front of a fire, and suddenly he started putting water on the fire. Someone asked him what he was doing and he replied that a house was on fire and he was putting it out. There are many such incredible incidents about him.

Who was Sai Baba?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sai Baba was a great siddha of India who lived a simple and humble life. One day at his ashram, he was sitting before the dhuni, the sacred fire, in the evening, having satsang. Suddenly, Sai Baba put his hand right into the fire and then pulled it out. The hand was burnt.

People could not understand why he did this. The reason was discovered after one week when a family from a distant village came for Sai Baba's darshan and related an incident at their home a week ago. They said a miracle had taken place in their house. The evening meal was being prepared

and a charcoal fire was burning. A small boy playing nearby tripped and fell into the burning embers. Catching sight of this, the mother cried out to Sai Baba, "Save my son!" When she looked again, the son was standing safe and sound, and not a part of his body was burnt. That was when people realized why Sai Baba had put his hand into the fire on that particular day. He had saved the child. This is an expression of the *vibhu* mind, the interconnected mind. This kind of expansive mind is acquired by yogis.

MONTSERRAT

What is an example of a centre for pilgrims outside India?

Swami Satyananda: Sixty kilometres from Barcelona, there is a place called Montserrat, which has a very old church of the Black Madonna, where a small black image of Goddess Kali is enshrined. Centuries ago, when Muslims attacked that place, a mendicant saved the image of the Madonna and kept it in his cave. The smoke from the fire he lit in the cave blackened the image. When the kingdom of Spain was re-established, the Madonna was returned to the original church.

This church has become a famous pilgrimage centre. Thousands of people go there every day to pray for something – a son, a daughter, wealth – from the 'Madre' or Mother. Educated, intellectual, socially established people go there for this purpose. They would say, "I asked for something there and I got it. Why don't you also ask?" It is a similar story at the Tirupati temple of South India.

Is there a difference between Kali and the Black Madonna?

Swami Niranjanananda: Whether she is called Black Madonna or Kali, she represents a cosmic force which is unmanifest. She is given an external trapping according to cultural, social and religious beliefs.



What is special about Kanyakumari?

Swami Niranjanananda: The shrine of Kanyakumari is at the southernmost tip of India, at the edge of the water. Three seas meet there: the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean. You can see the waters of all the three seas merging. The maximum depth of the Arabian Sea is about forty to fifty metres, so a lot of mud flows in the water and its colour is muddy. The water of the Bay of Bengal is green, as it comes through forests, collecting algae, leaves and grass on its journey. The Indian Ocean is clear and blue. You see these three different colours in the water, and by this captivating sight the shrine of Kanyakumari is situated.

Legend has it that one day Shiva said to his consort, Parvati, "We have had a heavenly marriage, but we have not had an earthly marriage. Why don't we enact a lila to have an earthly marriage, with all the pomp and splendour?" Shakti agreed. Shiva said, "You go first; I'm coming." Thus Shakti came down, in the form of a beautiful, enchanting sixteen-year-old devi. At the last minute, however, Shiva was called away on an errand. Since that time, Shakti is waiting for Shiva, as the form of Kanyakumari.

Kanyakumari is one of the names of Durga, and there is a statue of her in the temple. This form, this image of Bhagavati, is that of a sixteen-year-old virgin girl, and she is absolutely enticing, enchanting and beautiful. The statue has been there for a very long time and nobody has actually put their finger on the timeline of the temple. The Devi has two diamonds on her: one on the nose and the other on the lower lip. It is said that before the walls were built around the shrine, she used to look out into the open ocean, and the sun's rays striking the diamond would act like a lighthouse. The glow of the diamond could be seen by sailors from far away and they would be guided into the harbour. Thus, she is also the patron deity of sailors and seafarers.

What is the meaning of Katyayani?

Swami Niranjanananda: Kanyakumari is also the impression, the image of Katyayani. Katyayani is the sixth form of Devi. The name indicates that in this form, she has the power to remove the rigidness, arrogance and the hard shell of the spirit. The rigidness of life is eliminated by Katyayani. Arrogance, the negative and destructive ego, is destroyed by Katyayani and purity enters with the invocation of Katyayani. That is the meaning of the word *Katyayani* 'one who is able to remove rigidity and the destructive, negative ego'.

What is the story of Sri Sailam?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Sailam is one of the Jyotirlingas in Andhra Pradesh. According to mythology, Sri Sailam is the place of Kartikeya, one of the sons of Shiva. Kartikeya became the commander in chief of the gods army and he was instrumental in killing one of the terrorists of that time, Tarakasura.

After his return from around the world, when he saw that his brother Ganesh had married the two princesses, he felt cheated and decided to leave Mount Kailash. He came to Andhra Pradesh and he settled in Sri Sailam where he lived like a sadhu, like a vairagi.



One day Shiva and Parvati decided to visit Kartikeya and they spent a few months with him in his ashram. When they were leaving, Parvati said, "You come back to us, we can't live without you." Kartikeya said, "No, this is my life, I have taken sannyasa, I want to propagate the sannyasa dharma, I want to propagate vairagya and live here." Then he requested Shiva and Parvati, "Why don't you also stay here?"

At that moment, the Shivalingam emerged. It is peculiar because it is a Shivalingam with a creeper entwined around it. It is known as Mallikarjuna. *Mallika* means 'white jasmine', and the creeper is Parvati, and Arjuna is Shiva in form of the lingam. Therefore, one sees Parvati entwining herself around Shiva.

It is a powerful and beautiful place. Most of the temples in the south are very ancient with beautiful carvings on the walls. Every stone has some handiwork on it and one can imagine the ancient glory of those places. One feels the energy of faith. It is a place where people go with so much faith and belief. What they offer there is faith, and faith can take a form, it can take a shape, and the energy of these ancient places is defined by the power of faith that one feels when one goes to these places.



What is special about the Golden Temple in Amritsar?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Tirthas*, places of pilgrimage, represent something special. Not from the religious point of view, but from a personal point of view. The place where faith becomes alive is tirtha. The place where medicines are handed out is a clinic, the place where social facilities are handed out is an NGO office, and the place where faith becomes a living experience is tirtha.

In India, many temples are dirty, disorganized, smelly, without hygiene or cleanliness, yet thousands of people go there. Why? Because of their faith. That faith is such a power, that whatever aspirations they have in mind are helped.

For this reason, tirthas can be seen not from the religious point of view, but from the point of one's faith. With belief, conviction and determination, people are going with a one-track mind to one place, following all the rigours required to go to that place.

When I went to Kedarnath, on that difficult climb, I used to see seventy and eighty year old people walking, just walking, walking, walking, alone. Whereas young people would think of the hardship of the climb, these old people were inspired and motivated by faith. In rain and sun, the

young people would seek shelter, yet these old people used to keep on trekking, small steps at a time. The young would reach in one day, whereas the old would reach only after three days.

On the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash sixty and seventy year old people walked reciting *Om Namah Shivaya*, *Om Namah Shivaya*, *Om Namah Shivaya*. When offered help they would say, "No. We are walking." What is that strength, conviction and belief in them, if not faith?

The Golden Temple in Amritsar is a place where the ten gurus of the Sikh tradition have done sadhana and penance. It is the place where the teachings of the ten gurus are enshrined, where they are worshipped and honoured. It is the place where, once one enters, the experience is of *nirakara*, the unmanifest Brahman. All mantras stop there, and all one thinks of is the guru tattwa. The brain stops. The whole connection to duality stops. That was my experience.

The difference from other tirtha yatras was that at the Golden Temple, the presence of guru was palpable, and the unity of people under the shade of guru tattwa was also palpable. There is no paid staff, everything is done by volunteers. Thousands and thousands of volunteers go there every day for selfless service. No payment, nothing.

The kitchen functions day and night. Thousands and thousands of people eat breakfast, lunch and dinner. Everything is done voluntarily. The volunteers can be commissioners, they can be ministers, they can be anybody, but if they are on duty, they are on duty. The Chief Minister goes there to wipe the shoes of the devotees who visit. That is the involvement and participation: 'This is the place of our gurus and we have to do service'. It is known as kar seva. *Kar* means 'hands', so it is seva which one does with one's hands.

The entire organization and management is flawless. Thousands of people are engaged in their own work, their own area and in the time allocated to them. There is no question of anybody saying, "Oh I can't come today," or "I can't come tomorrow," for people feel it an honour to have

been given the opportunity to do seva for the gurus. They do not see it as a burden.

Life revolves around not the social etiquettes, but the spiritual disciplines as written in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the teachings of the ten gurus. It is definitely a unique and special place where one can experience the *nirakara tattwa*, the formless quality of the Divine. Everywhere else, one experiences the *sakara tattwa*, the manifest form. In all other temples, it is the sakara tattwa. Whether it is a Shiva, a Shakti, or a Surya temple, everywhere one encounters the sakara tattwa.

