

CHICAGO CALLING



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Editor: Swami Ishatmananda
Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago
14630 Lemont Road, Homer Glen. 60491
email: ezine@chicagovedanta.org
chicagovedanta.org

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EDITORIAL // Thanksgiving of America & Pancha Maha Yajna of India

This year I happened to celebrate the Thanksgiving day in a splendid way with our devotees in Queens, NY. My perspective that I shared with the audience on that day, I think, it will not be inappropriate to share it once again through this editorial at the end of the year.

Thanksgiving, with its roots firmly planted in American tradition, transcends geographical boundaries. The colonists, known as “pilgrims”, came from England in Plymouth, Massachusetts. During the first winter their supplies were insufficient. The Native American leader taught them how to catch eel and grow corn also gave food. After their first harvest in 1621 both groups shared a feast. Modern Thanksgiving Day started in 1863, during the Civil War, when President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national day of “*Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens*”.

In the rich tapestry of the Hindu tradition, gratitude is artfully woven into the fabric of rituals, such as the sacred aarti ceremony. This ceremonial offering of five symbolic elements—fire, water, flower, cloth, and fan — serves as a poignant expression of appreciation for the grandeur of creation.

Delving into the depths of Hindu philosophy, these symbolic elements, collectively known as Pancha Bhuta, symbolize the quintessence of matter. They underscore our interconnectedness with the vast cosmos. Each element presented during the aarti becomes a humble acknowledgment of the divine craftsmanship that has shaped our existence.

This intricate ritual finds parallel in the evening aarti performed by Vaishnavas, inspired by the pastoral escapades of Krishna and his companions with the cows. The symbolism within this ritual encapsulates the nurturing essence of mothers, inspecting and caring for their children upon their return — a profound testament to the significance of light, water, and cleanliness.

Beyond the ceremonial intricacies, our gratitude extends to the Rishis — the revered seers and composers of Vedic chants. Their profound words

echo through the corridors of time, providing a spiritual odyssey for those seeking higher realms of consciousness. The chanting of Vedic mantras, notably “*Om Bhur Bhuva Svah*,” serves as a conduit for cleansing the mind and seeking divine clarity.

In the broader spectrum, our gratitude envelopes all living entities — the majestic and the minuscule, the animals, birds, and insects alike. Recognizing their existence as a manifestation of the divine, our gratitude extends gracefully to the entire animal kingdom.

Thanksgiving, in its true essence, beckons us to selflessness — a reminder that our interconnectedness demands reciprocal support. The act of seeking help when in need, as exemplified by Nri Yajna, underscores that

gratitude involves not just receiving but giving.

Deva Yajna refers to rituals or sacrifices performed to honor and appease the gods or deities. As we navigate the intricate tapestry of life, gratitude should be a constant companion. A recognition of our indebtedness to our parents — the bestowal of life being an immeasurable gift — is a fundamental aspect of Pitri Yajna. However, the purity of gratitude diminishes when marred by selfishness. The true tragedy lies in a solitary departure from this world by those who hoard blessings, oblivious to the transformative power of selfless sharing.

Our spiritual culture does not just emphasize seeking blessings; it implores us to embody divinity through transformative thoughts and attitudes. This, indeed, is our solemn duty—to be conscientious stewards of nature, respecting and preserving the delicate balance of our environment.

In contemplating the five traditional thanksgivings — Rishi Yajna, Bhoota Yajna, Nri Yajna, Deva Yajna, Pitri Yajna, and— we are reminded that gratitude extends beyond mere material offerings. True thanksgiving is reflected in our attitude, in our commitment to environmental stewardship, and in the cultivation of a selfless spirit.





Sri Ramakrishna's Gift to the World

Swami Tyagananda
Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston

*This article is prepared based on the lecture that
was delivered on August 20, 2023 at VVSC.*

No amount of discussion can help in clearing all the doubts and questions we have about divine incarnations. Though do clarify several points of contention, they lead us practically nowhere when we try to probe into the mystery of divine incarnations. A retrospective view of history shows us that civilizations pass through an unending series of ups and downs: there is an epoch of glory, progress, righteousness, which gradually declines into its antithesis, a period of darkness, evil and all-round degeneration. Then some extraordinarily powerful individual appears on the scene and reverses the downward trend. Once again the upward march begins. It is the appearance of this great personage—such is his power that you wonder if he is a human being although he certainly looks like one—that we have learnt to call the descent of the Divine.

Why does the Divine come down? This question has been answered variously. Devotees have said that God is 'hungry' for the devotion and love of his Bhaktas, and so He comes down to quench His hunger. Some have said that His coming down has no definite purpose. It is merely a sport, lila. It is we, weak humans, who need a purpose to do something; we become bound by the purpose. But God is not bound by anything. Just as a little child plays merrily without any definite purpose or goal in view, even so the Lord creates this world and comes down periodically to play with His own creation. Some others have suggested that God does have a purpose in coming down. He comes down to teach man the mysteries of spiritual life. Divine knowledge and divine love can be taught only by the Divine. So He is the Supreme Teacher,

Guru Maharaj.

There are the famous verses from the Gita (4. 7-8) which point out that God comes down as incarnation when dharma declines and adharma is on the rise. One would be led to imagine that in the face of so clear and unambiguous a statement, it is futile to search for other reasons for God's descent. These two verses have been so extensively written about and so forcefully quoted from every pulpit that one is astonished why the purpose of God's descent has still remained a mystery.

The simple reason is that these verses raise more questions than they answer. How do we interpret 'the protection of the good' and 'the destruction of the wicked'? In the lives of Sri Rama and Sri Krishna not much of interpretation seems necessary: we see them actually destroying the wicked. There is, however, sufficient reason to assume that even Rama and Krishna did not destroy all the wicked people of their times. Then came Buddha, Christ, Sankara, Chaitanya and Ramakrishna. They did not destroy anyone. So we resort to interpretation and say figuratively that they destroyed the demon of wickedness, unrighteousness, and evil. But was this demon really destroyed after their advent? That is to say, did wickedness, unrighteousness and evil vanish from the face of this earth? History contradicts us at this point. Moreover, one would like to know why God has to come down to protect the good and to destroy the wicked. If He is almighty, can He not do it from up above, wherever He is?

Take the next point: dharma-samsthāpana, 'establishment of dharma.' What ever does this term mean? Our books say that Kali Yuga began

immediately after Sri Krishna passed away. Sounds so paradoxical! Among the four Yugas — Satya or Krta, Dvapara, Treta, and Kali — Satya Yuga is supposed to be the age when dharma in all its pristine purity and power reigned; then the degeneration began, ushering in Treta Yuga, followed by Dvapara Yuga, and finally came Kali Yuga. Thus Kali Yuga is supposed to be the age of maximum degeneration when the power of dharma is at its lowest. If Sri Krishna came to establish dharma one would expect an upward swing rather than a degeneration from Dvapara to Kali. So ‘establishment of dharma’ also seems to be a concept difficult to understand. These two verses of the Gita stand in need of a convincing interpretation which would solve the inherent difficulties outlined above.

Some Vedantic teachers have held that it is futile to engage in such speculations. They point out that, no matter what the purpose of God’s descent is, we know from the study of history that whenever He has come down — or, if you like, whenever we have seen an extraordinarily unique manifestation of the Divine in any human being — He has given to the world many things that were the needs of the times, holding on to which earnest and sincere souls have transcended death, suffering and finitude, and become immortal, blissful and infinite. All that we need to do is to recognize these divine ‘gifts’, make the right use of them, and achieve the goal of our life. When we realize God, they tell us, we will not have to wonder why He comes down as an Avatara; we will understand it perfectly in the depths of our being.

What were the divine ‘gifts’ Sri Ramakrishna gave to the world? Every student and devotee of Sri Ramakrishna would be able to discover many through his study, and from insights and experiences acquired through daily devotions. Three of Sri Ramakrishna’s gifts, however, stand out immediately. In fact, one may go so far as to say that only to those who make a proper use of

these three gifts are revealed the countless other gifts of Sri Ramakrishna. What are these three gifts? Devotees believe that these three gifts are His Form, His Name, and His lila.

His Form

A Vedantic text points out that every entity has five characteristics, viz existence, cognizability, attractiveness, form, and name. Of these, the first three — corresponding to being, consciousness, and bliss (sat-cit-ananda) — belong to God, the Supreme Reality, and the next two, to the world. The idea is that everything in this universe has Sat-cit-ananda as its substratum; what distinguish one thing from another are its name and form. When God comes down, as it were, into this world, he appears to have assumed the two characteristics of the world: form (rupa) and (nama).

Everything we perceive in the world has a form. But the form that God takes when he comes down as an Avatara has something special about it. It is not just one of the countless forms we encounter all around us. Dwelling on worldly forms can never bring lasting peace, bliss and fulfillment. Out of compassion for the suffering humanity God assumes a divine form, meditating on which devotees find a way beyond suffering. This is what we see when we study the lives of great saints and devotees. They did not, of course, all meditate on the same form. Every one of them had a Chosen Deity (ista-devata) and he meditated on the form of his Chosen Deity. Some of them have described in sublime poetry the beauty and splendor of the divine forms they perceived in their heart. These descriptions have come down to us as ‘meditation verses’ (dhyana-mantras) and have helped generations of devotees to visualize the different divine forms.

One of the most revolutionary things connected with Sri Ramakrishna’s life is that we now have for the first time a divine form ‘photographed’, and this has certainly facilitated visualization in the devotee’s efforts to meditate on him. Visualization with the help of descriptions available in the

‘meditation verses’ needs some amount of active and creative imagination. But now with Sri Ramakrishna’s likeness available through a photograph, that difficulty is overcome.

Faith is generally said to be blind. But there’s no getting away from the fact that it is faith that makes us stand before Sri Ramakrishna’s picture and pray to him with the firm conviction that he is hearing us. And hear he does; have no doubt about it. God’s presence can be felt very palpably in shrines and temples because many devotees pray to Him there with faith and devotion, and He hears them and answers their prayers. When we pray with intensity and devotion even in our family-shrine at home, or before the ‘personal-shrine’ in your room, He manifests Himself through the picture and makes His presence known to us in a special way. We feel His presence, because He is there, as much as He is in our heart and everywhere in the universe. If we are able to feel His presence in one place, feeling His presence in any other place — our heart, for instance — becomes only a question of time and our perseverance.

