



Talks with Swami Shivananda

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI

This is the sixth in a series of recorded conversations with Swami Shivananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

SWAMI SHIVANANDA felt rather unwell today (March 19, 1929). Only two days ago the birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna had been celebrated on a grand scale. About 150,000 persons had gathered together for the occasion. From early morning until late in the evening, innumerable people had been blessed by touching Swami Shivananda's feet or seeing him from a distance. His door was always open for the devotees. He, too, was so full of the thoughts of the Master that he paid little attention to his own body. It was as though he were divinely inspired. He talked unceasingly with the devotees about the Master and made them all happy and gave them instruction on various spiritual problems as well. Although the strain had told upon his health, he was ever smiling and looked quite happy.

From early morning, the *sadhus* [holy men] and *brahmacharins* [novices] of the monastery began to gather in his room, and started to salute him with devotion and respect. He made affectionate inquiries about their health. Noticing that one of the monks

was wearing a rather worn piece of cloth, he asked his attendant to give him a new piece, saying to him: "Can't you so much as keep an eye on the needs of the monks?"

On hearing that the newly initiated *sannyasins* and brahmacharins were to go to Dakshineswar that day, where they would spend the entire day in meditation, listening to devotional music, etc., the Swami said: "Dakshineswar is our heaven on earth. It is our Kailas, our Vaikuntha [legendary abodes of Shiva and Vishnu]. Is that an ordinary place? The *Panchavati* is a great seat of spiritual perfection, where the Master had many spiritual experiences of a very high order. For twelve long years he practiced different modes of divine communion at Dakshineswar. The divine visions and spiritual realizations he had there are without parallel. The history of religion has no record of such intense and diverse spiritual practices in the life of any other Incarnation. The Master used to say: 'The experiences that have occurred here [meaning himself] have transcended all the scriptures.' That is why Swamiji used to refer to the Master as 'the greatest Incarnation.'

"The Master brought the dust of Brindavan and spread it on the ground of the Panchavati. Every particle of dust at Dakshineswar is holy. Blessed by the holy feet of God himself, Dakshineswar has become a great place of pilgrimage. The intense spiritual *sadhana* [disciplines] which the Master underwent will exert its influence not only on this earth, but also in the regions higher up. Ah, what a play of divine power it was!" As the Swami spoke, his whole face became

flushed, and he sat silently, his eyes cast down.

A WOMAN devotee asked Swami Shivananda: "I do not know much about the life of Holy Mother. Kindly tell me something about her."

"The Holy Mother was the mother of all," Swami Shivananda said. "Her kindness, her forbearance, and her patience were wonderful. How little of her do we ourselves know! But out of her mercy she has let me realize that she is none other than the Mother of the universe. Unless, in her mercy, she reveals herself none can understand her real nature. First Swami Yogananda and then Swami Saradananda attended to her needs. I also had the good fortune of cooking for her once, when on a visit to Jayrambati. That was many years ago, a few years after the Master had passed away. Swami Ramakrishnananda was with me and another monk—possibly Swami Subodhananda.

"In those days the devotees seldom visited Jayrambati and the journey was extremely difficult. It pleased her greatly to have us there, and she became quite busy in feeding us properly and making us happy in every way. Although Jayrambati is a small village where nothing can be had, Mother had arranged for milk, fish, and various kinds of vegetables for us. She knew that the people of Calcutta were used to tea, so she even had some tea as well.

"We spent the whole first day in great delight. We had a fine bath in the Talpukur tank. The Holy Mother, being very bashful, would not come out in the open before us. At night, when we had gone to bed after dinner, I planned with Swami Ramakrishnananda that we should cook for her. When we broached

the question the next morning, she at first laughed at the idea. 'How can that be, my sons? I am your mother; it is my duty to cook for you. And here you are wanting to cook for me instead! You will hardly be able to bear the smoke in the kitchen!' Thus, she tried to dissuade us, but we were firm in our resolution. Ultimately, she had to agree. Mother was highly pleased with the food.

"We stayed with the Mother for three days in great joy. Her affection was boundless. She was extremely busy from morning until night so that we might not suffer the least discomfort. As for myself, I had lost my mother in childhood and had almost forgotten what motherly love was. But at Jayrambati I got a taste of that affection.