The actual name of the Sikh temple in Amritsar is *Har Mandir Sahib* which means 'Temple of God'. It was the British who called it Golden Temple. The experience is of the nirakara, the unmanifest, and *Om* is the only mantra that resounds in that location. *Om* is supposed to be the source of everything. *Om* is the only mantra that one hears everywhere in the temple, and it is the only symbol that one sees everywhere.

SWAMI NIRANJANANANDA'S NEPAL YATRA

What is the story behind Burha Nilkanth?

Swami Niranjanananda: At Burha Nilkanth, the image of Vishnu sleeping in yoga nidra on top of a snake is the image there, but the person who is lying on the snake is not Vishnu or Narayana but Shiva. This story of Shiva is ancient. Nepal is in the seismic zone of the Himalayas, and just one earthquake can easily destroy the entire country.

In the sixteenth century, a king had a dream in which he saw this statue and a location where he had to dig the ground. Following this dream, he came and started digging, excavating the earth. At one point a pick-axe hit something and blood flowed from there. They removed the dirt and saw that a toe made out of stone had been hit with the pick-axe. Blood was flowing from that toe. They excavated further and discovered a huge, twenty-five foot, massive statue of Shiva sleeping on



top of the serpent just like Narayana. The prophecy is that if this statue is destroyed at any time, Nepal is finished. It is like the safety valve of Nepal. As long as the statue is intact, Nepal will survive, and the day the statue is destroyed, Nepal is finished. *Burha* means 'ancient' and *Nilkanth* means 'blue throat', which is one of the names of Shiva, so it is the figure of the ancient Shiva in the form of Narayana.

There is an interesting darshan that happens in Burha Nilkanth. The snake is in the middle of the lake, so it looks as if the snake is on top of the water and Shiva is lying on top of the snake. Yet from one point, if one looks down into the water, one sees the whole reflection of Shiva turned upside down. How that happens or why it happens is not possible to know. It is the perfect image of Shiva reclining on a bed, but in reverse. One actually sees two faces: one on top, the real one, and the other at the bottom of the reflection, and they look as though they are fused into one body. That is one of the most powerful experiences; totally unexpected and yet very vibrant and alive.



Can you describe the Gupteshwara Mahadev caves?

Swami Niranjanananda: About fifty kilometres from Pokhara is a chain of underground caves which is about one kilometre long inside the mountain. It is known as Gupteshwara Mahadev. *Gupta* is 'secret', *Ishwara* is 'Lord': the secret Lord Mahadeva. The inside of the cave is incredible. It is all made of stalactites, forming natural images of Saraswati, Lakshmi, Kali, Shiva, the Pandavas, the Saptarishis, Brahma, all shaped by the flow of water over thousands and thousands of years, very much like Patal Bhuvaneshwar in the Kumaon area. The figures, the shapes are just perfect, as if once upon a time gods and goddesses resided in that cave and somebody had actually carved their images on the rocks with water. Inside the caves we had a beautiful darshan. This cave was discovered by a sannyasin, Swami Shivagiri. He had done a lot of tapasya and sadhana, and inside the caves one can actually feel the intensity of vibration of the tapas that was conducted by the sadhus over different times.

What sacred places did you visit during your tirtha yatra in 1988 and 1989?

Swami Satyananda: I visited many places, for it is a powerful sadhana.

Khajuraho: This place, a tribute paid to Shiva by the Chandela dynasty, is a haunting experience of the rites and rituals that were an inseparable part of the lives of our ancestors – the rishis and munis who not only gave birth to our civilization but who also dedicated their lives to the exploration of energy and consciousness behind matter. The sublime depiction of that dramatic cosmic process of creation revealed life as a 'prayer'. Warriors, musicians, devas, apsaras, gandharvas, men, women and beasts came alive and spoke in unison of a time when not just eroticism, as has been overly emphasized in all depictions of the temple, but every aspect of life was considered as means to reach God.

Chitrakoot: It was on this spot "at the ghat of Chitrakoot when all the saints gathered to watch Sant Tulsidas grinding chandan paste to anoint a tilak on his ishta devata, Sri Rama, that Rama revealed himself in person". Here amidst the sylvan setting of Kamdgiri, I delved into the time when Sri Rama eternally sanctified this soil by taking refuge there. During a few reflective moments as I rested at the foot of the mountain, where thousands do parikrama, the murmuring streams, dancing trees and flowing rivers sang to me of the glorious year when Sri Rama with Sita and Lakshman played his lila at Chitrakoot.

Maihar: The long and steep climb up to the shrine of Sharada Devi is reminiscent of the ascent of Kundalini to sahasrara, resting and reposing at each chakra. Sharada Devi, goddess of Vidya, is enshrined at Sahasrara, to whom noted musicians and artists pay tribute.

Amarkantak: 'The forest of the immortals', vibrant with the energy of great tapasvis, rishis and munis who have

engaged in sadhana there from time immemorial, breathes an air of tranquillity, harmony and balance.

Mahakaleshwar, Ujjain: The eternally sanctified city of Ujjain, which was conquered with pride by Shiva. The three-foot high black lingam encircled by Nag Raj and set with flawless perfection on a silver yoni, thronged by hundreds of devotees, silently projecting shakti from within itself, defies all understanding and brings alive the timeless tradition of shradda and bhakti.

Kala Bhairava, Ujjain:

> You have been consuming the madira offered to you by your ardent devotees.
> Now, I offer you the intoxication which has led me through several incarnations for this is all I have.
> And, with this humble offering seek your protection while I tread throughout the wilderness of life.

Omkareshwar: This sacred Om-shaped island on the banks of Narmada Devi, where Adi Shankaracharya received sannyasa diksha from Guru Govindapada, and later performed the miracle of absorbing Narmada in his kamandal, transforms faith into a living experience.

A secret passage from Shankaracharya's cave leads to the garba griha where the jyotirlingam of Omkareshwar stands in meditative silence amidst the chanting of mantras.

How can a person come close to God?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is difficult. Where does He or She live? Where is the house? What is His phone number, His e-mail? Who has the GPS to heaven? Where will one search for God?

The best thing to do is to make yourself so inviting that God comes to your home. Then you do not have to make the effort to go closer to God. Instead, the effort is made to beautify your life so that God can come closer. As long as you cannot access Him, you can invite Him to visit your home.

6

Expressions of Bhakti

THE ROLE OF FINE ARTS

How did bhaktas express their experiences?

Swami Satyananda: There are many artists who expressed bhakti through their work. Many poems, paintings and sculptures were produced by bliss-intoxicated bhaktas. Their masterpieces are an attempt to express the ineffable. Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, William Blake, Rabindranath Tagore, the incredible tantric artists and sculptors of India and many more in all parts of the world tried to express and depict their feeling of divine love. The beauty and sensitivity of their masterpieces clearly shows this. Great works of art are not really made, they are divinely inspired by revelationary experience. They are an expression of the heart. They don't really require effort, they happen.

What is the origin of music and dance in India?

Swami Satyananda: Music and dance are fine arts. Music has had its origin in the *Sama Veda* from time immemorial. By mistake Sama was spelt 'psalm', but it is still pronounced 'saam'. *Sama* means *richa,* or hymns. The *Sama Veda* contains hymns. The richas of the *Rig Veda*, when sung to a tune, become the *Sama Veda*. In English it is called 'psalm'.

From the time of the Vedas to the present day, India has perfected only one thing and that is imbibing good

samskaras. If good samskaras disappear from your family and from my family, then what is left? Will you cherish television? No, we want good samskaras. The progressive refinement of personality, stage by stage, is known as good samskara. These samskaras are based on religion, on the teachings of great souls, saints and sages, as well as on cultural traditions, such as dance and fine arts.

What was the culture of India in the 20th century?

Swami Niranjanananda: In India until the 1960s the only music was spiritual music. Only after the coming of television and other media, the style of music changed. North Indian and South Indian music was classical. The classical music used to have the chants which were mantras, kirtan with Rama, Devi, Shiva and Krishna. The bhajans that were sung throughout the subcontinent were bhajans that are sung in ashrams. Instead of filmy songs people used to hear kirtan. There used to be kirtan conventions, musical gatherings, like now there are rock stars and pop stars. It used to be a normal, musical event conducted in every city, village, town, in every state. People never felt that this was religious. It was the culture of India.

Can a seeker's love of music and dance contribute to his quest for the higher experiences of life?