The human mind is a perfect blotter. It has an unending absorbing capacity. It partakes of the character of anything it dwells upon. Leave it unrestrained into the pasture of the world, and it becomes out and out worldly. Fix it on God, and it partakes of all divine virtues. ‘You are what you meditate on’ — is a fundamental law of spiritual life. Meditation on the divine form day after day, year after year, produces wonderful changes in the personality of the seeker. Such has been the experience and testimony of all the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. Truthfulness, purity of body, mind and speech, selflessness, compassion, faith — everything that Sri Ramakrishna manifested in an abundant measure — begins to trickle and pervade the being of the devotee who meditates on his divine form.

A fascinating feature of Sri Ramakrishna’s form is its universal character. Most other divine forms have remained bound within the limits of a particular race, religion or caste. But Sri

Ramakrishna’s form has somehow managed to cut across all such barriers separating one person from another. His form is today being adored, worshipped and meditated on in several parts of the world. The number of people doing so may be small, but the important point is that these people come from widely divergent backgrounds of race, religion, culture and society. How has Sri Ramakrishna become their unifying point?

One reason why this has become possible is that Sri Ramakrishna had firsthand knowledge of most of the major faiths of the world. He himself had practiced them for a time, and had discovered by actual experience that all religious paths lead the seeker ultimately to the same spiritual goal. Sri Ramakrishna encountered God in His innumerable divine forms and saw these forms merging into his own body. Today he is worshipped, therefore, as Sarva-deva-devi-svarupa, ‘the embodiment of God in all His different forms.’ So no matter in which religious setting a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna is born and brought up, he has to reject nothing in order to love Sri Ramakrishna. On the other hand, he finds his heart and spirit broadening out, ready to embrace the whole universe as his own.

Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings are as universal as his form, and have remained to this day refreshingly free from narrow dogmatism, exclusiveness, and bigotry. It is mainly these two features that have given Sri Ramakrishna’s form a universal appeal and have drawn to him sincere seekers of God from all corners of the world.

His Name

Sri Ramakrishna’s second gift to the modern world is his name ‘Ramakrishna’, which, in the words of Vivekananda, is ‘pure and auspicious, [and] converts sinfulness to purity.’

The power of the divine Name has been acknowledged in one way or the other in most of the religious scriptures the world over. God, it is said, is not different from His Name. This idea is concretized through an incident in Sri Krishna’s life. Satyabhama, we are told, tried to balance Krishna with gold and precious stones, but could

not do it. Then Rukmini put on the scales a tulasi-leaf with the name of Krishna written on it. That balanced the Lord!

In the Ramayana we come across Hanuman, who could cross the sea in one leap and reach the other side, all because he was continuously repeating the name of Rama. But Rama himself had to build a bridge to cross over! These stories are meant to impress on the mind of the devotee the tremendous power lodged in the divine Name and to tell him that, when the Name is repeated with faith and devotion, the power latent in it can be unleashed for one's spiritual evolution.

Constant repetition of the Name, japa as it is known in the Indian tradition, has a wonderfully purifying effect. 'All the sins of the body fly away if one chants the name of God and sings His glories,' says Sri Ramakrishna. It is said that japa transforms the physical body of the seeker into a spiritual body; he sees everything then as the embodiment of Spirit.¹⁰ No wonder, Bhakti teachers have strongly maintained: *japat siddhih*, 'Spiritual perfection comes through the practice of japa.'

When the seeker who is imbued with discrimination (*viveka*) and dispassion (*vairagya*) practices japa 'with a longing heart,' he is able to perceive the Lord's form and realize Him. Name and form are usually interlinked. The mention of a name calls up the corresponding form to your mind, and when we behold a form the name associated with it immediately bubbles up in our consciousness. That is why the practice of japa usually involves a simultaneous visualization of the form of the Deity whose sacred Name we are repeating. When both these processes go together, they become unified into a powerful spiritual practice, focusing the entire mind on the Chosen Deity. We become oblivious of everything else. As our concentration deepens and our awareness becomes more sharp and inner-directed, the form of your Chosen Deity becomes three-dimensional, throbbing with life, radiating Light, and producing in us inexpressible bliss. We stop thinking about Him, we start seeing Him enshrined in the lotus of our heart.

His lila

Whether we are repeating a sacred Name of God or visualizing His form in our heart — or doing both — we are trying to make our mind dwell on a single thought. Again and again, we struggle to create the same *vrtti* in the mind. Oftentimes we find it difficult. The mind feels so jumpy. It refuses to remain content with just one form and just one name. It craves for variety. And before we know it, hundreds of different forms and ideas crowd in the mind, pushing out the divine form we had been trying to concentrate on. No one understand a baby's problem like its mother does; in the same way, no one understands the problems of the babies in spiritual life, which most of us are, like God does. That is why every time He comes down he gives us another gift — His third gift — in the form of His divine play (*lila*) in this world.

You find it difficult to meditate on a single, unmoving form? The Lord says, 'Here you are. Take as many as you like of My "moving" forms. Meditate on the different incidents of My life. Don't dwell among worldly ideas. Take and feast upon the countless divine ideas you can get from My life. Don't contaminate your mind with the material, perishable forms. Select from My life as many different images as you like and drink them deep.'

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is the product of a deep meditation on the sport of the Lord (*lila-dhyana*). Mahendranath Gupta, who has become famous as M., maintained a diary and kept notes of all his visits to Sri Ramakrishna. He didn't write in shorthand. His notes consisted mostly of short phrases, even single words. He had, of course, no idea of publishing them. He had made the notes strictly for his personal use. When Girish Ghosh asked M. to lend him the notes, M. flatly refused, saying that he was writing them for himself and not for others. With the help of these notes M. used to often reconstruct the scenes and conversations he had heard. Those that saw him during such periods of profound meditation on the incidents from Sri Ramakrishna's life noticed that M.'s face

would beam with an extraordinary light, for he was not merely recalling the events of the past but was actually reliving those wonderful moments he had spent in the divine company of the Master.

Later on, of course, he decided to throw this spiritual treasure open to all true devotees of the Lord — and thus was born the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. The stenographic authenticity and accuracy of M.'s narration was certified by no less a person than Holy Mother herself. In a letter she wrote to him: 'All the words of His that you have with you — every one of them is true. One day when you read them out to me, I felt as if it was He [Sri Ramakrishna] who was speaking.'

The birth of the Gospel is a shining example of what lila-dhyana can achieve. M.'s meditation on Sri Ramakrishna's lila brought spiritual fulfillment not only to him but, through the Gospel, is continuing to do so to hundreds and thousands of readers the world over, to the present day. Meditating on the various incidents of the Master's life is something quite within the reach of most of us. Let us begin with that. It's a creative pastime, and with a little bit of positive imagination one can bring about wonderful renovation in one's image-making faculties.

Day-dreaming is bad, even harmful. Why not substitute it with this conscious visualization of episodes from a Godman's life? If we succeed in it, we will reap great benefits. For one thing, God will become real to us. He will come closer and closer, and become a part of our life. This in turn would supplement and strengthen our practice of japa and meditation. Lila-dhyana accelerates our spiritual progress and leads us ultimately to Spiritual Freedom, says the Bhagavata (1.8.36).

In this way when we learn to make the best use of the three gifts the Lord has given us — His Name, His Form, His lila — life becomes different. We become altogether different. Everything that we see, hear, feel and think about, takes on a new meaning. We see the world with a different mind.

And the world sees us as a different person! At this stage, the countless other gifts that the Lord has bestowed upon humanity in His different incarnations are revealed to us. We are drawn closer and closer to Him. Our whole being gets flooded with love for Him. And as we learn to behold Him and His glory in all creation, we learn to love His children too. Now is the time when whatever we do becomes His worship. We begin to see God in man, and our service to man becomes worship of the Lord.

A time comes, our teachers say, when we don't see God in man anymore; we see only God everywhere. After one of his lectures in America, a man stood up and asked Swami Vivekananda, 'Well, then, Swami, what you claim is that all is good?' 'By no means,' Swamiji answered. 'My claim is that all is not — only God is! That makes all the difference.' Yes, at that highest stage it makes a world of difference. The idea of 'all' itself vanishes there, when only the One remains.

Sri Ramakrishna's three gifts are meant to take us there to the pinnacle of spiritual fulfillment. And these gifts are meant for all, no matter what our color, nationality, race, or religion is. These gifts are now before us. They are ours for the mere taking. But we must be fit to receive them. When a qualified spiritual seeker (*adhikari*) takes these gifts and uses them well, his entire life gets rejuvenated. He finds all names and forms merging in the Divine Name and Form, and all ideas of the relative world merging in the ideas related to the Divine. His spiritual journey begins.

It is a journey from the Name (*nama*) to the Nameless (*a-nama*), from the Form (*rupa*) to the Formless (*a-rupa*), from the Relative (*lila*) to the Absolute (*nitya*). The three gifts of Sri Ramakrishna lead us on, holding us by the hand, as it were, to a state that is not a state, beyond the pairs of opposites such as the Name and the Nameless, the Form and the Formless, the Relative and the Absolute.



Spiritual Solutions to the Emerging Social Challenges

Swami Kirtipradananda
Vedanta Society of Greater Houston

*This article is prepared based on the lecture delivered on December 3, 2023 at the
Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago.*



ॐ नमः श्रीयतिराजाय विवेकानन्द सूरये ।
सच्चित्सुखस्वरूपाय स्वामिने तापहारिणे ॥

Good morning everybody. At the outset, I offer my respectful pranams to Revered Swami Ishatmanandaji Maharaj, and offer my heart felt namaskaars to all the members of the audience present here. I am thankful to you Maharaj, for giving me this opportunity to talk to the Chicago Vedanta Society devotees.

I was deliberating upon what subject to speak on and I thought it would be a good idea to talk on the subject, "Spiritual solutions to the emerging social challenges".

In the modern times are we having any challenge, any problem?

I feel that we don't have any problem, we have many problems.

I have had some first-hand experiences here in the US during my short stay so far. I came to Houston from Belur Math in the month of July. In August, Revered Swami Sarvadevanandaji Maharaj asked me to come to our Hollywood centre to get some exposure of the way of our working in the US centers.

While in Hollywood, on the way to visit our monastery at Trabuco Canyon, we found a lot of police vehicles being pressed into activity near a bar, just one and a half mile from our monastery. Some shooting incident had occurred. A former sheriff had some domestic problems with his estranged wife, and went on a shooting spree in a bar, killing half a dozen people.

I returned to Houston and a couple of weeks later, was supervising the preparation of Durga Puja pandal with some devotees at our ashrama premises. All of a sudden, we heard the sound of what appeared to be two cracker bombs from the marketing complex barely 150 yards from our

ashrama. What we thought as cracker bombs, turned out to be gun shots, fired by a person as a result of an altercation over a parking spot.