"On the third night I experienced some fever and shivering, and it increased as the night advanced. In the early hours of the morning I told Shashi Maharaj [Swami Ramakrishnananda]: 'Brother, no more of this here. If I live here with my fever, I shall only be a burden to the Holy Mother. We shall bid farewell to her in the morning and leave. After that, I do not care what happens.'

"He agreed to the proposal, and as soon as day dawned we saluted the Holy Mother and left Jayrambati. At first, the Holy Mother would not agree to our departure so soon. But when we were insistent, she became silent.

"I walked with difficulty a little distance from the Mother's house, and then we came across an empty bullock cart. We hired it to take us to Arambag, and all three of us got in it. The fever showed no sign of abatement. Finding me in this condition, a villager

suggested that my fever would come down if I was given some juice of *bel* leaves. As we had no medicine with us, we had to act on his advice. After this, we resumed the journey, but the fever did not go down.

"When we reached Arambag, a doctor was called in and he said that I had malaria. I was struck with wonder at his diagnosis. Where could the malaria have come from? I had no such fever since my boyhood. But we concluded that the long bath in the Talpukur tank at Jayrambati might have activated the old malaria bacilli in my body. Regardless, we had to stay at Arambag for a number of days, and then we returned to Calcutta."

ON one occasion the talk turned to a monk's journey on foot to Kashmir during the cold season [it was December, 1929]. Swami Shivananda said: "So Peta has gone to Kashmir in this winter! They say that he walked all the way from Rishikesh. I have been worried from the moment I heard that. Ah! Master, please take care of him. I think he has become a little unbalanced. Or else why should he behave so whimsically?"

"This is a difficult path, my son. The pursuit of the knowledge of *Brahman* is no easy affair. Not every brain can comprehend it, for it is 'subtler than the subtlest.' It is easier to master secular knowledge. That is why the seer in the Upanishads sings: 'The wise describe that path as impassable as a sharpened razor is difficult to tread.' Those who do not tread the path have no idea of its difficulty. In the Upanishads this knowledge 'by which is realized the immutable Brahman' is called the higher knowledge, while

secular knowledge is referred to as the lower knowledge. One must practice absolute continence if one desires to have this higher knowledge. As a result of prolonged continence the body and mind become fit for the divine life. The brain develops a new nerve for reaching this state of Brahmanhood and all the cells of the body become transformed."

Again, Swami Shivananda repeated: "One must observe absolute continence. The Master used to say that one hesitates to pour milk in a vessel that contains curd lest the milk spoil. That is why he loved pure-minded boys so much; for it is they who can imbibe spirituality to the full. But these are all very subtle matters. Of course, above all one must have the grace of God. Unless the Divine Mother is gracious, there is no hope for this [knowledge]. It is only when she opens the door to spirituality that the aspirant is able to enter, not otherwise. It is she who grants the boon of freedom, when she is pleased with men.

"There are quite a number of fine nerves in the brain. Should any of these become deranged, man loses his balance. The Holy Mother used to say: 'Pray to the Master that he may keep your head steady.' To lose one's mental balance is to lose all. 'Shoot me,' said Swamiji [Vivekananda], 'if my brain goes wrong.'

"When Peta first came to the Monastery I could see from the formation of his head that he would have an unsteady mind, that he would lose his balance. It was reported to me that he had learned *hatha yoga* at Rishikesh. I tell you, boys, that is no good. Besides, he has been moving about from place to place for a long time, not keeping in touch with the monastery

and its monks—roaming just as he liked. Maharaj [Brahmananda] used to say that it is not safe for a monk to live a solitary life in the early stages; he should have at least one companion.” After remaining silent for awhile, the Swami said, “Master, save him. Who, indeed, but you can save a man! Ah! He was such a sincere boy.”

THE talk then turned to spiritual practice. Swami Shivananda said: “Self-control will come as a matter of course if one repeats God’s name constantly and is earnest in spiritual endeavors. The name of God has such innate power that all the internal and external organs become subdued by it. But one has to call on him with sincere love. If one can somehow acquire love for God, one has nothing to worry about; one can advance towards him quickly. By acquiring the feeling that God is one’s own, the mind is set at rest. But real love for God is impossible so long as the mind is preoccupied with sensual things.