Swami Satyananda: Music, dance, religion and fine arts are all part of the practices towards higher spiritual life. Whatever practice expands the scope of an aspirant's consciousness; whatever practice transcends the realm of his lower consciousness.

Chaitanya came from the eastern part of India. He was a professor of logic but soon realized that experience was more important than knowledge. He headed for a higher spiritual experience and finally came to the conclusion that in this age of tension, stress and strain, when each and everything vitiates man's mind, when he is unable to balance himself through props, solace, comfort or rest, it is music that can give him everything.

Kirtan

When thou commandest me to sing,
It seems to me that my heart would break with pride:
And I look to thy face,
And tears come to my eyes.
All that is harsh and dissonant in my life
melts into one sweet harmony –
And my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird
on its flight across the sea.
I know thou takest pleasure in my singing.
I know that only as a singer I come before your presence.
I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing
of my song at thy feet
Which I could never aspire to reach.
Drunk with joy of singing I forget myself
And call thee friend who art my Lord.

—*Rabindranath Tagore*

What is the role of storytelling, song and poetry?

Swami Satyananda: Stories explain things so that when we read the Upanishads it becomes easier for us to understand. We understand through stories.

Most of us sing songs by outstanding saints, not just poets. We like poems, but so far as the truth is concerned, we don't believe in poets. We believe in saint-poets like Tulsidas and Mirabai and Kabir and many others – there are hundreds in India – who have written songs and their songs are sung by people from north to south. In Uttar Pradesh the *Ramacharitamanas*, the *Ramayana,* is famous; in Maharashtra they have Jnaneshwara, Tukaram, Namdev and many other great saint-poets and their songs. These songs are not just simple songs – they are on the lips of everyone. Most people know hundreds of these songs. We start this from childhood and as we grow these songs tell us the meaning.

There is a song which talks about the higher stage of bhakti. When one enters that state one becomes intoxicated, which gives a different experience altogether: "Hey! You should drink the cup of God's name" – *Peele, peele, hari naam ka pyala*.

There is a song by Mirabai about the ascending of kundalini. It says, "When will my darling come? When will my husband come? When will my lover come? I am waiting for him and my eyes are on the path, the road that leads to my house, to me. I know that when he comes I will hear his footsteps. I may not see him, but by hearing his footsteps I will know that he is coming." What are those footsteps? When somebody is coming from outside, how do you know? You don't see him, you hear the footsteps. How do you know that higher consciousness is dawning on you? There are certain footsteps and these footsteps are experiences. Then she says, "I climbed every floor of the house, not once but many times, and I am expecting him, but I don't know when he is going to come." These floors relate to the states of consciousness. They are the chakras or the planes of consciousness or the different lokas.

What are the Padavalis? Why are they so highly regarded?

Swami Sivananda: In the Vaishanavite literature Padavalis have a high place. They are lyrical poems and songs concerning Sri Krishna's lila, and have been composed by Vaishnava bhaktas and saintly persons like Jayadeva, Chandidas, Vidyapati, Jnanadas, Govindadas and others. In the present age, Rabindranath Tagore, Sisir Kumar Ghosh have also made a gift of beautiful Padavalis. The excellence and sublimity of Padavalis lie in their power of attuning the mind to real bhava which is beyond poetry, rhyme, cadence or tune.

It has been said that bhaktas believe that God-consciousness and God's proximity could be felt by singing kirtan, hence the latter has a distinct and definite place in spirituality. If judged from the literary standpoint, Padavalis are lyrics, from the musical viewpoint they are kirtans in the

original sense of the term, and from the spiritual standard they are bhajans of Bhagavan.

Padavalis are based on the lila of Sri Krishna. His bhajan had been in vogue from earlier times, but Sri Chaitanya placed Krishna lila on a higher pedestal. Sri Chaitanya's ideal of *prema* or love inspired many poets and they composed many *padas* or poetical songs taking as their theme Gouranga Lila. These Padavalis are known as Gourachandrika. In real kirtan first *Gourachandrika* has to be sung before Krishna lila.

The life, character and teachings of Sri Chaitanya are sublime, deep, uplifting and purifying. Volumes like *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, *Chaitanya Chandrodaya*, *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, *Chaitanya Mangala* testify to this. It is doubtful if anywhere in the world any religious preacher or reformer had been able to generate so much feeling or emotion as the name of Sri Chaitanya has done or is still doing among the Vaishnavites of Bengal. So *Padavalis* mean lyrical songs based on the lila of Radha-Krishna as well as Gouranga.

He Himself has Entered my House

He Himself has entered my house.
He lives in my house day and night.
In the morning, the light of His laughter fills my house.
The whole house is delighted by His smile.
He sits alone in my house.
When I go out on my business,
He comes to the door to bid me goodbye.
When I return home in the evening,
I find Him sitting alone in the house.
When I am asleep on my bed, forgetting everything,
He alone remains awake in the house.
Sometimes in slumber and sometimes in dream,
He comes and goes, and keeps on laughing,
Even in the darkness of my house.

—*Rabindranath Tagore*

Why do the mantras that form the songs affect the singers of bhajans?

Swami Satyananda: Mantra is not merely sound. It is not the name of a god. It is a combination of certain sound principles in a particular pattern to create an effect.

Ham Mei Tum Mei Hai Bhed Nahi
Hame Sab Hai Tuma Narayana Ho

—Bhajan by Swami Satyananda Saraswati

The meaning of this song is: all the burdens of life are laid down at Your feet and in Your hands. Redemption and downfall is in Your hands. I do not remember You, but You do not forget me. Ungratefulness, ingratitude is my nature, and compassion is Your nature. There is a difference between Yourself and myself. I am the human being, and You are the divine. There is a difference between Yourself and myself. I am in the hands of the world and the world is in Your hands. When I cry the tears trickle down and they make an ocean on account of the pang of separation. The torrential flow of the river is my destiny and the mast of the ship that carried me to the right destination is in Your hands.

How do bhaktas express themselves?

Swami Satyananda: What does a bhakta do? Many people think that bhakti has to be expressed by wild singing or emotional prayers or utterances. This can be the case. Many great bhaktas have sung the most soulful songs and created the most beautiful poems in order to express their joy, devotion and realization. Others have been famous for their joyful dancing. The Sufi dervishes are good examples. Every movement, every action is an expression of bliss and devotion.

Many great bhaktas were less dramatic. They continued to live their lives in a state of calmness. Each action and each thought however is permeated with awareness of the Divine. Every act becomes blissful. Every act is done as worship,

without a sense of limited ego, but according to the dictates of the situation, with intuition. He looks into the mirror of the world and sees the image of himself. Actions become perfect.

Bhakti need not necessarily be associated with wild, abandoned singing. It can be felt in many people without obvious outward expression. It depends on the dharma or personality of the bhakta. Some bhaktas seem to mellow with time. They become less obviously expressive. It is like someone who takes his first bottle of wine. The initial intoxication makes him do crazy things. He says crazy things and jumps around like a madman. This is the expression of a new experience. The seasoned drinker, who has been drinking wine for many years, is unlikely to do such things. He is more likely to sit quietly and enjoy the wine and the effects of the intoxication. The intoxication is the same, but the expression is much less dramatic.

Actually, every saint, yogi, tantric or sage is a bhakta. This applies whether they appear to be karma yogis, jnana yogis, raja yogis. They must be bhaktas, for the knowledge, the realization that they have in higher states of awareness must automatically lead to bhakti.

A Christian gospel singer, a Hassidic Jew at the wailing wall in Jerusalem, a dancing Sufi, a Hindu chanting or singing bhajans, a Buddhist of the bhakti sect of the Fair Land School reciting 'namuamidabu', a Muslim facing Mecca and praying on his mat, can all be expressing bhakti. It depends on the inner feeling and attitude, *bhava*. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam* it says (2:2): ". . . the devotee loses all sense of etiquette. He moves around the world without attachment. He always chants the name and his heart melts through love. He is like someone possessed, sometimes laughing wildly, sometimes weeping; and then he sings aloud and dances . . ."

This description of the expressions and actions of a bhakta is as good as any. But a bhakta need not conform to this pattern. He will express himself according to the dictates of his personality, dharma and the given situation.

Every Breath that Flows in the Nose

Every breath that flows in the nose,
Every beat that throbs in the heart,
Every artery that pulsates in the body,
Every thought that arises in the mind,
Speaks to you that God is near.

Every flower that wafts fragrance,
Every fruit that attracts you,
Every gentle breeze that blows,
Every river that smoothly flows,
Speaks of God and His mercy.

The vast ocean with its powerful waves,
The Mighty Himalayas with its glaciers,
The bright sun and stars in the wide sky,
The lofty tree with its branches,
The cool springs in the hills and dales,
Tell me of His omnipotence.