The week after that, there came the news of the mass shooting in Maine.

Why are we becoming so disoriented? Why are we losing our balance? Because we have not been amply careful in training our mind.

We, sort of pamper our mind and do not chastise it when required, as a result it becomes pampered, obstinate, and turns out to be a bad master. It runs unrestrained in an indiscriminate way.

Untrained mind is like a restless monkey.

Swami Vivekananda gave an interesting analogy of a restless mind, in which he compares the mind to the condition of a restless monkey, fed with a liberal dose of liquor, stung by a scorpion, and possessed by a ghost.

For restraining the senses, the mind has to be first controlled and trained in the proper way.

How can the mind be controlled?

This problem is not new. Arjuna, the great warrior in the Mahabharata war faced the same problem and he asked Sri Krishna, his charioteer and Lord for the solution. Arjuna said -

चञ्चलं हि मनः कृष्ण प्रमाथि बलवद्दृढम् ।

तस्याहं निग्रहं मन्ये वायोरिव सुदुष्करम् ॥ 6.34 ॥

"The mind is very restless, turbulent, strong and obstinate, O Krishna. It appears to me that controlling the mind is more difficult than controlling the wind."

Sri Krishna, having heard Arjuna's problem did not deny the problem. He gave a wonderful solution to it. He said,

असंशयं महाबाहो मनो दुर्निग्रहं चलम् ।

अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते ॥ 6.35 ॥

"What you say is correct; the mind is indeed

very difficult to restrain. But by practice and detachment, it can be controlled.”

Abhyās means practice. A concerted and persistent effort to change an old habit or develop a new one.

Vairāgya means detachment. The mind runs toward the objects of its attachment, toward the direction it has been habituated to running in the past. The elimination of such attachment eradicates the unnecessary wanderings of the mind.

Taking the mind away from the objects of sense gratification — this is vairagya.

Bringing the mind to rest on higher thoughts, spiritual values — this is abhyās.

The training of the mind begins at the thought level, what types of thoughts we entertain in our mind is of utmost importance.

Sri Krishna says in the Gita -

ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते ।

सङ्गात्सञ्जायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥ 2.62 ॥

“While contemplating on the objects of the senses, one develops attachment to them. Attachment leads to desire, and from desire arises anger.”

क्रोधाद्भवति सम्मोहः सम्मोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः ।

स्मृतिभ्रंशाद् बुद्धिनाशो बुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति ॥ 2.63 ॥

“Anger leads to clouding of judgment, which results in bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, the intellect gets destroyed; and when the intellect is destroyed, one is ruined.”

So the solution is we need to discriminate and also need to practice the cultivation of good thoughts, positive thoughts, and elevating thoughts consciously.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Sow a thought and you reap an action. Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny.”

In the modern times, we have become rather reckless and have been indiscriminate in entertaining the types of thoughts in our mind.

We get carried away by our thoughts, oriented towards creature comforts and sense pleasures,

without applying the faculty of discrimination.

As a result, there is a trend of continuous downward slide in the individuals resulting in the downward slide of the society.

We can see the trends of this downward slide in:

1. Increase in thirst for sense gratification
2. Instant expectations
3. Dwindling patience
4. Decrease of peaceful homes
5. Increase in crime, violence, and homicides
6. Break up of families
7. Decline in moral values
8. Rising Ego conflict
9. Violence because of religious intolerance
10. Increasing menace of terrorism, etc.

So, these are the emerging social challenges that I was referring to in the beginning of my talk. And we shall see what are the spiritual solutions for these emerging challenges.

All individuals seek pleasure and avoid pain.

All individuals want to be happy and be devoid of any misery. But the pleasure, the happiness that they seek, they seek it to be coming through their senses, through sense gratification.

All human beings, while pursuing for pleasures coming through the senses, consciously or unconsciously, ultimately seek everlasting peace, satisfaction, contentment and fulfilment.

But, in spite of possessing the objects of comforts and luxuries of life, still we are not in peace, we are not contented, and we are not fulfilled. Why?

The Shwetashvatara Upanishad says:

शृण्वन्तु विश्वे अमृतस्य पुत्राः। आ ये धामानि दिव्यानि तस्थुः॥ वेदाहमेतं पुरुषं महान्तम्। आदित्यवर्णं तमसः परस्तात्॥ तमेव विदित्वातिमृत्युमेति। नान्यः पन्था विद्यतेऽयनाय॥

“Listen ye, all the people of the world, who are the children of immortal bliss.

Even those who dwell on high, that is the devatas and Gods in heaven, you also hear this, I have realised that Infinite Being. And how is that infinite being?

That infinite being is blazing forth like the Sun,

for ever beyond darkness, beyond life and death.”

Very good. But how am I going to be benefitted by it? What good does it do to me?

“Realising that, one goes beyond death, mortality and attains supreme bliss.

There is no other path to go beyond death and suffering. There is on other way to be free from sorrow and misery.”

Mark the last stanza: नान्यः पन्थाः विद्यते अयनाय

If we are seeking everlasting peace, satisfaction, contentment and fulfilment then नान्यः पन्थाः विद्यते अयनाय There is no other way to be free from sorrow and misery. There is no other path to get everlasting peace, satisfaction, contentment and fulfilment.

Our search of peace, satisfaction, and fulfilment is directed in the external world. We seek for happiness from the objects of the external world.

If the centre of gravity of an individual is in the external world and not within, then one fails to understand one's self-worth and turns out to be a mere slave of things.

Why is it that the centre of gravity of an individual tends to be inclined towards the external world?

Our scriptures say,

पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत् स्वयम्भूः तस्मात् पराङ् पश्यति न अन्तरात्मनः कश्चिद् धीरः प्रत्यगात्मानं ऐक्षत् आवृत चक्षुः अमृतत्वम् इच्छन् (Katha Up. 2.1.1)

“The Self-existent God (Brahma, the creator) created the senses with outgoing tendencies; therefore, man beholds the external universe and not the internal Self (Atman). But only some wise man desirous of Immortality, with his senses turned away from sensual objects, sees the Atman within.”

We all want joy and happiness and we seek it in the external world – the world outside, in the form of money, relationships, property, houses, bank balance, and various other objects of sense enjoyment.

The objects of enjoyment titillate our senses and mind, gives us a moment of pleasurable sensory experience and we mistake it as real happiness.

But the titillation of the senses, the sense gratification does not last long, it is short lived. Soon after a spell of sensory enjoyment, follows the spell of misery. Pleasure and pain follow each other, this is the eternal law.

We keep running after the objects in the external world because, we get instant sense gratification. That is not real happiness.

Our search for real happiness in the external world is a misplaced search.

What has humanity's race for hoarding worldly possessions given us? What has the thirst for various accomplishments given us? What has humanity's excessive involvement in hedonistic pursuits given us?

They have given us nothing but anxiety, tension, corruption and other wrongdoings in the society.

What is the way out?

The reason why peace, satisfaction, and fulfilment have been eluding us is that we are ignorant of our own divine nature, our true Self. An individual, when unaware of one's divinity within, gets lost and stuck up in the external world.

When we reach the twilight of our life, inching towards the setting sun of our life, and we draw up our life's balance sheet, we look back towards our life and analyse whether I have put this human life to a good use. Did I utilise this human life for the purpose it was meant for?

What should be the purpose of human life?

In the 'Gospel of Sri Rāmakrishna', Sri Rāmakrishna, in his characteristic Bengali language says, 'Mānus aar mān hunsh. Jār chaitanya hoieche, sei mān hunsh. Chaitanya nā hole brithā mānus janma. -- A human being is one who possesses dignity and is conscious of his dignity. If the spiritual consciousness is not awakened in this life, then the human birth becomes futile.'

The term mānus used by Sri Rāmakrishna depicts the human species which represents the pinnacle of glory of the entire evolution process.

The process of evolution till it reaches the human level involves physical and biological evolution. The moment evolution reaches at the human level, the physical and biological evolution reaches its culmination. From here on, there is no more external evolution at the physical level.

The process of evolution takes an inward turn, and all further growth and development that happens is at the mental, intellectual, moral, and spiritual level.

The human birth is the acme of the evolution process because all the other species below the human level are instinctive in nature and are completely sense-driven. There is a wonderful saying -

आहार-निद्रा-भय-मैथुनं च समानमेतत्पशुभिर्निराणाम् ।
धर्मो हि तेषामधिको विशेषो धर्मेण हीनाः पशुभिः समानाः ॥

“Eating, sleep, fear, and reproduction – these are common to both animals and human beings. It is only the features of power of discrimination and right conduct with which a human being is specially endowed with. Devoid of these two features, there is no distinction between a human being and an animal.”

The sub-human species do not have the capability of experiencing higher visions and pursuing nobler aims. It is only when the process of evolution reaches the human level, the cerebral system is capable of experiencing higher visions and pursuing nobler aims.

So having got a human birth, the goal in life should be to make an endeavour to understand the highest spiritual truth.

The higher visions and noble aims, which raise man to the moral and spiritual level of existence, proceed from a deeper dimension of the human personality than the sensate level. So long a person does not strive for freedom from the sensate level, from the over dominance of the sense organs on oneself, and engages only in hedonistic pursuits, one remains a mere animal in a human frame.

Sense-gratification, pleasure-seeking, and indulgence in hedonistic pursuits can never be the purpose of a human life.

At the physical level, emotional level, and intellectual level, the joy and happiness that one gets is short-lived, and is temporary in nature. There is no real bliss in the temporary things. True bliss is found only in the Infinite. All lower types of joy – at the physical level, emotional level, and intellectual level, culminate in the supreme bliss of infinite God. It is this boundless, everlasting bliss of God-realisation that ought to be the purpose of human life.

This fact was stressed upon in the Shvetasvatara Upanishad about which I discussed a little while earlier.

Now coming to the next set of maladies of the modern-day-contemporary society – the tussle of the ego and erosion of moral values.

In the present times, there is an increasing disruption within individuals as well as in the society as a whole. The cause of disruption within a human being as an individual entity and in the society as a whole, is that we are becoming more and more ego-centric.

This has led to the erosion of human values. Gradual erosion of morality is the root cause for the problems that arise in family life and in interpersonal relationships.

Lack of practice of virtues like satya (truthfulness) and santosha (contentment) is pushing the modern society towards a moral crisis.

Sri Rāmakrishna said, the inner growth of a human being involves the transfiguration of the unawakened selfish ego into an awakened, illumined ego.

An important teaching of Sri Ramakrishna which can help entire humanity in our day-to-day life is the handling of our own ego. He spoke of the little-I in all of us and how to handle it.

