

Gems from a Swami's Notebook

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Swami Sukhatmananda is an elderly monk, now in retirement at the ashrama in Ulsoor. Recently I was asked to look at some notes he had made long ago from talks given by eminent swamis. I found some of them very insightful, and thought that devotees would benefit from them. I've paraphrased what I thought were the best of them below, using direct quotations where that seemed advisable.

Swami Vireswarananda

From night classes at the Madras Math, 1974-1984:

Swami Vireswarananda 'advised devotees not to keep so many gods and goddesses in the same place. To keep them merely like that in cupboards and not offer daily puja and offerings even for a day would create more *karma* instead of reducing it. It was more efficacious to offer simple worship of *dhoop* [incense], flowers and *japa*.'

M wrote *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* after deep meditation, 'like a cow slowly eating [chewing] its cud.' Swami Brahmananda said that reading *The Gospel* every day results in *brahmajnāna* [knowledge of Brahman].

Swami Madhavananda coined the suffix *-prana* for the names of the nuns of Sarada Math. This is why they are named Bhaktiprana, Vrajaprana, Saradaprana, etc.

'An intellectual conviction of Advaita Vedanta has to come, and [the] rest of all work is in Dvaita only.'

The purpose of the Ramakrishna

Mission schools is to teach Hindu culture and traditions. Indians living in the United States, when asked about Hinduism, say they have left it to their grandmothers!

People think that all they have to do is get initiated. It takes a lot more than that to get God-realisation. 'Holy Mother used to say, "He who can do 50,000 japas daily can see God."' Sri Ramakrishna has come and made things easy for all of us. The bolts of the door which were locked have been removed and [the door] remains shut. We have to push [it] just to open [it] and enter the realm of God.'

[It is well known that Swami Vireswarananda had a great sense of humour. The notes on him are enlivened by several jokes. These are the best ones:]

The Drunkard and the Goat : A drunkard wanted to sacrifice a goat. Being drunk, he took his dog instead. As he was about to chop off its head, the dog started barking. The drunkard said, 'Oho, what a fine animal you are! You used to say Baa-baa, but now you say Bow-wow.'

The Magic Touch of Holy Water : A Christian priest went to a Hindu devotee's home for Sunday dinner. In deference to the priest's meat-eating habit, the Hindu devotee had cooked non-vegetarian dishes. The priest protested at such deference, saying that vegetarian dishes would have been fine. So the Hindu got a bowl of water and sprinkled it on all the dishes, explaining, 'You sprinkle water on people and make sinners into saints. I'm doing the same with these meat dishes to change them into vegetarian dishes.'

The Wrong Obituary : An American newspaper falsely reported a man's death. When the man objected, the newspaper refused to publish a retraction. Finally they reached a compromise. The newspaper agreed to publish the man's name in the list of births the next day.

On Vairāgya (Told by Swami Turiyananda) : A rich man invited a group of sadhus for a feast and asked them each to give a definition of *vairāgya* (renunciation). Each gave his definition. When the last sadhu's turn came, he said, 'If I knew what *vairāgya* is, I wouldn't have come to the feast.'

Swami Bhuteshananda

Everything happens by God's grace, and that comes only when we're exhausted and have given up. It's like a bird perched on the mast of a ship. It flies everywhere looking for land, and finally comes back, exhausted, and perches on the mast again. 'When we begin to get exhausted from our efforts, religion begins.' This is the religion of the kitten, which depends entirely on its mother—not the religion of the monkey, which relies on self-effort.

Swami Abhedananda found it hard to readjust to India after spending so much time in the West. He wanted changes. He wanted to have a centre in Kolkata, and to promote vocational and technical training. He thought each monk should be self-supporting, with no begging for alms. Although he started his own centre, he still loved his gurubhais and was loyal to them. He grieved greatly at the death of Swami Shivananda. When he went out, he dressed in a Western-style suit.

Swami Brahmananda wouldn't stay at Belur Math because the location was malarial, and he had suffered from malaria when he was young. He stayed at Balaram Mandir in Calcutta.

Swami Bhuteshananda served Swami

Shivananda as his attendant. Outwardly Swami Shivananda looked stern and reserved, but inwardly he was full of love. He was fond of cows, and was sympathetic to the poor Muslim labourers working at the Math.