The melody of sweet music,
The oration of powerful orators,
The poems of reputed poets,
The inventions of able scientists,
The operations of dexterous surgeons,
The utterances of holy saints,
The thoughts of the *Bhagavad Gita*,
The revelations of the Upanishads,
Speak of God and His wisdom.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

How did Mirabai express the pain of her separation from the Lord?

Swami Sivananda: The feelings of a devotee who suffers from *viraha*, separation, can hardly be described in words. One will have to experience it oneself. Though a painful experience indeed for the devotee, it intensifies the love towards the Lord.

Become a gopi. Become a Gouranga. Become a Mira. Then only you can feel and know what viraha is. Without viraha you cannot meet the Lord, you cannot have His darshan. Mira has expressed her feelings in the following poems. They pierce the heart of every reader.

I have watered the creeper of love with my tears.
Now the creeper has grown, the fruit shall be bliss.
The Lord of my heart is delaying.
The clouds of grief are enveloping me.
The scattered clouds have come,
But they have not brought any news from my Beloved.
I have planted the vine of love and irrigated it again and again
With the waters of tears.
The whole world sleeps, I alone sit awake to meet my Beloved.
There is one like me who sits in her palace and strings a necklace of pearl,
There is another who strings a garland of tears.
When shall I meet my Beloved Giridhar Nagar,
When shall the bower of joy come?
My pain in the heart will vanish only by meeting my Lord.
My Lord! I am restless,
My eyes long for Thy vision,
I feel one night as half a year.
O Lord! To whom shall I tell the pang of separation?
My bosom heaves at every sound,
O Lord, when will Thou meet me?
I cannot bear the pain any longer.
Why art Thou so unkind, O Lord?
I am sleepless all the night,
I am waiting the whole night to meet my Beloved.
My body is emaciated O Lord, Thy name is on my lips.
As the chatak looks out for the clouds,
As the fish pines for the water,
Mira is pining to meet her Beloved.

The pain of separation burns my heart,
How can I live without my Beloved?
My heart is restless without Thy vision.
When shall I see Thy sweet face, O my Beloved,
When shall I hear Thy sweet voice?
I am quite restless, O Lord.
Meet Thou soon, I cannot wait any longer,
The secret arrow of love has pierced my heart,
It has come through the other side.
My heart is burning in separation from my Lord,
My hunger is lost, my sleep is gone.
Dwell in my eyes, O Giridhar Nagar,
Enthrone in my heart!
Let me hear Thy flute,
Let me behold Thee in every being;
I am dancing and singing to have a sight of Thee.
I cannot suppress my tears however much I try,
They flow like streams and drench my clothes.
I am waiting the whole night to meet Thee,
Every sound stirs me up.
The bosom heaves, the eyes ache, the heart burns.
I find solace in my tears, quenching my thirst,
Joy in Thy remembrance, pleasure in Thy name,
Bliss in my dancing, happiness in singing Thy praise.
Mira's Lord is Giridhar, she cannot live without Him.

Throughout the history of India, why have so many of the great saints, sages and inspirers spoken about the power of music and dance?

Swami Satyananda: Mirabai, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Ramakrishna Paramahamsa spoke about singing and dancing to God's name. Swami Sivananda used to sing and dance. Once in 1950, at the University in Benares, he was dancing on a stage that had been made for him. While he was dancing to *Agara Bam*, one of the wooden boards broke. Lord Shiva also dances while Parvati sings. Even Ganesha dances, despite his fat tummy! Ganesha eats well, dances and sings.

Sing me a bhajan. I am a lover of music; everybody loves music. Even animals and demons love music. A person who does not love music is neither a human being, an animal or a demon. Ravana and Kamsa had music in their court. In Hindu mythology, Ganesha is considered to be an intellectual, Shiva is considered to be erratic, Vishnu is the one who holds the royal court and Brahma is a scholar.

The human mind is evolving and changing and it finds great rest, relaxation and solace in music. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Sweet music cools the heat of the atma."

Do you think music and dance are a person's natural expression?

Swami Satyananda: In Indian culture, Shiva is the master of dance, the beautiful dancer and the dancer loved by all – *Nataraja Nataraja nartan sundar Nataraja*. *Shivaraja Shivaraja Shivakami priya Nataraja*. Once Shiva and Parvati were having a dance competition. Shiva would give a performance and Parvati would follow. They danced continuously and finally Shiva adopted a pose that Parvati could not do. This pose became the immortal posture of Nataraja and it is in the Chidambaram temple near Chennai, South India.

After Shiva came Sri Krishna. Sri Krishna brought dance to the level of the masses, to the cowherd boys and girls who graze and milk the cows. Sri Krishna is supposed to be the master of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but just like Swami Niranjan, he had no schooling and was illiterate. Swami Niranjan never knew what a schoolmaster was nor a desk, pen and paper; Sri Krishna had a similar destiny. During childhood and adolescence he lived incognito with the cowherd boys and girls. There he used to dance and dance and the girls used to also dance and dance. This dance has become immortal in Indian history and is called the rasa lila, the cosmic dance, the celestial dance and the divine dance. We call it the dance of purusha and prakriti, the dance between ida and pingala. We have given it so many names. Sri Krishna danced and the rasa lila has become immortal.

Sri Krishna and Shiva were masters of dancing; they were perfect dancers. Shiva's Nataraja and Sri Krishna's rasa lila were missing from Indian life for two or three hundred years and during this period women and men were not allowed to interact with each other. However, man is born free and he wants to be free; dancing is his right and singing is his soul. It is the only time he can be happy. Otherwise he is dancing after money, the bottle, this and that; but that dancing is full of tensions.

Puchhate Ho Kanhaiyaa Kahaa Hai

Puchhate ho kanhaiyaa kahaa hai,
Kahi gauen charaate milenge
Puchhate ho kanhaiyaa kahaa hai,
Kahi raasa rachaate milenge
Yaa kisi vriksha ke neeche baithe
Apani vanshi bajaate milenge.

Chaandani raata Yamuna ke tata para raasa
Honge rachaate muraari
Yaa kahi rupa apanaa badalakara,
Radhika ko rijhaate milenge
Radhika ko rijhaate milenge.

Shaayada draupadi ne hooga bulaayaa,
Khinchataa hogaa saari duhshaasana
Taba to nishchaya hi kaurava sabhaa mei,
Shyaama saari barhaate milenge
Shyaama saari barhaate milenge.

Unako dhundho kurukshetra mei jaa,
Bhrama mei arjuna pare hon na shaayada
Roka kara usa dhananjaya ko mohana,
Gyaana gitaa sunaate milenge
Gyaana gitaa sunaate milenge.

Unako dhundhoge chanchala kahaa taka,
Apane mana ko jaraa tuma tatolo

Prema mei hi kanhaiyaa base hai,
Prema hai to bulaate rahenge
Prema hai to bulaate rahenge.

What is the meaning and sentiment of the bhajan 'Puchhate Ho Kanhaiyaa Kahaa Hai'?

Swami Niranjanananda: This is an exceptionally beautiful bhajan. It is in form of question and answer. The question is being asked, "Where is Krishna?" The answer is given, "You are asking where is Krishna? There are only few places where he can be. Either he is with the cows in the field, or he is sitting under some tree playing his hypnotic flute, or he is teasing Radha in some place. If you look in the moonlit night on the banks of Yamuna, there you may find Krishna dancing, or he might have changed his form and is eluding people.

"It is quite possible that Draupadi would have called him, where her robes were being pulled by Dushasana, and there definitely you will find Krishna, who is increasing the length of Draupadi's sari. Or you can also search him in Kurukshetra, because there, possibly Arjuna is in delusion, and after stopping the chariot, Krishna would be giving the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Arjuna.

"How much are you going to search for this person, for this inspiration? You don't have to search for him under a tree or with the cows or with gopis. You don't have to search for him in the battlefield or beside the banks of Yamuna. You just have to discover in your mind where he resides, and remember that God resides only where there is love. God resides only where there is love." This is the sentiment of the bhajan.

Life is Complex Nowadays

Life is complex nowadays,
Struggle is keen;
Here is an easy way
Of worshipping the Lord.

Consider your house
As a temple of the Lord,
Or Vrindavan or Ayodhya;
Your wife, children and others
The holy company of bhaktas.

Consider every word you speak
As the japa of the Lord's Name,
And the praise of the Lord;
Every action as service of the Lord.
Your lying in the bed,
As prostration before the Lord;
Your daily walk and moving about
As perambulation of the Lord.

Consider the lights that you burn
In the evening
As waving lights to the Lord.

Consider sleep as samadhi;
Give the food as offering
To the Lord
And then take it as His Prasad.
You will attain happiness
Here and hereafter,
If you worship God in this way.