Every human child develops the sense of ‘I’ at the age of about 2 to 3 years.

The ‘I’ that appears in the baby is only an initial datum. It has to develop and expand in a big way. The initial education of the child is to strengthen that ‘I’, that is, to strengthen its sense of individuality. Whenever the child wants to do

something, the mother and others around encourage it, so that the child can understand its own worth as an individual and learn to stand on its own feet.

Unfortunately, this initial education of the child happens to be the final education, and the result is an individual who is petty-minded, egotistic and unable to live and work with others.

That is why we are in trouble. Sri Ramakrishna called this kacha ami, the unripe-I. This has only one capacity, namely, colliding with other 'I's. This unripe-I, the kacha ami must be cultivated into a paka ami, the ripe-I.

He gave a beautiful parable to illustrate this.

In India, we have a system of joint family, staying together – grandparents, parents, brothers along with their wives and children and so on.

"Once, the head of the family went to the market for procuring provisions. While he was returning, one of the kids saw him. The kid left the other children with whom he was playing and went to the elderly member and asked – 'Baba, baba, what have you brought for me from the market'. He took out a mango from his bag and handed over the same to the kid. No sooner, did the kid got the mango in his hand, he quickly saw towards all directions, when he was sure that no one was watching, quietly ate the mango, wiped his face, and re-joined all other children in the courtyard as if nothing had happened.

Another day, again the head of the family went to the market for procuring provisions. While he was returning, another kid, younger in age compared to the earlier kid, saw him. This kid also approached the elderly member and asked, 'Baba, baba, what have you brought for me from the market'. This time also, he took out a mango from his bag and handed over the same to the kid. No sooner, did this kid receive the mango, he shouted at the peak of his voice to all the other children with excitement, 'Listen everybody, I have got a mango, come to me immediately, let us all enjoy it together'."

The first kid was tied down to his genetic system. He could not identify himself with the other children. He could not see anything beyond 'me' and 'mine'.

The second kid, the younger one, felt happier when the mango was shared. He felt happier when

all were happy. He was not confined merely to his genetic system; he could identify himself with all the other children.

We must try to be geo-centric in our approach to life and not ego-centric. That will help in sorting out the problem of ego-complex in individuals.

And coming to the last malady in the list that I referred to in the beginning – the malady of religious intolerance - the intolerance of other person's religious beliefs, practices, and faith.

Where is our society heading towards? One religious group refusing to tolerate the religious convictions and practices of another religious group – and this resulting in violence and killing of innocent people – women and children.

Swami Vivekananda had categorically pointed out this fact in the inaugural address of the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, where he said, *"sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now."*

This malady of religious intolerance was troubling humanity even then, 130 years back, and in the present times this malady has assumed even more humongous proportion.

Religion, which is a subtle force that elevates a being from the level of humanity to the level of divinity, when being misunderstood and misconstrued, can become a tool to create violence leading to bloodshed of innocent people.

The solution is that we need to understand religion in its correct perspective. Sri Ramakrishna in his own life carried into practice, the different faiths prophesied by different religions and shared his realisation to entire humanity in his simple Bengali language – Jato Mat, Tato Path. As many faiths, so many paths to reach God.

So we need to inculcate the ideas of toleration in the first place, and we should not stop just at toleration. Toleration is just a passive from of acceptance, we must inculcate the idea of Universal acceptance – that all religions lead to the same goal.

From the Shiva Mahimna stotram, Swamiji

quoted a beautiful passage at the Chicago Parliament which says:

रुचीनां वैचित्र्याद्भुजकुटिल नानापथजुषां
नृणामेको गम्यस्त्वमसि पयसामर्णव इव ॥ ७॥

"As the different streams having their sources at different places, yet they all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to thee."

Some practical hints on how to eliminate the friction and misunderstandings among the followers of different faiths were dealt upon by Swami Vivekananda throughout his addresses at the Chicago parliament.

I will share with you some excerpts from his address at the final session where he said,

"Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, 'Brother, yours is an impossible hope.' Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid.

The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant. Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth...

...holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not Fight,' 'Assimilation and not Destruction,' 'Harmony and Peace and not

Dissension'."

If we imbibe these universal ideas regarding religion, then the world would be a safer and better place to live in.

So we have discussed in length about the modern problems and the solutions to the same based on our ancient scriptures.

What next?

The way ahead lies in the course correction in our approach to life.

The scriptures say that we need to have a clear-cut goal or well-defined aspiration for this human life of ours.

What does a human being aspire for?

The innumerable things sought after, aspired for, or aimed to be achieved by a human being, are called **पुरुषार्थ** in the Indian thought system.

पुरुषार्थ have been categorised into four groups:

(i) **धर्म** – Leading a righteous life, with moral values.

(ii) **अर्थ** – Economic prosperity.

(iii) **काम** – Fulfilment of worldly desire, legitimate enjoyment, and sense pleasure.

(iv) **मोक्ष** – Emancipation or liberation from the birth-death cycle, realization of one's True Self.

अर्थ and **काम**, Pursuit for economic prosperity and pursuit for enjoyment and sense pleasure, have been receiving disproportionate priority in the modern times, resulting in so much of maladies and the remedy for it is, to be prudent and re-discover and emphasize the **पुरुषार्थ** of **धर्म** -- Leading a righteous life, with moral values and **मोक्ष** -- realise our own true divine nature.

A course-correction is the need of the hour and what is required is along with **अर्थ** and **काम**, adequate emphasis should also be laid on **धर्म** and **मोक्ष** as well.

I once again thank Revered Swami Ishatmanandaji Maharaj for giving me this wonderful opportunity to speak here at the Vedanta Society of Chicago, and thank you all for giving me a patient hearing. I conclude this talk of mine with a universal prayer to the Lord:

ॐ सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः।

सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मा कश्चिद्दुःखभाग्भवेत्।

"May all be prosperous and happy; may all be free from illness. May all see what is auspicious, may no one suffer."

BHAGAVATA (21): RUDRA-GITA

Swami Ishatmananda

After the great king, Prithu, his son Vijitasva became the king. King Vijitasva was also known as Antardhana since he had the power to hide from the sight of others. He received this boon from Indra. King Vijitasva was more interested in spiritual pursuit than the kingly duties like giving punishments, collecting taxes, imposing fines, and so on.

King Vijitasva distributed among his four brothers the four provinces of his kingdom. The Eastern province to Har-Yak-sha, the Western province to Vrika, the Northern to Dravina, and the Southern to Dhumra-Kesa.

King Vijitasva had two wives, namely, Shikhandini and Nabhasvati. Shikhandini had three sons and Nabhasvati had one son named Havirdhana. Among Hardhana's six sons, Barhisad married Satadruti and they had ten sons who were collectively called Prachetas.

Each of these ten brothers was pious and pure. They practiced severe austerity for a long period of time. One day, when they were traveling towards the north, the rarest of the rare incidents happened - they came face to face with Sri Rudra (Lord Shiva).

Sri Vidura, of Mahabharata fame, said to Maitreya:

स.गमः खलु विप्रर्षे शिवेन इह शरीरिणाम्।

दुर्लभो मुनयो दधुः अस.गायां आभीस्पितां ॥ (4/24/18)

Embodied beings (शरीरिणाम्) cannot contact (स.गमः खलु) Sri Rudra. The great Rishis, wishing to commune,

Sri Rudra (यां) practice meditation (दधुः).

Why is it so difficult to see Sri Rudra? The reason is Shiva or Sri Rudra is purity itself.

What is purity? Purity refers to a state of beings that's completely free from the sense of 'I'.

Where there is 'I' there is 'ego', and ego is the cause of separation from God, who is pure.

Hence, शरीरिणाम् or embodied beings cannot see Sri Rudra.

But these Pra-che-ta brothers saw Sri Rudra. Sri Rudra said to them I know you are the sons of Barhisad "युयं वर्हिषदः पुत्रा विदितं." I met you because I know you are qualified to receive the highest spiritual advice. Sri Rudra said-

यः परं रहसः साक्षात् त्रिगुणात् जीव सज्जितात्।

भगवन्तं वासुदेवां प्रपन्नः स प्रियो हि मे ॥ (4/24/28)

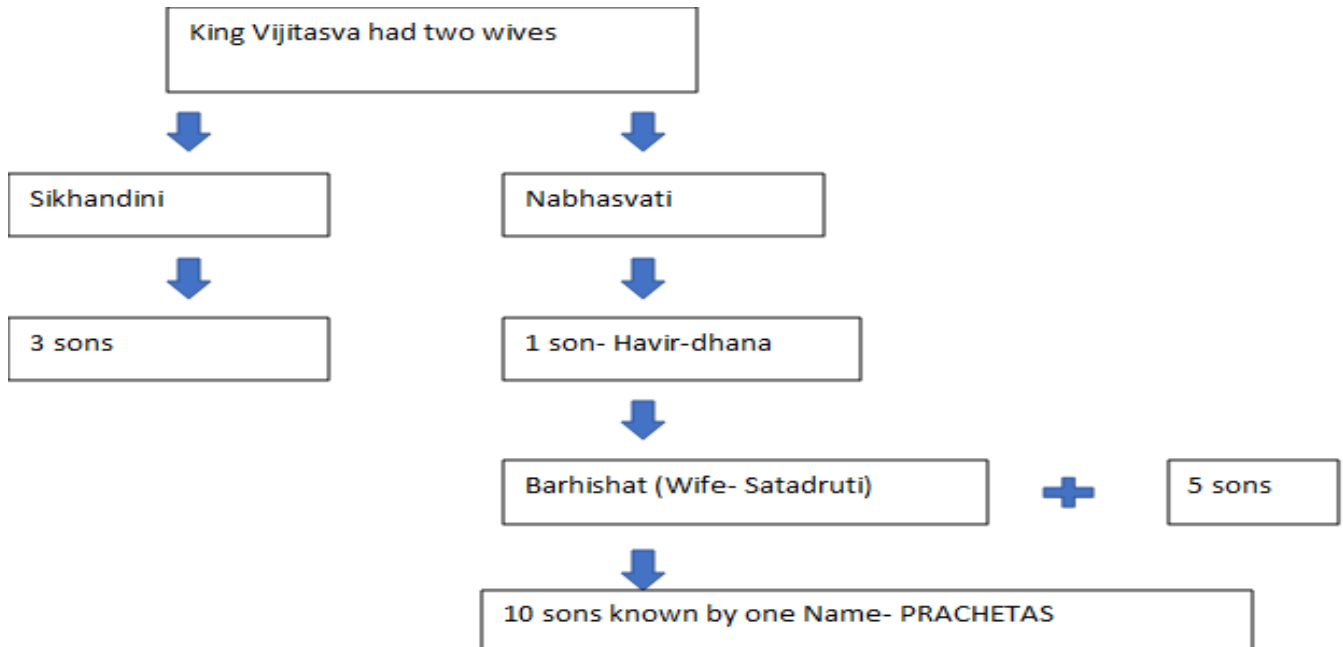
One who is dedicated completely to realizing Vasudeva, who is the controller of the subtle Prakriti & Purusa, becomes dear to me.