Once Swami Bhuteshananda offered Swami Shivananda a container of sweets after massaging his feet. Swami Shivananda wouldn't eat them because they were ritually contaminated: Swami Bhuteshananda had been massaging Swami Shivananda's feet before offering them. Besides that, Swami Shivananda never ate anything without first offering it to Sri Ramakrishna, and he couldn't do that because the sweets were ritually contaminated!

Swami Saradananda didn't like rules. He thought it was enough just to worship Sri Ramakrishna and revere Swamis Vivekananda, Brahmananda, Yogananda, and Premananda. 'Otherwise everything will become law, rules and regulations, and mutual trust will go.'

Swami Bhuteshananda began his monastic life at Belur Math in 1918. There were 30 sadhus, very little space, and great austerity. Breakfast was just one cigarette-tin full of puffed rice (*moori*) per person.

On preaching, Swami Bhuteshananda said that you have to make sure you know what you're talking about, or people will laugh. People will try to pressure you to speak on various topics, but you have to resist this pressure if you don't know much about the topic. It's best just to quote the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji, and Holy Mother.

Swami Ranganathananda

Swami Ranganathananda's premonastic name was Shankar. He was born near Trichur, in Kerala. He was a disciple of Swami Shivananda, who probably gave him the name Ranganathananda because he was to be posted to Mysore, near a famous

temple of Ranganātha. He joined the Order at age 17 and became President at age 90.

While at Mysore, Swami Ranganathananda and the abbot, Swami Siddheswarananda, were the only people in the ashrama. So Swami Ranganathananda had to become an expert at doing everything: from doing the puja to housekeeping, cleaning, gardening, fixing things, cooking, and shopping in the marketplace.

Swami Ranganathananda believed that a monk should always be cheerful. Sannyasa requires a lot of energy. Roar like a lion, don't bleat like a goat. He used to quote a verse that means 'When the lion roars, the fox hides. When a Vedantist speaks, everybody else runs away.' Hence the expression 'Vedanta Kesari,' the lion of Vedanta!

He mentioned a married couple who wanted their son to become a sannyasin because he was useless, unsuited for worldly life. Swami Ranganathananda protested that this was absolutely the wrong idea: only a person of great strength and self-control should become a sannyasin.

Swami Ranganathananda looked strong and healthy. [Another source says he was famous for his swimming ability.] But he had had a stomach problem since 1936 and had to restrict his diet. In 1968, doctors in Boston examined him and declared that he should be dead. He took the medicines they prescribed, but to no avail. He used to joke, 'My Himalayas (meaning his head) are fine, but my Madhya Pradesh (meaning his stomach) is not so good.'

Swami Atmasthananda

When he was young, Swami Atmasthananda heard a lot about Swami

Shivananda and became very fond of him. He regarded him as his guru, even though Swami Shivananda died before they could meet. Swami Atmasthananda 'had received his mantra in a dream from Sri Ramakrishna himself.' [The notes emphasize this fact by recording it in italics.] But elderly swamis at Belur Math told him he should get formally initiated. Swami Nirvedananda advised him to take initiation from Swami Vijnanananda. Swami Atmasthananda had a dream in which he was walking along a highway with Swami Shivananda, and Swami Shivananda kept changing into Swami Vijnanananda and then changing back again. So he took initiation from Swami Vijnanananda.

Swami Atmasthananda told a story about Swami Abhedananda, who had collected gold to make a statue of a golden lion (*simhāsana*) for the image of Sri Ramakrishna to sit on at some future date, when the Ramakrishna Temple would be dedicated. [There's another story that Swami Vivekananda wanted an image of Sri Ramakrishna seated on a swan.] Swami Abhedananda wanted to take the gold to a jeweller to make the statue of the lion, but on the way he kept feeling that somebody was giving him a push and shouting, 'Don't you know I can't touch metal? You idiot, I told you I can't touch metal, and you want to put me on a golden simhasana! Go back!' Realising that this was Sri Ramakrishna's doing, Swami Abhedananda gave up the idea, and had the statue of the lion made from sandalwood instead. [We are not told how this resulted. Probably due to the difficulty of mounting an image of Sri Ramakrishna on the statue of either a swan or a lion, the image in the Ramakrishna Temple shows him seated quite sensibly in the traditional sitting posture made famous by his photo.] ■

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