Life is short, time is fleeting,
Start doing it right now.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

DANCE

Is dancing a way to deepen a bhakta's devotion?

Swami Satyananda: In my childhood I had these experiences in my birthplace, Kumaon, where the famous dancer Uday Shankar had his Cultural Centre. When I was about ten years old I started learning dancing at his centre. Uday Shankar

and I performed together right up to 1962. During that period, when I practised I would lose contact with time, place, object and environment. I would forget everything connected with my own body and mind. All I would remember was the rhythm and timing of the dance sequence. This is the power of music and dance.

Sri Krishna was a great dancer. He used to dance with the gopis and the cowherders and those dance sequences are now depicted in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* as rasa lila. Sri Krishna's dance with the gopis on full moon night shows explicitly that through such devotional dance and song one can experience the presence of the Lord and become completely lost in devotion to Him.

Bharat Natyam is an ancient art form, the oldest dance tradition of India. In our country, dance is not performed for sensual pleasure but as an expression of bhakti. In the vedic tradition, dance is an expression of the devotion of inner consciousness. When the heart is filled with joy it dances, and when the heart rejoices, the body also swings into dance. Odissi is a beautiful and graceful dance form from Orissa. Kuchipudi is the dynamic dance style from Andhra Pradesh.

A person should know a practice by which he can forget the vagaries of the mind, by which he can transcend the restlessness of the mind, by which the mind can attune to the inner Self and move to the higher experiences.

What is the science of dance?

Swami Satyananda: Dance is a very great science. Just as we join the letters to make words, sentences, ideas, subjects and literature, in the same way, dance also has a language. That language is made up of postures of the body – whether it is eye movements, hand movements, facial expressions or anything else. Just as the letter 'ka' is different from 'bha,' there is a difference in the eye and body movements. This is the core language of dance that is taught by Bharata in the *Natya Shastra*.

The *Natya Shastra* of Bharata is a volume in Sanskrit, written in sloka form. Just as there is a grammar guide

for Sanskrit by Panini, the *Natya Shastra* of Bharata is the equivalent for dance. Each movement of the body is indicative of something. Feeling, pace, expression, posture; these form the different elements and tones of dance.

There is another form of dance, *katha kalakshepam*, dance based on a story. It is dance but not pure dance; it is the experimental form of dance. For example, *Kumarasambhavam* by Kalidas is the story of Kartikeya's birth. The story includes Shiva carrying Sati's corpse and wandering in desolation, followed by Narada's promise, Parvati's penance and then Shiva and Parvati's marriage. The description of Parvati's penance in *Kumarasambhavam* is amazing. The armlets around Parvati's upper arms slip down to her elbows, then to her wrists and finally fall to the ground. This is depicted through dance.

Just as there is verse and prose in language, in the same manner, there are ways to depict a story in dance. This is called katha kalakshepam. A specific form of dance is used to depict and narrate a story. While narrating the story, the main episodes are depicted through different postures. The way the postures are to be used to depict a story are put down in great detail in Bharat Natyam; you cannot just do as you please. It is clearly specified how to depict or represent the heart-lotus, the lotus in mooladhara, the lotus at the very top of the head, Lakshmi's lotus, and so on.

Is it wise to discourage young people from some types of dancing?

Swami Satyananda: I learned music and dance at an early age. Music brought me to dance. I like dancing very much because Lord Shiva dances and Parvati also dances. Shiva is the father of all the dance traditions: Odissi, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Kathakali, Mohiniattakam. Parvati perfected folk dance. We believe that dance is close to spiritual life and, therefore, you should teach your children to dance. Don't stop your little ones from dancing, even break-dancing is all right.

Dance is never vulgar, it is always pure. Music is always pure. Even if milk curdles it is still milk, it is not impure just because it is curdled. Similarly, dance is still dance no matter what form it takes and, therefore, it should not be condemned. Music should not be discouraged either, irrespective of its style and form. All music is essentially devotional. Even cinema music is devotional because the mind becomes immersed in it. The husk falls off and is discarded outside and the kernel remains intact within.

What is the history of Bharat Natyam?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bharat Natyam is actually a beautiful expression of sentiments that people convey, that bhaktas convey in front of their beloved Lord. The tradition of dances in India is not a wild tradition like in the West. In India the dances are not wild but they convey emotions, sentiments, through the expression, through the mudras of hands, eyes, the expressions in the face. The songs that are sung in these dances are actually kirtan and bhajan, depicting and singing of the glory of God. Traditionally the dances in India are performed in the temples not in nightclubs.

Every year there is a Khajuraho festival, where the best, the topmost dancers of India go to offer their dance to God, and the creator of dance is Lord Shiva. So if the creator of the dance is Shiva then you can imagine what the intention of the dance is: to unite with the Cosmic Self. The traditions of dances are not created by social people, but by rishis and sages. Bharat was a muni, he is called Muni Bharat. He was not a sensualist, he was a sage and he created this dance form, which is known as Bharat Natyam. Similarly the other dances also have a beginning, a tradition which starts with a sage who is the exponent of that dance, Shiva being the first one.

The *nritya*, the dance tradition in India, is powerful, unique. Perfection in these dances can take years and years. The mudras taken from the tantras depict an emotion. Each mudra depicts a sentiment. The facial expressions and body movements depict a sentiment.

What makes music such a powerful medium for a bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Music fills the mind with sattwa. Music generates harmony in the heart. Music melts the hardest heart and softens the brutal nature of man.

Music comforts, soothes and cheers up people when they are afflicted. It comforts the lonely and the distressed. Music removes worries, cares and anxieties. It makes you forget the world. Man wants music to relax and elevate him.

The devotee sits with his tanpura to melt his mind in his Lord in silence. Rishi Narada roams about in the three worlds with his tambura in hand, singing *Sriman Narayana Narayana Narayana*. Music helps the devotee to commune with the Lord. It makes the mind one-pointed quickly. Music brings bhava samadhi. Tyagaraja, Purandara Das, Mira and Tukaram have all realized God through music.

God is one's best listener. When one sings for the appreciation of others, they listen but God doesn't. Music becomes a sadhana when one practises in solitude for an hour early in the morning. It is not necessary to have a melodious voice, because God wants to hear music, not a sweet voice. Music sadhana also includes sitar, flute and other instruments.

How did some of the ancient bhaktas relate to music?

Swami Sivananda: Tyagaraja was a devotee of Sri Rama. Most of his devotional songs are in praise of Sri Rama. He had direct darshan of Sri Rama on several occasions. Purandara Das worshipped Lord Vitthala, and spent forty years in the dissemination of bhakti all over the land through his songs. He heard the music of the soul inside and so he gave his thrilling music outside. Mira came face to face with Sri Krishna. She talked with Sri Krishna her beloved. She drank the Krishnaprema rasa. She has sung from the core of her heart the music of her soul, the music of her beloved, her unique spiritual experiences. Her language of love is so

powerful that even a downright atheist will be moved by her devotional songs. Shyama Sastrigal was a great devotee of Devi; he enjoyed the abundant grace of mother Kamakshi.

The Name of Sri Rama

Go naked if you want,
Put on animal skins.
What does it matter till you see the indwelling Ram.
If the union yogis seek
Came from running around naked,
Every deer in the forest would be redeemed.
If shaving your head
Spelled spiritual success,
Heaven would be full of sheep.
And brother, if holding back your seed
Earned you a place in paradise,
Eunuchs would be the first to arrive.
Kabir says: Listen brother,
Without the name of Rama
Who has ever attained anything?

—*Kabirdas*

How does sound and music affect the devotee?

Swami Sivananda: There is a great shakti in every word. The utterance of the word 'hot pakora' brings saliva in the mouth. If one utters the word 'faeces' when a man is taking his meals, he will immediately vomit. When such is the case with ordinary words, what to speak of the names of God! Every name of God is filled with various divine shaktis and nectar.

An objector says, "If I say, 'Sugar candy, sugar candy," can I get it? How can I see God if I simply utter *Rama*, *Rama*?" In the case of sugar candy, sugar candy is outside, but God resides in the chamber of your heart. He is close to you. By repeating *Rama*, *Rama*, the mind becomes one-pointed. It melts in silence and in the heart you get darshan of God. The name of God is as good as God Himself. God is

Chaitanya and so is His name. It is not so with other objects or names of objects.

There is a man in sound sleep. The pranas are there, in and with him. He will not hear if one calls by addressing him with "*Prana, Prana*." Calling him by his name Rama or Shyama, he will hear and will get up from his sleep. Such is the power of *naam*, the name. Naam is nothing but Chaitanya personified.