अथ भागवता युयं प्रियाः स्थ भगवान् यथा ।

न मत भगवतान्च प्रेयान-अन्य-अस्ति कर्हिचित ॥ 4/24/30

You being the devotees of Vishnu, are as dear to me as the Bhagavan Himself. In the next line, Sri Rudra said, those who are true devotees of Vishnu, for them, no one is dearer than me (Shiva).

This 30th Verse of the 4th Book, 24th Chapter, is a clear indication of unity between two great forces – the



Shaivas (devotees of Lord Shiva) and the Vaishnavas (devotees of Lord Vishnu). In

In verses 33 through 79 of the 24th chapter, where Shiva, also known as Rudra, reveals the true nature of Vishnu to the Pracheta brothers are famous as the Rudra Gita.

O Lord! Victory unto Thee! I'm announcing Your qualities so that great knowers of Brahman realize the bliss in Atman.

Thou are the Self-fulfilled still you are supporting the Creation- controlling the Prakriti- the Creative Power of God.

वसुदेवाय शान्ताय कुटस्थाय स्वरोचिषे ॥ 4/24/34

Salutations to you who have taken the form of Vasudeva - Peaceful, Unchanged, Self-effulgent.

सर्कषनाय सूक्ष्माय दुरन्ताय अन्तकाय च ॥ 4/24/35

Salutation to you who has manifested as Sankar-shana, the master of Ahamkara ('I' sense). Subtle and Infinite, you withdraw the creation.

नमो विश्वप्रबोधाय प्रद्युम्नाय अन्तरात्मने ॥ 4/24/35

Salutation to you as Pradyumna, controller of the intellect and the bestower of Consciousness on all beings.

नमो नमो अनिरुद्धाय ह्रिशिकेश इन्द्रियात्मने । 4/24/36

Salutations to you as Aniruddha, controller of

Manas (Mind)

स्वर्गापवर्गद्वाराय नित्यं शुचिषदे नमः ॥ 4/24/37

Salutation to you, the Gateway to Heaven and Salvation.

Vaishnava scholars, who are Dualist Vedantins, consider Supreme Brahman as the ultimate knowledge of the Veda.

They explain the creation as the four parts of the Vasudeva.

Vasudeva = Param- Atman & also Para-Prakriti

Sankarshana = Jiva- Beings

Pradyumna = Mind

Aniruddha = Ego

By practicing Charity, Scriptural Study, Holy company and Devotion, one can

Get rid of the Ego - the circle of Aniruddha,

Obtain a Purified Mind - the circle of Pradyumna,

Understand the nature of Prakriti - the circle of Sankarshana, and Finally, reach the circle of Vasudeva.

Vasudeva is the embodiment of six qualities (षड् गुण सम्पन्न), namely - ज्ञान knowledge (Para-Apara), शक्ति Power (Physical), बल, (Spiritual Strength), ऐश्वर्य (splendor), वीर्य (Valor), तेजः (brilliance).



“Everything progresses in waves. The march of civilization, the progression of worlds, is in waves. All human activities likewise progress in waves — art, literature, science, religion. Great waves succeed each other, and between these great waves is a quiet, a calm, a period of rest, a period of recuperation. All manifest life seems to require a period of sleep, of calm, in which to gain added strength, renewed vigour, for the next manifestation, or awakening to activity. Thus is the march of all progress, of all manifest life — in waves, successive waves, [of] activity and repose. Waves succeed each other in an endless chain of progression. Such a one was Jesus of Nazareth.”

— Swami Vivekananda

Introduction to the Cover Page :: The Way Out

*Brahmacharini Jagaddhatri
Sarada Convent
Vedanta Society of Southern California*

According to the Gregorian calendar, we are now transiting from 2023 to 2024. The old year will not be left behind totally but will continue to be with us subtly as memories – be they good or bad. Similarly through the transition of the gross body to a subtle one, the soul continues to move from death to birth within the labyrinth of experiences. When the muddle of this mortal life is set in the scorching fire, a spontaneous urge arises in the heart: Then “**What is the way**” to come out of this endless travel within a labyrinth? The cover image is an attempt to visualize the situation.

The word labyrinth probably has a pre-Greek origin. The oldest securely datable labyrinth symbol so far was found in the ruins of the Mycenaean palace at Pylos in southern Greece, around 1200 BC, in the Bronze Age. It was inscribed on a clay tablet. Since then for thousands of years it is being used as an analogy of life.

It is often considered a powerful spiritual metaphor representing a journey of self-discovery, transformation, and spiritual growth. In a spiritual context the labyrinth represents the path of life, with its winding, circuitous route symbolizing the twists and turns one encounters on their journey.

The center of the labyrinth signifies enlightenment, self-discovery, or spiritual awakening. As individuals move toward the center, they move closer to inner peace, wisdom, and understanding. Each step inward allows for letting go of thoughts, emotions, or experiences that no longer serve the individual's spiritual growth. Walking the labyrinth encourages the alignment of body, mind, and spirit. It promotes mindfulness and fostering a sense of unity and harmony within oneself. Labyrinths do not have

ups and downs but a single path leading to the center, emphasizing the idea that spiritual growth is an ongoing process.

A labyrinth is often seen as life's course, as a metaphor, due to its complex and winding nature with various paths, choices, and challenges. Each decision made and every experience encountered shapes the journey, leading to different outcomes. Like labyrinth, life is filled with unexpected twists, turns, and uncertainties with the center that symbolizes a goal or purpose in life.

Religiously speaking there is no direct mention of labyrinth in the Holy Bible or Hindu or Buddhist texts. Though in Ancient Mediterranean Cultures (Greek and Roman) and in the middle age some Christian traditions used labyrinths as a tool for prayer and meditation. Some labyrinths were designed in a circular pattern, suggesting cycles of death and rebirth. This can be connected to the Christian belief in Christ's resurrection and the promise of new life for believers. The use and interpretation of the labyrinth in Christianity vary among denominations and individual believers.

In Hinduism or Buddhism there is no direct historical or religious association the labyrinth. However, in Hindu philosophy, the concept of Maya refers to the illusory nature of the material world. The labyrinth, with its intricate and confusing paths, can be metaphorically associated with Maya, signifying the complex and bewildering nature of worldly existence. The circular design found in some labyrinths can be reminiscent of the cyclical nature of existence in Hinduism, where life, death, and rebirth are continuous cycles (samsara). This cyclical pattern might resonate with the circular paths of a

labyrinth, representing the eternal cycle of life.

The spiritual journey in Hinduism involves self-realization or the understanding of one's true nature (Atman) and the ultimate reality (Brahman). The labyrinth's journey toward the center could symbolize the inward journey toward self-discovery and spiritual awakening.

There are various paths in Hinduism, known as *yogas*, to achieve enlightenment or liberation (*moksha*). The labyrinth's winding paths might be metaphorically connected to these different paths of yoga — Karma Yoga (path of action), Bhakti Yoga (path of devotion), Jnana Yoga (path of knowledge), and Raja Yoga (path of meditation).

These days the labyrinth walk is a common spiritual practice that encourages introspection, contemplation, and meditation and a deeper connection with oneself and the divine. Spiritually, it can be seen walking towards the center or in a secular sense it can be used as coming out of the maze and being free.

In Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* too we see a student being tormented by the afflictions of the world which is like a forest on fire (*saṃsāra-dāvānala-tāpa-taptam*) seeks refuge from a guru. The student then asks: How shall I cross this ocean of phenomenal existence, what is to be my fate, and which of the means should I adopt (*katham tareyaṃ bhavasindhūmetam, kā vā gatir me katamo'styupāyah*).

The question was asked in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna about 19 times. Sri Ramakrishna himself asked this very same question, as well as people from diverse strata of the society — a Tantrik, a Vaishnava, a Brahmo devotee; a musician, a householder, a marwadi devotee; devotees of other traditions, some *sadhakas*, a number of followers of Sri Ramakrishna like Mahendra, Trailokya, Girish, and others.

Being asked this question Sri Ramakrishna is not answering all of them in the same way. As he could see through the heart of any aspirant he answered based on the seeker's area of strength or weaknesses. This article is an attempt to revisit Sri

Ramakrishna's answers in different contexts.

"Sir, **what is the way** to realize God?" asked a hired musician who came to Dakshineswar to sing for Sri Ramakrishna on August 13, 1882 in a religious festival. The Master was highly pleased with his music and told the musician, "There is a special manifestation of God's power in a man who has any outstanding gift, such as proficiency in music." Good qualities in human being are often accompanied by egotism. Therefore, the Master's answer for him was, "Bhakti is the one essential thing. To be sure, God exists in all beings. Who, then, is a devotee? He whose mind dwells on God. But this is not possible as long as one has egotism and vanity. The water of God's grace cannot collect on the high mound of egotism. It runs down. I am a mere machine."

Then Sri Ramakrishna confirmed that God can be realized through all paths as God is the Inner Guide who sees the longing of our heart and the yearning of our soul.. All religions are true; Even if every religion has errors. The important point is to have yearning for God. In his words, "It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him: ... the devotees call on God alone, though by different names. They call on one Person only. God is one, but His names are many."

Again Bhakti is also not a homogenous entity. Among Sri Ramakrishna's disciples Girish Ghosh was famous for his faith in his guru's words. His professional life brought him a lot of accomplishments, and at the same time it drowned him in with many worldly entanglements. Naturally, on Wednesday, February 25, 1885 when the Master came to Girish's house he asked, "What is the way for people like us?"

Sri Ramakrishna not only assured that, "Bhakti is the only essential thing," but also explained, "Bhakti has different aspects: the *sattvic*, the *rajasic*, and the *tamasic*. One who has *sattvic* bhakti is very modest and humble. But a man with *tamasic* bhakti is like a highwayman in his attitude toward God. He says: 'O God, I am chanting Your

name; how can I be a sinner? God, You are my own Mother; You must reveal your-self to me."