“When the *kundalini* is awakened as the result of intense spiritual practices and prayers to God and when the mind gradually rises above the three lower planes and remains in the fourth plane, then visions, etc. come to the aspirant. How can anyone have love for God, pure and untouched by sin as He is, unless one’s own mind becomes pure? The purer the medium, the quicker is His manifestation. You have to consider spiritual practice as the chief aim of your lives; as for the rest—lectures, discourses, and so on—they are but secondary.

“It is good to have a fixed seat for one’s meditation and *japa*, for that creates an atmosphere which helps

the mind to become concentrated quickly. And whenever you meet a woman salute her mentally as your mother. That was the special instruction of the Master to us, and he himself did it all his life. A sannyasin's life is, as it were, a devotional fast when even a drop of water is not taken. There must not be a single blemish—your whole life must be absolutely pure. Do not allow your mind to be polluted by even the slightest touch of lust or greed. Yours is a spiritual life, a divine life”

A MONK asked Swami Shivananda the following question: “Was there any special reason, Maharaj, for your boyhood name of Taraknath?”

The Swami answered: “Yes, I heard that my parents had no male issue for a long time, so they prayed to Taraknatha [Shiva of the Tarakeswar temple, near Calcutta]. The deity appeared to my mother in a dream and promised her that she would have a good son. After that I was born, so they named me Taraknath.

“My mother was very pious. She was quite beautiful, too. I received my religious tendencies from her in my childhood. My father was also quite pious and had a large income. He would maintain some twenty-five to thirty underprivileged boys in our home. My mother would cook for all of us, despite my father's desire to hire a cook. She would say, ‘It is my good fortune that I can cook for so many boys.’ She did not bestow much affection on me, for she was quite busy in her chores. I was just one among all those boys. Some of the neighbors protested her apparent unconcern. But she replied: ‘It is His [Tarakanath's]

child, not mine. He has given it to me out of His mercy, and He will look after it.' When I was about nine, my mother died, so I have few memories of her.

"My father, Kanai Ghosal, was a pious devotee, and a very charitable person—though he had to curtail his charities when his income dwindled. At night he would cry: 'Mother, how hard dost Thou deal with me! I am still denied Thy vision.'"

CHRISTMAS EVE had been observed the night before. In the visitor's room of the monastery [Belur], the picture of the Virgin Mary with the divine Child was tastefully decorated with leaves, flowers, and garlands. A number of lay devotees joined with the monks in the celebration. Portions from the Bible regarding the advent of Jesus were read, and a number of the older monks spoke about his life. Swami Shivananda was too ill to be present but he expressed great delight at the report of the gathering. As the monks gathered in his room the following morning, he greeted them with "Merry Chirstmas." Referring to the Christmas Eve celebration, the Swami remarked: "This ceremony began from the old Baranagore days. A few days after the Master passed away, the mother of Baburam [Swami Premananda] invited us to her village of Antpur. We were then afire with renunciation, and felt great agony at the loss of the Master. We were also engaged in intense spiritual practices. The only thought we had those days, and the only effort we made was for the realization of God. While we were at Antpur we applied ourselves even more intensely to spiritual practices. We would burn logs under the open sky at night and spend the nights in

japa and meditation. Swamiji would talk to us with great fervor about renunciation and self-sacrifice. Sometimes he would make us read the Gita, the *Bhagavata*, and the Upanishads, and we would hold discussions on them. We passed several days in this way.

"One night we sat near the fire in meditation. After some time Swamiji broke the silence and began to speak about Jesus Christ in an inspired mood, and with the utmost devotion. He spoke about the intense spiritual practices, burning renunciation, and message of Jesus—but above all, about his realization of unity with God. He did this with such enthusiasm and lucidity of expression that we were dumb-struck. It seemed to us that it was none other than Christ himself who was speaking through Swamiji's mouth. As we heard his words, we floated on a cloud of bliss, as it were. The only idea that reigned in our hearts was that somehow we must realize God, however hard the struggle might be; that we must become one with him, for all else mattered little.

"Later we came to know that it was Christmas Eve when Swamiji spoke to us, though we had no idea of it at the time. We became convinced that it was none other than Christ himself who, through Swamiji, spoke that glorious message to us, so as to intensify our spirit of renunciation and quest for realization. And while at Antpur the firm determination grew in us to take the vow of monasticism and organize a community life. The Master had made us monks, but the idea took firmer root at Antpur."