Earth is greater than all objects. As earth rests on Adisesha, Adisesha is greater than the earth. As snake is an ornament of Lord Siva's hand, Siva is greater than the snake, Adisesha. As Lord Siva meditates on Sri Rama, Rama is greater than Lord Siva. As Rama's name is still remembered, the name of Sri Rama is greater than Sri Rama himself. Singing the names of God has a tremendous influence over the mind that is filled with passion and evil desires. It brings incalculable benefits. There is no doubt about this.

What is the power of sound?

Swami Satyananda: Sound waves quickly affect the sub-conscious mind. Sweet song relaxes muscular tensions; then alone, proper aid is received in reaching the goal. With mental tensions continuing, no concentration can be achieved. Holy songs remove the unholy tendencies of the mind. The external sound turns inward and purifies the veins, and the mind full of pleasure becomes qualified to visualize easily the form of God.

The point is that all creatures, not only humans, but birds, animals, vegetation and trees are receptive to music. Music is God-given. You try it out while working in your fields or in your vegetable patch. If you cannot sing, then put on good tape-recorded music, or at least chant the name of God – *Sri Rama Jaya Rama Jaya Jaya Rama*. Who doesn't know how to sing, how to cry, how to laugh? Laughing, crying and singing are all nature's gifts; these are natural, instinctive faculties. Who has taught you to cry, to laugh, to sing? Thus, laughing, crying, singing, eating and sleeping are all given

to us by God without training. They come naturally and spontaneously.

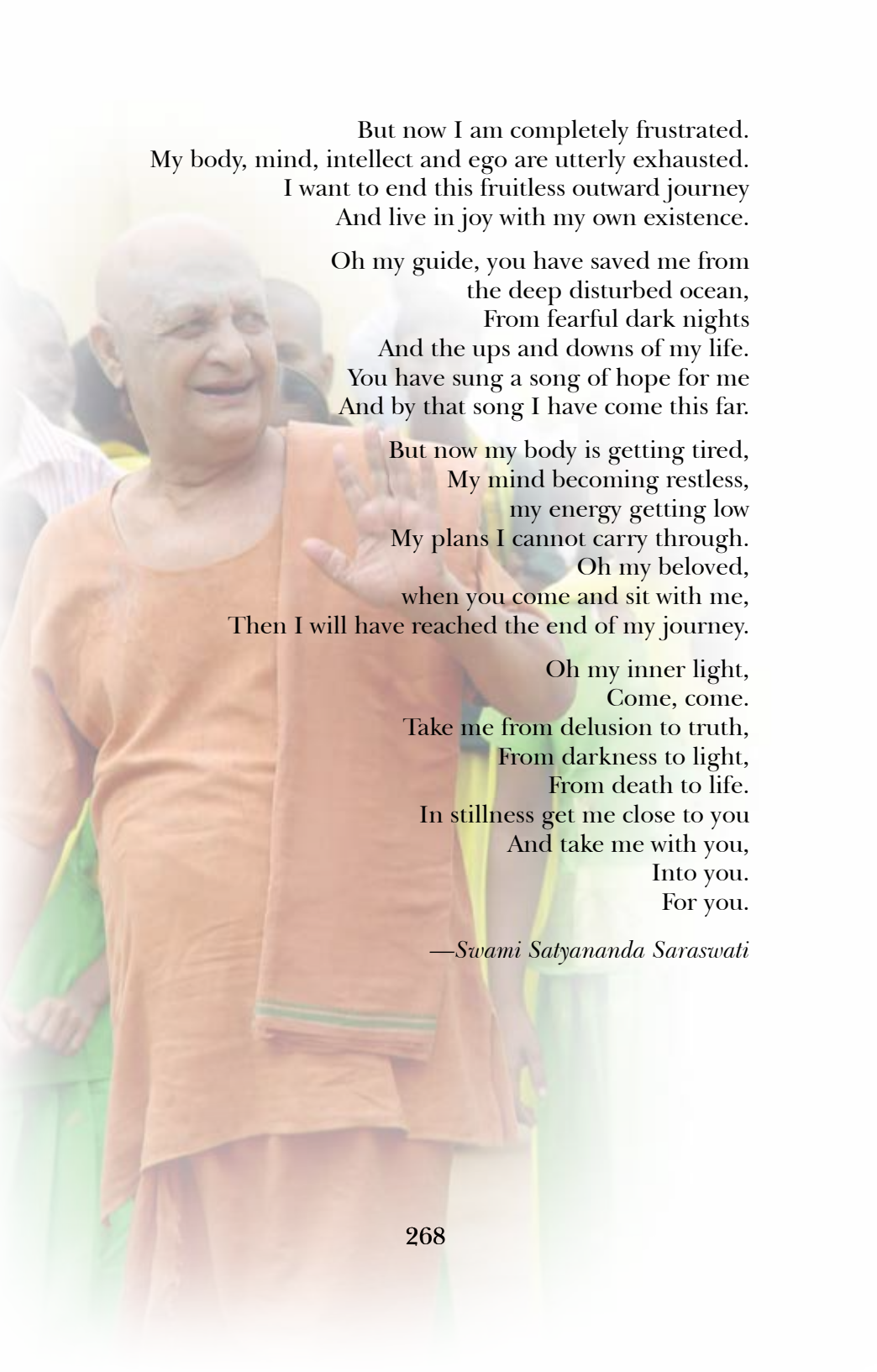
I am saying this to bring out the glory and the impact of music on all living beings. In life you will have to accept the power of music. Music is the easiest, quickest, cheapest, safest and surest path to reach the goal of life. All those means which man has to reach out to God, to entertain God, to please God, to get near to God and to attain God are subordinate to the power of music. Pooja, flowers, arati and sweets are all subsidiary. Music is the best and the foremost means of worshipping God.

Surrender

I surrender my heart to you
Whom I don't know.
I surrender my mind to you
In whom I never believed.
Oh God, Oh Swami, now I have come
To surrender my whole self to you.

After wandering for ages
Amidst problems and confusion,
Successes and failures,
Ego and desires,
At last when the sun is scorching
And the nights frozen
And the way is blind to follow,
I am seeking your light,
Guidance and warmth.

It is true that I neglected you
And never even accepted your existence,
I hated those who loved you.
Oh God, I considered my desires
more important than you.
And I don't want to hide this from you,
In my mind I never wanted to remember you.



But now I am completely frustrated.
My body, mind, intellect and ego are utterly exhausted.
I want to end this fruitless outward journey
And live in joy with my own existence.

Oh my guide, you have saved me from
the deep disturbed ocean,
From fearful dark nights
And the ups and downs of my life.
You have sung a song of hope for me
And by that song I have come this far.

But now my body is getting tired,
My mind becoming restless,
my energy getting low
My plans I cannot carry through.
Oh my beloved,
when you come and sit with me,
Then I will have reached the end of my journey.

Oh my inner light,
Come, come.
Take me from delusion to truth,
From darkness to light,
From death to life.
In stillness get me close to you
And take me with you,
Into you.
For you.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

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Glossary

Advaita – non-duality
Ajnana – ignorance, spiritual ignorance
Akharas – place for martial arts, sacred place or headquarters for a sannyasi sect
Anubhava – direct intuitive experience
Anugraha – divine grace; kindness; assistance
Aparokshanubhuti – direct experience, state of intuitive experience
Aradhana – service, adoration
Aradhya – symbol, object of worship
Arati – worship involving waving of lights with reverence before a deity
Asakti – attachment
Ashram – place of spiritual practice and growth through internal and external labour
Asuras – demons
Atma, **atman** – the self beyond mind and body; principle of life, highest reality, Supreme Consciousness, spirit, soul
Atmajnana – direct knowledge of the self
Atmanivedan, **atmanivedanam** – complete self-surrender
Avadhoota – ascetic who has renounced all worldly attachment and connections, *naga babas*
Avatar – descent or incarnation of God to the mortal plane
Avidya – ignorance of reality; ignorance

Bhagavad Gita – literally, 'divine song'; Sri Krishna's discourse to his disciple Arjuna delivered on the battlefield of Kurukshetra at the commencement of the great Mahabharata war; one of the source books of Indian philosophy, containing the essence of the Upanishads and yoga

Bhagavan – God

Bhajan – devotional song

Bhakta – devotee

Bhakti – intense inner devotion in which the intellect, emotions and self are channelled towards a relationship with the divine

Bhakti marg – path of worship, ritual and adoration leading to the experience of bhakti

Bhakti Yoga Sutras – sutras on bhakti yoga, composed by Sage Narada and Sage Sandilya

Bhasma – sacred ashes

Bhava, **bhavana** – feeling; condition; attitude; inclination or disposition of mind