Atul, Girish's brother, an accomplished lawyer of the High Court of Calcutta, was also present there and asked the way to keep our minds on God. The Master advised him about "Abhyasa Yoga, the yoga of practice. You should practise calling on God every day. It is not possible to succeed in one day; through daily prayer you will come to long for God. The key term is "daily". To counter the daily connection of mind and world daily prayers are necessary. Vedanta scriptures say the same, "until the deep sleep and/or death comes, one must keep practicing Vedanta uninterruptedly (*Asupteramriteh kalam nayet Vedanta chintaya*).

But the Master knew that it is difficult to remember God while living in the world. On Sunday, April 9, 1882 when he was meeting devotees of Calcutta, he agreed on that point. Right away one of the devotees asked, "Then what is the way, sir?" The compassionate Master replied with an example, "Prayer and the company of holy men. You cannot get rid of an ailment without the help of a physician. But it is not enough to be in the company of religious people only for a day. You should constantly seek it, for the disease has become chronic. Again, you can't understand the pulse rightly unless you live with a physician. Moving with him constantly, you learn to distinguish between the pulse of phlegm and the pulse of bile."

Years later on Saturday, May 23, 1885 at Ram's house again when a devotee asked, "Sir, what is the way for worldly people?" The Master's answer remains the same: "The Company of holy men. Worldly people should listen to spiritual talk." But, a worldly person should also receive instructions from a real teacher, who has discrimination and renunciation.

A real teacher is not a mere scholar. "There is a big difference between a scholar and a holy man." Said Sri Ramakrishna. The mind of a mere scholar is fixed on the worldliness, "but the sadhu's mind

is on the Lotus Feet of Hari. A scholar says one thing and does another. But it is quite a different matter with a sadhu." On Wednesday, September 26, 1883 sitting in his room in Dakshineswar Sri Ramakrishna was recollecting, "In Benares I saw a young sannyasi who belonged to the sect of Nanak. ... He used to refer to me as the 'loving monk'. His sect has a monastery in Benares. I was invited there one day. I found that the mohant was like a housewife. I asked him, '**What is the way?**' 'For the Kaliyuga', he said, 'the path of devotion as enjoined by Narada.' He was reading a book. When the reading was over, he recited: 'Vishnu is in water, Vishnu is on land, Vishnu is on the mountain top; the whole world is pervaded by Vishnu.' At the end he said, 'Peace! Peace! Abiding Peace!'

In the Vaishnava tradition it is a common practice to chant the name of the Lord unceasingly. The belief is thus: as the name and the possessor of the name are identical – one gets benefit of being with God alone. "But" the Master begs to differ, "the Word is not enough. There must be something indicated by the Word. Can your name alone make me happy? Complete happiness is not possible for me unless I see you."

March 11, 1883 was the Master's birthday celebration. The whole morning there were Kirtan, spiritual discussions and the Master's room was packed with devotees from all over. After meal we see a Vaishnava Goswami was seated in the room. The Master asked him: "**What is the way?**" The (go)swami gave the traditional answer: "Sir, the chanting of God's name is enough. The scriptures emphasize the sanctity of God's name for the Kaliyuga." The Master did not contradict but complimented by saying, "Yes, there is no doubt about the sanctity of God's name. But can a mere name achieve anything, without the yearning love of the devotee behind it? One should feel great restlessness of soul for the vision of God." He made it clear, if one's mind is absorbed in worldliness, and that person repeats the name of God mechanically, then that person cannot achieve

anything. "Therefore I say, chant the name of God, and with it pray to Him that you may have love for Him. Pray to God that your attachment to such transitory things as wealth, name, and creature comforts may become less and less every day."

After this the writer of the Gospel painted a heart-warming picture. "It was dusk. The lamp was lighted in the room. Sri Ramakrishna chanted the divine names. He was singing and praying. He said, "Chant the name of Hari, repeat the name of Hari, sing the name of Hari." Again he said, "Rama! Rama! Rama!" Then: "O Mother! Thou dost ever enjoy Thine eternal Sports. Tell us, Mother, what is the way? We have taken refuge in Thee; we have taken shelter at Thy feet."

About a year later. Sri Ramakrishna's arm was broken. Devotees and his disciples were visiting him. As usual Sri Ramakrishna was keep on having spiritual conversations. On Saturday, February 2, 1884 when he was talking about yearning for God realization, ... suddenly a devotee asked, "Sir, **what is the way?**" The Master told him the way is: "Discrimination between the Real and the unreal. One should always discriminate to the effect that God alone is real and the world unreal. And one should pray with sincere longing." Now the devotee got back with a genuine concern, "where is our leisure for these things?" The Master gives an easier solution, "Those who have the time must meditate and worship. But those who cannot possibly do so must bow down whole-heartedly to God twice a day. He abides in the hearts of all; He knows that worldly people have many things to do. ..."

Interestingly about four months later during a festival at Surendra's house on Sunday, June 15, 1884 when a devotee asked, "Then what is the way for those who have not seen God? Must they give up all the duties of the world?" The Master emphasized the path of devotion: "The best path for this age is bhaktiyoga, the path of bhakti prescribed by Narada: to sing the name and glories of God and pray to Him with a longing

heart, 'O God, give me knowledge, give me devotion, and reveal Thyself to me!' The path of karma is extremely difficult. Therefore one should pray: 'O God, make my duties fewer and fewer; and may I, through Thy grace, do the few duties that Thou givest me without any attachment to their results! May I have no desire to be involved in many activities!'

Sri Ramakrishna continues, "It is not possible to give up work altogether. Even to think or to meditate is a kind of work. As you develop love for God, your worldly activities become fewer and fewer of themselves. And you lose all interest in them." Therefore the Master reminded again and again, "The aim of life is the attainment of God. Work is only a preliminary step; it can never be the end. Even unselfish work is only a means; it is not the end. ... It can never be the goal of life."

On the auspicious Mahalaya Day of 1884, (Friday, September 19) when Mahendra Mukherji came with his question, "Then **what is the way?**", the Master replied clearly, "No salvation is possible for a man as long as he has desire, as long as he hankers for worldly things. Therefore fulfil all your desires regarding food, clothes, and sex." He gave several examples from his own life. How he identified the desire, arranged to fulfill it, and finally renounced it through reasoning: "It is not good to cherish desires and hankerings. For that reason I used to fulfil whatever desires came to my mind. "Once the idea came to me to put on a very expensive robe embroidered with gold and to smoke a silver hubble-bubble. Mathur Babu sent me the new robe and the hubblebubble. I put on the robe. I also smoked the hubble-bubble in various fashions. Sometimes I smoked it reclining this way, and sometimes that way, sometimes with head up, and sometimes with head down. Then I said to myself, 'O mind, this is what they call smoking a silver hubble-bubble.' Immediately I renounced it. I kept the robe on my body a few minutes longer and then took it off. I began to trample it underfoot and spit on it, saying: 'So this

is an expensive robe! But it only increases man's rajas."

It was Sunday. of June 17, 1883. Some visitors came to see the Master on that summer afternoon. One of them was a Tantrik. He knows that the cycles of birth and death are controlled by karma. So his anxious question is, "Then what is the way for us? We shall have to reap the result of our past karma, shall we not?" The Master encouraged him to cut the bondage of karma through the love for God. He said, "That may be so. But it is different with the devotees of God." Then he sang some Kali Kirtan to convey the message.

Sri Ramakrishna had quite a few marwadi devotees among his regular visitors. Marwadis have been a highly successful business community, first as inland traders during the era of Rajput kingdoms, and later also as investors in industrial production and other sectors. Today, they control many of the country's largest media groups. Although spread throughout India, historically they have been most concentrated in the hinterlands of central and eastern India. They usually live a religious life. Among the Hindus, the marwadis follow Vaishnava tradition. They worship Vishnu incarnations -- Rama and Krishna. They have celebrations at the similar time like that of Shaivas or Shaktas but in a different way. For example, the worship of Kali they celebrate as the "Festival of Light". Two days after the worship of Kali, the marwadi community observes "Annakuta". On this occasion on Monday, October 20, 1884 the marwadis of the Burrabazar section of Calcutta invited Sri Ramakrishna.

The Master came about three o'clock in the afternoon. The street was jammed with people, bullock-carts, and carriages. He alighted from the carriage and proceeded on foot to the house of his host. Probably their family business is clothes as at the entrance the author of the Gospel found there are many bullock carriages full of cloths and dress materials. The marwadi host greeted the Master and led him to the third floor of the house. A

painting of Kali hung on the wall. Sri Ramakrishna bowed before it. He sat down and became engaged in conversation with the devotees.

On this day during a course of spiritual conversation with a humble marwadi pundit, the Master said, "God incarnates Himself for the bhakta and not for the Jnani." The Pundit knew this happens as "the Jnani has no desire". And, the Master corrected the Pundit that all desires are not the cause of bondage by saying, "I have the desire for love of God." The discussion continued on bhava, bhakti, prema, and different types of samadhi. Suddenly, the Master appreciated the Pundit's son. The unattached and wise Pundit replied, "All this is transitory." The answer pleased the Master.

Now came the host. He, too, intended to know, "**what is the way for us?**" The Master's prescription had three medicines for him, "Chanting the name and glories of God, living in the company of holy men, and earnestly praying to God." This devotee had understanding that through the blessings of Holy men his mind can turn away from worldly things. But the Master suggested, "If you please God, everyone will be pleased. It is God alone that exists in the heart of the holy man." At the same time he reminded, "A little spiritual discipline is necessary. ... Pray to Rama. Meditate on Him. He will certainly provide you with everything." Some of the devotees wanted to offer some physical service to the Master by massaging his feet or so. Though first he objected, later after some reflection, out of compassion he let one of the marwadis to stroke his feet.

Not all of them were the followers of the path of devotion, some were Vedantists too. Lakshminarayan was one of them through whom Sri Ramakrishna taught his strictness of renunciation for a sannyasi. Laxminarayan proposed to invest ten thousand rupees in the Master's name. His idea was: The interest would be used for Sri Ramakrishna's maintenance. The

Master recalled later, "The moment he uttered these words, I fell unconscious, as if struck by a stick. Regaining consciousness I said to him: 'If you utter such words again, you had better not come here. It is impossible for me to touch money. It is also impossible for me to keep it near me.' He was a very clever fellow. He said: 'Then you too have the idea of acceptance and rejection. In that case you haven't attained Perfect Knowledge.' The witty Master responded, 'I haven't yet gone that far.' Lakshminarayan then attempted to leave the money with Hriday, the Master's attendant. But the Master refused. His logic was, "If you leave it with Hriday, then I shall instruct him to spend it as I wish. If he does not comply, I shall be angry. The very contact of money is bad. No, you can't leave it with Hriday.' Won't an object kept near a mirror be reflected in it?" Renunciation of the monetary attachment is an requirement for them who are seeking way out from the world and worldliness.