Brahma Sutras – famous, terse and far reaching classical vedantic text written by Sage Vedavyasa

Brahmin – the priestly caste; one whose consciousness is immersed in Brahman

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad – Upanishad from the *Yajur Veda*; considered to be one of the ten most important Upanishads and especially revered by the Saraswati branch of the Dashnami tradition

Chitta laya – dissolution of consciousness

Darshan – a glimpse; vision; direct perception; philosophy

Dasya bhava – feeling and attitude of relating to God as a servant

Devata – form of divine dignity or power; divine being representing the higher states of evolution

Dharma – the natural role one plays in life; ethical law; duty; the laws or fundamental support of life; righteousness

Dvaita – duality

Grihastha ashrama – the second stage of life according to the ancient vedic ashrama tradition, i.e. household or married life from 25 to 50 years of age

Guna – quality; the three gunas, qualities or aspects of prakriti (nature) are sattwa, rajas and tamas

Guru – one who dispels the darkness caused by ignorance (avidya); teacher of the science of ultimate reality who by the light of his own atma can dispel darkness, ignorance and illusion from the mind and enlighten the consciousness of a devotee/disciple; preceptor

Guru Granth Sahib – central religious text of Sikhism

Gurukul – educational system of ancient India, where children lived in an ashram or family of the guru and were taught a comprehensive syllabus for life

Havan – offering an oblation into a fire

Hiranyagarbha – cosmic mind or subtle body; Brahman; golden seed of the unity of life; it is said that Brahman alone is creating himself from his own substance

Ikshvaku – first of the solar kings

Ishta deva, **ishta devata** – one's personal chosen deity and form of worship

Ishwara – higher reality; God; non-changing, indestructible principle or quality

Japa – a meditation practice involving repetition of a mantra

Jiva – principle of life; individual or personal soul; living being

Jivanmukta – liberated in life; an enlightened person, a person purified by true knowledge of the Supreme Reality and freed from future births while still embodied

Jivatma – individual or personal soul

Jnana – knowledge, cognition, wisdom; higher knowledge derived from meditation or from inner experience

Jnani – one who expresses wisdom in daily life

Kalas – rays

Kali Yuga – the present age or yuga; during this cycle man is collectively at the height of technology, decadence, dishonesty and corruption of spiritual awareness

Karma – action and result; law of cause and effect

Karmakanda – another name for bhakti marg; the path of ritual and worship to attain the state of bhakti

Kirtan, **kirtanam** – singing of God's name; practice in which a group of people sing a collection of mantras

Kumbha Mela – enormous festival of bathing at four places on the river Ganga

Kundalini – the evolutionary energy in a human being; spiritual energy; Devi described as the potential energy of a human being dormant in mooladhara chakra, which when awakened, awakens the chakras, resulting in progressive enlightenment

Lila – literally, 'play'; activity of prakriti and its three gunas

Loka – locationless dimension; plane of existence, dimension

Madhurya bhava – attitude of a lover of the beloved deity

Mahabharata – epic of ancient India said to be composed by Sage Vedavyasa, involving the history and consequences of the great battle between the Kaurava and Pandava princes. It consists of eighteen sections and the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of it

Maha rasa – cosmic dance, divine dance

Mandala – visual image, form or symbol which one may visualize or concentrate on, externally or internally, may be two or three-dimensional; circular symbolic pictorial depiction of cosmic power and/or the human psyche

Mandir – temple

Mantra – words of power; sound vibrations which liberate the mind when repeated

Marg – path

Maya – means by which Brahman creates the phenomenal world; power of creation; illusive power; in Vedanta philosophy, the two powers of maya are: 1. the power of veiling, and 2. the power of projection; in Samkhya philosophy, another name for Prakriti

Moksha – liberation from the cycles of birth and death and the illusion of maya

Nagas – millitant sannyasa sect

Narada Bhakti Sutras – one of the main bhakti yoga texts, authored by Sage Narada

Nirakara – without form, formless; unmanifest

Nirguna – without quality or attribute; formless

Nirvikalpa samadhi – state in which the mind ceases to function and only pure consciousness remains; superconscious state where mental modifications cease to exist, resulting in transcendence of the manifest world

Nishkama – without desire, expectation or personal interest

Para bhakti – supreme devotion, bhakti. It is said to accompany or follow the highest knowledge and be a state of consciousness which is self-contained

Paramatma – cosmic Soul or Consciousness; Supreme Self; the atma of the entire universe; God

Parivrajaka – wandering mendicant; ascetic

Parikrama – circumambulation

Parameshwara – supreme being, another name for Shiva

Pooja – worship

Poornata – fullness

Prakriti – individual nature; nature; manifest and unmanifest nature composed of the three gunas; the active principle of manifest energy

Pralaya – dissolution, destruction

Pranava – another word for the sacred syllable *Aum* or *Om*, the primal sound vibration, the symbol of the Soul or Self

Prem – love, affection; tenderness; regard

Puranas – eighteen ancient texts containing the earliest mythology of the tantric and vedic traditions

Purusha – literally, 'who dwells in the city', in Sankhya philosophy purusha designates pure consciousness, undefiled and unlimited by contact with prakriti or matter

Purushartha – human attainment; self-effort; the four basic needs or desires to be fulfilled in life, viz artha (wealth), kama (desire), dharma (duty), moksha (liberation)

Ramacharitamanas – a version of the *Ramayana* written by Tulsidas. It is composed in poetic form and is chanted by devotees throughout India

Ramayana – one of the most famous ancient Indian epics, relating the life of Sri Rama, the most widely known version

was composed by Valmiki, containing about 24,000 verses in sections

Rasa lila – cosmic dance, divine dance

Rishi – seer; realized sage; one who contemplates or meditates on the Self

Sadhaka – one who practises sadhana; a spiritual aspirant

Sadhana – spiritual practice or discipline performed regularly

Sadhu – good or holy person, sage, saint

Sakara bhakti – love and devotion of God with a form, qualities (guna) or attributes

Samadhi – the culmination of meditation, state of oneness of the mind with the object of concentration and the universal consciousness; self-realization; the eighth stage of raja yoga

Samkhya – one of the six systems of Hindu philosophy, attributed to the sage Kapila

Samsara – illusory world; the course or circuit of worldly life; unending cycle of birth and death

Samskara – mental impression stored in the subtle body as an archetype; the impressions which

condition one's nature, causing one to react or respond in a certain way

Sannyasa – dedication; complete renunciation of the world, its possessions and attachments; abandonment of the phenomenal world

Sannyasi, **sannyasin** – one who has taken sannyasa initiation, surrendering everything to the guru and the spiritual journey

Sanyam – restraint, self-discipline

Satsang, **satsanga** – gathering in which the ideals and principles of truth are discussed; spiritual association; association with the wise and the good

Sakhya, **sakhya bhava** – attitude or way of relating to God as a friend; relationship between

Sayujya – absorption in God

Seva – literally, 'being That'; service; selfless service; to become one with the divine transcendental nature, and to express that nature in thought, word and deed

Shakti – primal energy; manifest consciousness; power, ability, capacity, strength, energy; counterpart of Shiva; the moving power of nature and consciousness; in Hindu mythology Shakti is often symbolized as a divine woman

Shraddha – trust, faith, belief; religious faith; composure of mind

Shravan, **shravanam** – to listen, to hear the scriptures; the second of the three steps on the path of knowledge in vedantic sadhana

Siddha – an adept or perfected person; one who has developed his/her psychic and pranic capacity to the point of mastery

Srimad Bhagavata, **Bhagavatam** – one of the eighteen major Puranas dealing with the avataras of Vishnu, it speaks in great detail about the life of Sri Krishna. See Puranas

Srimad Devi Bhagavatam – text containing myths and doctrines of Devi

Tantra – most ancient universal science and culture which deals with the transition of human nature from the present level of evolution and understanding to a transcendental level of knowledge, experience and awareness; a particular path of sadhana including mantra, yantra and other esoteric practices

Tapasya – practice of austerity

Tirtha – holy or sacred place, place of pilgrimage

Tyaga – renunciation or gradual dissociation of the mind from worldly objects and desire

Udasi, **udasin** – a philosopher, a witness

Upanishads – the philosophical portion of the Vedas, traditionally 108 in number, containing intimate dialogues and discussions between guru and disciple on the nature of the Absolute and the path leading towards it; literally, 'to sit near and listen' (to the spiritual teacher)

Vairagya – non-attachment; absence of sensual craving and desires; detachment; supreme dispassion

Vatsalya bhava – affection towards one's offspring; relationship with God as between parent

Vedanta – one of the six principle systems of Indian philosophy; literally, 'the last part of the Vedas'; the school of thought based primarily on the Upanishads; the doctrine of non-dualism (Advaita)

Vedas – ancient texts revealed to the sages and saints of India, explaining and regulating every aspect of life from the Supreme Reality to worldly affairs; four in number: *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama*, *Atharva*, which are further divided into the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishads; the oldest books in the library of mankind, parts of them revealed to sages and seers before 5,000 BCE

Veera bhakti – emotion of enmity; relationship Ravana had towards Sri Rama

Vibhu – interconnection, being interconnected

Vidya – knowledge or science, particularly knowledge of spiritual truth and non-mundane reality

Viveka – discrimination; right knowledge or understanding

Virakti – non-attachment, disinterest, indifference

Yajna – sacrifice; yajna has three components: ritual or worship, satsang and unconditional giving

Yantra – a geometric symbol of cosmic power designed to unleash the hidden potential energy within consciousness; used in meditation and concentration practices

Yatra – going on a pilgrimage; a journey

Yatri – traveller, pilgrim

Yoga – union; the root is yuj, meaning 'to join', 'to yoke'; a system of practice leading to a state of union between the individual and universal awareness; practices, philosophy and lifestyle to achieve peace, power and spiritual wisdom as well as perfect health, a sound mind and a balanced personality; one of the six main systems of Indian philosophy

Glossary of Names and Places

Arjuna – name of the third Pandava brother; son of Indra and Kunti; in the *Bhagavad Gita* he received divine revelation from Sri Krishna

Ayodhya – birthplace of Sri Rama

Badrinath, **Badrinarayana –** temple at Badri in the Himalayas; one of the four seats established by Adi Shankaracharya

Bharat – brother of Sri Rama; son of King Dasharatha and Kaikeyi

Brahma, **Brahman –** God of the Hindu trinity who creates the universe; God as creator; manifest force of life and creation; ever-expanding, limitless consciousness; absolute reality

Buddha – (566–483 BCE) 'The enlightened one'; commonly referred to the founder of Buddhism

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, **Gouranga –** (1485–1534) reformer of the Vaishnava faith; one of the contributors of the bhakti movement in India during the Mughal era

Chitrakoot – place of exile of Sri Rama where Tulsidas had darshan of Sri Rama and Lakshman

Dasharatha – king of Ayodhya; father of Sri Rama

Dattatreya – an ancient sage who learned from twenty-four gurus; considered to be an incarnation of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; author of *Yoga Shastra of Dattatreya*

Devaki – mother of Sri Krishna; wife of Vasudeva

Dhruva – bhakta famous for his steadfast worship of Narayana; the pole star is named after him

Durga – Goddess who removes difficulties, wife of Shiva

Gandhi, **Mahatma** – (1869–1948) Indian national leader who established his country's freedom through a non-violent revolution

Ganesha, **Ganapati** – elephant-headed Hindu deity; remover of obstacles; son of Shiva and Parvati

Ganga – river Ganges, most sacred river in India

Gopis – companions of the young Krishna in Vrindavan

Gorakhnath, **Yogi** – founder of the Nath sect; author of *Gorakhsha Samhita*

Govinda – another name of Sri Krishna

Guru Nanak – (1469–1538) founder of Sikhism

Hanuman – name of a powerful monkey chief possessing extraordinary strength and powers which he manifested on several critical occasions on behalf of Sri Rama, the Lord of his heart

Hari – name of Vishnu, the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the preservation of the universe; Supreme Consciousness

Indra – king of the vedic gods, the ruler of heaven; lord of the senses; the mind or the soul; the rain god

Jagannath – another name of Sri Krishna, worshipped with Balaram and his sister Subadra in Puri

Jambavan – King of bears who served Sri Rama; known for his medical skills

Kabir, **Kabirdas** – (1440–1518) poet and mystic, his teachings blend Hinduism, Sufism and bhakti

Kailash – sacred mountain in the Himalayas; residence of Shiva and Parvati

Kakabhushundi – he was cursed by his guru, Sage Lomasha, to incarnate as a crow; devotee of Sri Rama and narrator of Sri Rama's story

Kali – primal manifestation of Shakti; destroyer of time, space, object and ignorance

Kamsa, **King** – king of Mathura; maternal uncle of Sri Krishna

Kartikeya – son of Shiva and Parvati; older brother of Ganesha

Krishna, **Sri** – the 'black' or 'dark one'; eighth incarnation of Vishnu; avatara who descended in the Dwapara Yuga. Sri Krishna is perhaps the most celebrated hero in Hindu mythology and seems to be an historical figure. To uphold dharma he orchestrated the Mahabharata war. His teachings to his friend and disciple Arjuna during that war are immortalized in the *Bhagavad Gita*

Lakshman – hero of the epic *Ramayana*; brother of Sri Rama, son of Dasharatha and his wife Sumitra

Lakshmi, **Mahalakshmi** – goddess of fortune, prosperity and beauty, the consort of Vishnu

Mahavir – (599–527 BCE) contemporary to Buddha; founder of the Jain religion advocating non-violence, compassion and restraint

Mathura – name of an ancient town which is the birthplace of Sri Krishna, situated on the right bank of the river Yamuna

Milarepa – (11th century) Tibetan saint

Mirabai – (1547–1614) princess; Indian poet saint; devotee of Sri Krishna

Nachiketa – principal character of the *Kathopanishad*

Namdev – (1270–1350) Indian saint of Maharashtra; devotee of Lord Vitthala, a form of Sri Krishna

Narada, **Sage** – author of *Narada Bhakti Sutras*; devotee of Vishnu

Narayana – another name of Vishnu

Parvati – goddess and consort of Shiva, mother of Ganesha and Kartikeya

Peetha – place, seat, seat of a deity; shrine

Prithu – first king, from whom the earth received her name Prithvi

Rabindranath Tagore – (1861-1914) Indian poet and philosopher, founder of Shanti Niketan, West Bengal, which offers a model of high quality education

Radha – beloved gopi of Sri Krishna

Rama, **Sri** – the seventh avatara of Vishnu and embodiment of dharma, hero of the epic *Ramayana*; a heroic and virtuous king

Ravana – ten-headed demon king who kidnapped Sita; he was slain by Sri Rama; his ten heads symbolize attachment to the phenomenal reality

Rishikesh – sacred place in northern India where the river Ganga leaves the Himalayas and enters the plains

Sandipani – guru of Sri Krishna

Saraswati – goddess of knowledge, speech and learning, daughter of Brahma

Shankaracharya, **Adi** – (782–820) name of a celebrated teacher of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy, he was an enlightened sage who is said to have established the Dashnami order of sannyasa and authored a large number of scriptural works.

Shatrughna – son of King Dasharatha and his wife Sumitra; younger brother of Sri Rama, and twin brother of Lakshman

Sheshnag – name of a celebrated 1000-hooded serpent, represented as forming the couch on which Vishnu reclines, or as supporting the entire universe on his head

Shiva – state of pure consciousness, individual and cosmic, original source of yoga Lord of yogis; auspicious, benevolent one; name of the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the work of destruction; destroyer of the ego and duality

Sita – daughter of King Janaka and wife of Sri Rama, as recorded in the epic *Ramayana*

Sukadeva, **Shukadeva** – son of Vedavyasa; he narrated the *Srimad Bhagavatam* to Raja Parikshit

Surdas – (1478–1581) celebrated blind saint and poet of India; his devotional songs to Sri Krishna are known throughout India

Tukaram – (17th century) Indian poet saint of Maharashtra

Tulsidas – (1532–1623) author of one of the versions of the famous epic *Ramayana* called the *Ramacharitamanas*, which describes the life of Sri Rama. It is composed in poetic form and is chanted by devotees throughout India

Uddhava – devotee of Sri Krishna; a childhood friend of Sri Krishna who later learned bhakti from the gopis

Valmiki – name of a celebrated sage who meditated for so long that he became interred in a termite mound. He was author of the first *Ramayana*

Vasishtha, **Sage** – a celebrated rishi and seer of the Vedas; guru of Sri Rama; author of many vedic hymns His teachings are recorded in *Yoga Vasishtha*, one of the greatest expositions of jnana yoga

Vasudeva – father of Sri Krishna

Vedavyasa, **Vyasa** – compiler of the four Vedas in their present form

Vibhishana – youngest brother of demon Ravana; devotee of Sri Rama

Vraja – village near Vrindavan, home of the gopis

Vishnu – vedic deity; the second deity of the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva), entrusted with the preservation of the universe, a duty which obliges him to appear in several incarnations; Supreme Consciousness

Vrindavan – name of a forest near Gokula where Sri Krishna used to play as a child

Yashoda – foster mother of Sri Krishna; wife of Nanda

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Notes

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