It was the afternoon of January 1, 1883, Monday. Some marwadi devotees came to Dakshineswar to have spiritual guidance from the Master. One of them asked, "Sir, **what is the way?**" As the business easily begets affinity towards money and through community ritualistic practices it is also easy to get trapped in the mindless devotion. therefore Sri Ramakrishna said, there are two ways: "One is the path of discrimination, the other is that of love. ..." But emphasized, "Discrimination and renunciation. Discrimination means to know the distinction between the Real and the unreal. Renunciation means to have dispassion for the things of the world. One cannot acquire them all of a sudden. They must be practised every day."

First mental renunciation and then, by the will of God, outward renunciation become possible. But practice is necessary. "By practice one acquires uncommon power of mind. Then one doesn't find it difficult to subdue the sense-organs and to bring anger, lust, and the like under control."

The other is the path of bhakti, or zealous love of God. But it is important to note that the Master

is not talking about the outward manifestation of love but to "weep for God in solitude, with a restless soul, and ask Him to reveal Himself to you."

Similar advice was imparted to a devotee. It was Wednesday, November 28, 1883. Sri Ramakrishna went to see Keshab Sen in Calcutta and on his way back to Dakshineswar he stopped by one of his devotees house. Neighboring people came to hear the Master. One of them asked sincerely, "There are such obstacles, certainly. Besides, the children may be disobedient. There is no end of difficulties. Now, sir, **what is the way?**"

The Master felt for him and said, "It is extremely difficult to practise spiritual discipline and at the same time lead a householder's life. There are many handicaps: disease, grief, poverty, misunderstanding with one's wife, and disobedient, stupid, and stubborn children. ... But still there is a way out. One should pray to God, going now and then into solitude, and make efforts to realize Him." But to leave home for a householder is impossible. So the Master's suggestion is, "Whenever you have leisure, go into solitude for a day or two. At that time don't have any relations with the outside world and don't hold any conversation with worldly people on worldly affairs. You must live either in solitude or in the company of holy men."

Sadhaka from Konnagar:: "Sir, **what is the way?**" Probably the Master could see that this aspirant is more willing to hold onto scriptures than to follow his guru's instructions. He told him have "Faith in the guru's words. One attains God by following the guru's instructions step by step. It is like reaching an object by following the trail of a thread." Moreover, the Master told him, "One cannot understand the meaning of the scriptures without practising spiritual discipline."

In the December of 1881, on two successive Saturday afternoons, the 3rd and 10th, Sri Ramakrishna met Brahmo devotees. The Brahmo Samaj (or Society) was a monotheistic sect of Hinduism that believes in one Absolute Spirit of

the Universe instead of the traditional Hindu gods. In principle the Samaj condemned Polytheism and image worship. The movement began in Calcutta in 1828. One of the leading figures was Ram Mohun Roy.

Debendranath Tagore was a key member of the Brahmo Sabha. In 1843 he was involved in the creation of the Brahmo Samaj and accepted Keshab Chunder Sen, as his disciple in 1857. The Brahmo Samaj (in its various guises) continued to flourish in India and particularly Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore's Visva Bharati University was founded as an expression of Brahmo universalism.

Keshab Sen was an ardent admirer of Sri Ramakrishna. On the wall in Keshab's room hung a picture of Sri Ramakrishna absorbed in samadhi. The Master used to visit the meetings and festivals organized by the Brahmo Society often. Also, the Brahmo devotees used to visit the Master in Dakshineswar seeking spiritual guidance.

On the 3rd the Master visited one of his lay disciples Manomohan, when Keshab also joined with some Brahmo devotees. Upon arrival he respectfully saluted the Master, and took a seat on his left. A reader recited and explained an excerpt from the Bhagavata followed by the Master's talk. He reminded, "It is very difficult to do one's duty in the world. ... Do your duty, but do not forget God. ...

"You may ask, 'If worldly life is so difficult, then what is the way?' The way is constant practice. At Kamarpukur I have seen the women of the carpenter families flattening rice with a husking-machine. They are always fearful of the pestle's smashing their fingers; and at the same time they go on nursing their children and bargaining with customers. ..."But one needs spiritual discipline to acquire such a state of mind; one should pray to God in solitude every now and then. It is possible to perform worldly duties after obtaining love for God. If you try to break a jackfruit, your hands will be smeared with its sticky juice. But that won't happen if, beforehand, you rub them with oil."

On the following weekend at Keshab's request

Rajendra Mitra arranged a religious festival at his home in Calcutta and invited Sri Ramakrishna along with the devotees. Two days before the program a prominent member of the Brahmo Samaj had suddenly passed away. Rajendra had doubt about the number of attendees. But Ram, the Master's devotee, said to him: "Why are you so sad? ... Our Master will be here. He is always in communion with God. He enables one to see God. And his presence will make the festival a success." However, Keshab also joined in the festival saying, "Sri Ramakrishna will be there; so how can I stay away?"

On the way to the festival the Master stopped by the studio of the Bengal Photographer. Sri Ramakrishna saw the photography technique especially how glass covered with silver nitrate takes the image and after that he was also photographed. At that time he went into samadhi. Anyway, at the festival Sri Ramakrishna started conversation with the devotees regarding the way to be able to lead a spiritual life in the world, which is extremely difficult. He started with a beautiful example "While coming here I passed over the bridge at Baghbazar. How many chains it is tied with! Nothing will happen if one chain is broken, for there are so many others to keep it in place. Just so, there are many ties on a worldly man. There is no way for him to get rid of them except through the grace of God."

Hearing this, the perplexed devotee spontaneously asked: "Then **what is the way** for a householder?" It is worth mentioning that all revelations, prophets, gurus, messiahs, or avatars as authority are rejected according to the Brahmo faith. The Master taught this devotee to have "Faith in the guru's words. You should depend on his instruction. Do your duties in the world, holding fast to his words, like a person whirling round and holding fast to a pillar." The devotee may not have had a feeling to follow such advice and therefore the Master restated, "One must not look on one's guru as a mere human being: it is Satchidananda Himself who appears as the guru."

When the disciple has the vision of the Ishta, through the guru's grace, he finds the guru merging in Him. ...

A humble, disciplined disciple is bound to be accomplished in spiritual life as in the Master's words, "You know that rain-water doesn't collect on a high mound; it collects in low land, in a hollow."

Another Brahmo devotee asked the Master for **the way** to on April 22, 1883 during the semi-annual festival of the Brahmo Samaj and heard him saying, "Attachment to God, or, in other words, love for Him. And secondly, prayer." Prayers are an integral part of Brahmo religious practices. But love? The devotee asked again, "Which one is the way -- love or prayer?" Sri Ramakrishna picked both, "First love, and then prayer." In his opinion, "One should have faith in the holy name given by the guru and with it practise spiritual discipline." Lovingly!

The very sight of the many Brahmo devotees assembled there, made the Master joyful. He inspired them by saying: "It is very good that the Brahmo Samaj holds regular devotions. But one must dive deep; mere ceremonial worship or lectures are of no avail. One should pray to God that one's attachment to worldly enjoyment may disappear; that one may have pure love for His Lotus Feet. "The elephant has outer tusks and inner grinders as well. The tusks are mere ornaments; but the elephant chews its food with the grinders." With the growth of one's devotion one's taste for enjoyment of worldly things becomes weaker. However, it is also difficult to come out of the intellectual joy. So the Master questions, "What will you achieve through mere public lectures? The vulture undoubtedly soars high, but its eyes are fixed on the charnel-pit. The rocket undoubtedly shoots up into the sky, but the next moment it falls to the ground. "He who has renounced his attachment to worldly enjoyments will remember nothing but God in the hour of

death. Otherwise he will think only of worldly things: wife, children, house, wealth, name and fame. "Therefore one should constantly practise the singing of God's name and glories, and meditation and contemplation as well. And further, one should always pray that one's attachment to the world may disappear and one's love for God's Lotus Feet may grow."

One of the most efficient tricks the Master taught is to force your demand on the Divine Mother. He taught this to the Sikh devotees as well to Trailokya when he earnestly asked: "What is the way to dry up the craving for worldly pleasure?" The Master's sharp answer was, "Pray to the Divine Mother with a longing heart. Her vision dries up all craving for the world and completely destroys all attachment .. It happens instantly if you think of Her as your own mother. ... She will come to you without fail."

In the Mahabharata one life saving story was described. In a dense forest five Pandava brothers were looking for water. They were dying out of thirst. They found a water reservoir, the owner of which was a Crane. He wanted them to answer some questions. Each brother was very successful in his area but did not know the way out, except the eldest one. The crane asked him: "What is the path?" Yudhishtira replied, "The best path is to follow in the footsteps of the *mahajans* (great ones) whose hearts are full of genuine Truth regarding Dharma." And, according to the epic, the great war of righteousness was won by Yudhishtira along with his brothers. He became the king -- met the goal of worldly accomplishment. Right after that going through the labyrinth of spirituality he touched his inner Self and could that renounce that kingdom too.

Sri Ramakrishna guided through the winding paths of all yogas, to attain total freedom. To follow his teachings is a labyrinth walk with total absorption; at the end of which awaits the Bliss Absolute.





PRESS RELEASE

114TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

The 114th Annual General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was held at Belur Math on Sunday, the 17th of Dec 2023, at 3.30 p.m., in which, Swami Suvirananda, General Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission presented the 'Report of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission on the working of the association during FY 2022-23'. A synopsis of the report is given hereunder:

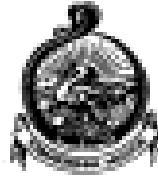
1) Awards & Recognitions:

- a) Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Barrackpore, Dt. North 24-Parganas, Kolkata presented the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Award to the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in recognition of their service activities.
- b) National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) awarded A++ grade to Vivekananda Centenary College, Rahara, Kolkata and A+ grade to the College of Arts & Science and the Maruti college of Physical Education, Coimbatore for five years.
- c) Four of our degree colleges secured distinguished positions in the India Rankings announced by the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), Ministry of Education, Government of India: Vidyamandira (Saradapitha, Belur) – 15th rank, Vivekananda Centenary College (Rahara, Kolkata) – 8th rank, Residential College (Narendrapur, Kolkata) – 19th rank, Arts & Science College (Coimbatore) – 71st rank.
- d) The Narendrapur (Kolkata) off-campus centre of Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute-RKMVERI (deemed university)-Belur, Howrah, West Bengal was adjudged the 'Best Centre of All India Network Programme on Organic Farming' by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) – Indian Institute of Farming Systems Research, Modipuram, Meerut.
- e) A student of Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, Narendrapur, Kolkata secured the state 1st rank (99.2%) in the Higher Secondary Examination of the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education.
- f) The higher secondary school at Malda (West Bengal) was awarded the Swachh Vidyalaya Puraskar (District Level Award) from the Department of School Education & Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- g) Blind Boys' Academy at Narendrapur, Kolkata bagged the State Award for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities for its Braille Press.
- h) Vivekananda Netralaya (eye hospital) at Dehradun received NABH certification for 2 years under the Entry Level – Small Healthcare Organisation programme.
- i) Mysuru Ashrama was awarded the Amrita Mahotsava State Award in recognition of its service activities.

2) New Branch Centres:

- a) A new branch centre of the Ramakrishna Mission was started in Sahadangi Hat, Dt. Jalpaiguri, West Bengal.
- b) New branch centres of the Ramakrishna Math were started in Bhuj (Gujarat), Chengam (Tamil Nadu) and Yadadri Bhuvanagiri (Telangana).

Phone PBX:
 (033) 2654 - 5700 / 5702
 (033) 2654 - 9581 / 9581
 FAX : (033) 2654 - 4346
 Email : mail@rkmm.org
 Website : www.belurmamh.org



RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

(The Headquarters)

P.O. BELUR MATH, DIST. HOWRAH
 WEST BENGAL : 711202
 INDIA

3) Activities in India:

The Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Math, through their 224 Indian branch centres and sub-centres, spent Rs.1171.61 crore towards various services as per the following details:

Name of the Sector	Number of beneficiaries in lakhs	Amount spent in Rupees (Crore)
Relief & Rehabilitation	5.31	7.46
General Welfare	38.75	28.42
Medical	86.30	412.08
Educational	3.08	594.53
Rural Development	70.67	101.54
Publication of literature		27.58
	Total	1171.61

4) Activities outside India:

- Balanti center, Bangladesh consecrated the newly built Shri Ramakrishna Temple.
- Chicago center, USA inaugurated its new unit, 'Home of Harmony' in Chicago.
- Two Sunday schools - one at Colombo centre and the other at Batticaloa - received the Best Sunday Religious School Awards from the Department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs, Government of Sri Lanka.
- The Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Math, through their 96 centres and sub-centers situated in 24 countries outside India, rendered various service activities.

We take this opportunity to thank our members, well-wishers and devotees for their invaluable support and cooperation in carrying forward the service programmes of the Ramakrishna Mission and Ramakrishna Math.

Suvirananda
 (Swami Suvirananda)
 General Secretary

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission

17 Dec 2023



NEWS BULLETIN: July to December, 2023
(News from January to June are published in the July 2023
issue of the “Chicago Calling (#38)”

Homer Glen:

The Society had special worships of Divine Mothers Durga and Kali in October and November. In December Christmas Eve was celebrated as per Society's tradition.

The Society of Chicago hosted a "Spiritual Fest" during the week of August 14. VVSC participated the Parliament of World's Religions. Distinguished guests included Swamis Balabhadrananda, the Assistant General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Belur, India; Tyagananda, Head of the Vedanta Society of Boston; and Kripamayananda, Head of the Vedanta Society of Toronto, who graced the Vedanta Society of Chicago with their presence.

On the 14th, the Swamis participated in the inauguration of the 30th Parliament of World's Religions, commencing with an inter-religious procession. Swami Ishatmananda, representing Hinduism, extended a warm welcome to the international assembly during the Plenary Session which was attended by more than 7000 people from all over the world. The Chicago Vedanta Society showcased a booth featuring literature on Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Vedanta. The Society's volunteers not only sold books but also engaged with numerous Parliament attendees who were less familiar with Vedanta. This initiative received a positive response. On August 16, Wednesday evening, Swami Balabhadrananda delivered a special lecture “Sri Ramakrishna and His Gospel” at the Homer Glen Ashrama. A good number of devotees attended the talk and supper that followed.

On the 18th, from 1 to 2.30 pm, a Special Standout Session representing the Vedanta

Societies was organized at the Parliament of World's Religions. Swamis Balabhadrananda, Kripamayananda, Tyagananda, and Ishatmananda shared Vedantic perspectives on the Parliament's theme, "A Call to Conscience: Defending Freedom and Human Rights." Mr. Somnath Ghosh, Consulate General of India talked about the Indian perspective of the PoWR's theme. Children from Chicago Marathi Vidya Mandir did inaugural chanting from the Bhagavad Gita.

On Sunday, August 20th the Swamis talked about various aspects of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna's life, highlighting him as A Great Mystic, A Unique Storyteller, A Divine Singer, and the Gifts of Sri Ramakrishna to the World. Around 150 devotees participated in the enlightening discussions, and music, and enjoyed prasad lunch at the conclusion.

On October 15th the Society had its Annual Fall Banquet. Swamis Nikhileshwarananda and Sarvapriyananda, Ms. Kehkhashan Basu delivered talks. Swami Ishatmananda made concluding remarks. The cultural program session included devotional music and Indian classical dance.

Swami Ishatmananda continued with his Sunday lectures on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and Wednesday classes on the “Panchama Veda” (the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna). The Swami delivered Special Talks on the auspicious occasions of Guru Purnima and Janmashtami.

On the second Saturday of each month there was Ram Nam Sankirtan, as usual.

[News of Home of Harmony and Vivekananda
Retreat, Ganges are on the next page.]



Home of Harmony:

The “Know and Love” lecture series continued. Swami Ishatmananda presented his talks on various aspects of Hinduism. Other distinguished speakers were Rev. Gyoshin Laurel Ross (Guiding Teacher at Ancient Dragon Zen Gate), Dr. Mukesh Doshi (Chairperson of Interfaith Committee of JAINA), Dr. Mark McClish (Professor, Northwestern University), Swami Sumanasananda (Vedanta Society of Southern California), Swami Nikhileshwarananda (Ramakrishna Math, Rajkot), Dr. Marcis Hermansen (Professor, Loyola University, Chicago), Reverend Dr. Beth Johnson, (Pastor, Unitarian Church of Hinsdale, IL).

The cultural events included Sai Bhajans by Suresh Shah, Hindu Melodies, Shabad Kirtan by Sikh Community Center of Wheaton, IL,

There were a few documentary shows that were related to Hinduism and Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta Movement.

People from in and around Chicago city had been regularly participating in the **Yoga and Meditation sessions** every Sunday. All are welcome to these sessions which are offered at no cost.

The **School of World Religions** continued conducting online courses on religious study. Students from all over the world enrolled in these courses Introductory Study of Eastern Religions - Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Taoism and that of Semitic Religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The education is offered at no cost and the course enrollment has no demographic restrictions. Introductory Study.

On August 19th morning, a celebration of the first-year anniversary of the Society's newest premises was held. Swamis Tyagananda, Kripamayananda, and Ishatmananda spoke and released of a video from the inauguration program that was held on May 21, 2022. Nearly two hundred attendees participated in the anniversary celebration, which concluded with lunch for everyone.



Ganges:

Swamis Atmajnanananda of the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, DC and Ishatmananda conducted July and September spiritual retreats respectively. On August 15th, Swami Balabhadrananda, along with Swamis Kripamayananda and Ishatmananda, visited the Vivekananda Retreat at Ganges, where Swami Balabhadrananda delivered a lecture titled "Swami Vivekananda's Contribution to India's Freedom Movement." Approximately 80 devotees attended the program, followed by a potluck lunch.

Other Activities:

August 19th evening, Swamis Tyagananda, Kripamayananda, and Ishatmannada discussed the lives and teachings of Divine incarnations: Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, and Sri Ramakrishna at the Vivekananda Spiritual Center of the Lemont Hindu Temple.

On October 15th Swamis Nikhileshwarananda, Ishatmananda and Sarvapriyananda delivered lectures at the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale to commemorate Swami Vivekananda's visit of the Church on the same day in 1893.

Swami Ishatmananda continued to conduct classes, both in person and via zoom, on *Bhagavad Gita*, *The Fragrance of Vedanta: Kapilopadesha*, *Bengali Kathamrita*, *Uddhava Gita*, *Kathopanishad*, *Bhagavatam*, and *Ramayana*.

Groups from Colorado and Washington DC continued to meet monthly for informal spiritual question answer sessions.

The Swami delivered a talk and also led Spiritual Retreats at the Vedanta Study Circles of Huntsville, Charlotte, and Sai Society in Wisconsin. Vedanta Societies of New York, New Jersey, Calgary, Ramakrishna Vivekananda Vedanta Centre of Ottawa, Ramakrishna Ashrama of Warren, and Vivekananda Study and Philanthropic Center.

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Order can be placed online: <http://www.vedantabooks.com/>

Eternal Literature : The Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavatam, Brahma Sutra, Upanishads in original Sanskrit with English translations. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vedanta scriptures, Sanskrit texts.



Bookshop Hours:

Homer Glen (14630 Lemont Road, Homer Glen, IL 60491) : Daily from 9 am to 7 pm.

Home of Harmony (3801 N Keeler Ave., Irving Park, Chicago, IL 60641) : Saturday & Sunday 9 am to 7 pm & by appointment.

Vivekananda Retreat (6723, 122nd Ave, Ganges, MI 49408) : Daily from 9 am to 7 pm.

2024
Calendar of the
Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

The Society turns the pages of
Vedanta Magazines
that assisted the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda
Vedanta Movement in the West

Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago, 14630 Lemont Road, Homer Glen, IL 60491
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**Society's Annual
Calendar is now available
for \$15 for pick up from
the Society's bookshop;
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Swami Vivekananda inspired his disciples in Madras to publish a Vedanta Magazine.

The **Brahmavadin** (The messenger of Truth) was published in 1895. It was blessed by Swamiji, "The Brahmavadin is a jewel - it must not perish!"

In 1914, the Ramakrishna Math in Chennai, India, took over and started publishing it as an English-language monthly magazine under a new name **Vedanta Kesari** (The Lion of Vedanta).

Prabuddha Bharata (Awakened India) was started by devotees of Swamiji in 1896. For a few months in 1898 its publication became irregular. To inspire the publishers, in 1899 Sister Nivedita wrote, "The Swami (Vivekananda) had always had a special love for this paper, as the beautiful name he had given it indicated."

THE BRAHMAVADIN.

"That which relates to me: mine call it my own!"
— *Epistle*, I, 161, 16

Swami Vivekananda
Chicago, September 1903. At the Art Institute in a room meant for delegates.

THE VEDANTA KESARI

PRABHUBHARATA

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