

Treat Everyone with Honour and Forbear : Holy Mother

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As we meditate on Holy Mother Sarada Devi's life and message, we find that every step she had taken was for our well-being so that we may advance on the path of attaining peace. This was the responsibility Sri Ramakrishna put on her shoulder for our welfare.

Holy Mother didn't say anything which she herself had not practised in her life. All her message had become transparent and very much alive in her extraordinary life. The words she spoke always dripped from her lips as nectar that soothed the suffering souls. Her words gave peace and solace and were never ejected like an arrowhead to pierce the heart of others.

She was extremely soft-spoken. On hearing someone using harsh words to Surabala (the wife of her youngest brother) at Jayrambati, Mother said: What's that! Should one say something in a manner that hurts another person? Even if it is truth it should be said sweetly and softly. Rudeness in speech makes one's nature unmannerly. When the sense of decency goes, one is not ashamed of blurting out anything that comes to mind. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'If one wants to ask a person how he has become lame, one should ask, "How your leg has got twisted?"'

In our day-to-day social life we often find that we get involved in squabbles over even a small incident. Once Surabala,

Radhu's mother, was quarreling with a 'low-caste' woman at Jayrambati. Mother noticed this and said: It is not good to get locked in a duel of words. If you throw stones at somebody, you too will be greeted with brickbats.

We hear the echo of this priceless teaching in Swami Vivekananda's declaration after his phenomenal success at the Parliament of Religions. The conquest of Chicago earned him many friends in America. At the same time it created some foes who had become exceedingly jealous of his triumph which threatened their narrow self-interest and petty dogmas. These opponents included, on the one hand, Pratap Mazoomdar, the Brahmo leader from Calcutta, and some self-seeking Christian missionaries, on the other. They joined forces to spread various canards and vicious remarks against him. This concerted drive to malign him was not confined to America, such remarks were being circulated in India also. Consequently, Alasinga Perumal, Swamiji's devout disciple, wrote a letter to Swamiji requesting him passionately to refute the false allegations levelled against him.

Swamiji's response

In reply Swami Vivekananda wrote to Alasinga more or less to this effect: Tell my friends that my only answer to those, who

are vilifying me, is to keep absolute mum. If I hurl stones at them as they have done to me, I become in no way different from them—in that case I drag myself down to their level. Please tell my friends that truth triumphs in the long run. They do not have to quarrel with anyone for my sake.

Why did Swamiji say this? The reason is that bandying of words with others is no good. It disturbs mental tranquillity so much that one loses mental balance and the power of judgement.

Swami Ranganathananda, while interpreting the verses of the *Gītā*, has compared the agitated mind with a fierce storm that covers the sky with dust. In such dust-storm nothing is visible. But as the storm subsides, everything becomes visible once again. Likewise, nothing should be said and done in a state of frenzy. If one does, there is every possibility that he will commit some mistake. What is the way out then? We should allow the mind to be calm. When the agitation dies down, we are able to take the right decision and act nicely.

Swami Brahmananda, the first President of the Ramakrishna Order, therefore advised a monk not to post a letter the latter had written hurriedly to teach a lesson to someone with whom he was angry. He said: Whenever you will feel tempted to write someone a strong letter, keep the letter under your pillow for two or three days; don't post it rightaway. Then you will find the fire of your rage is no more active and then you yourself will feel that it was wise on your part not to post the letter; and then you will either not post it at all, or change the language of the letter. This will save you from being repentant afterwards.

It was precisely out of this consideration that Swamiji wrote Alasinga that if he threw stones at his revilers, he would be on a par

with them which he couldn't be. In this context we should also remember Holy Mother's warning that it is not good to get entangled in verbal duel.

Forbearance

The question is: Who can keep away from senseless wrangling? He, who has the power to forbear. Holy Mother Sarada Devi used to say that one should have forbearance like the Earth. It is being tyrannized in all sorts of ways, nevertheless it bears all outrage silently. Likewise, man has to have this virtue of forbearance because he has to live with others in society. To live peacefully with others we need the power of adjustment which again requires forbearance. Forbearance is absolutely necessary. That is why Mother says that there is no virtue like forbearance.

Once Holy Mother came to know about a bitter quarrel between Nalini, her niece, and Subasini Devi, a sister-in-law. In a letter she reminded, possibly Subasini, that 'At times one has to put up with everything—even one has to offer flowers at the feet of a goat, depending on a situation!'

Let us give an example from Holy Mother's life itself. She herself has narrated this incident that had taken place when she came to Dakshineswar for the fourth time. She said: My mother, Lakshmi, I, and some others had come to Dakshineswar after offering a promised sacrifice of hair and nails to Lord Shiva at Tarakeswar. Since my brother Prasanna accompanied us, we had first gone to his residence in Calcutta. Next morning we came to Dakshineswar. But no sooner had we arrived there than Hriday started showing disrespect to them saying, 'Why have they come here? What for? What do you want?' and so on. My mother (Shyamasundari Devi) and Hriday belonged

to the same village—Sihore. That was why Hriday paid no respect to my mother. Mother kept mum. She only said, ‘Let us go back to our village (Jayrambati). In whose custody should I keep my daughter here?’ Thakur observed everything from beginning to end, but didn’t say anything for fear of Hriday.

Shortly after this tragic drama Holy Mother left Dakshineswar with a heavy heart, for she couldn’t spend even a day there! But in spite of this agony, neither was she displeased with her husband, nor her compassionate nature allowed her to curse Hriday, Sri Ramakrishna’s nephew. Only before leaving Dakshineswar, she unburdened her anguish to goddess Bhavatārini saying mentally—‘Mother, I shall come again only if You bring me.’

It is true that if God, the real Doer and Controller of everything, removes one who has taken shelter in Him, one who knows none but God as the true Protector, to whom will she make her earnest prayer except God Himself?

Consider now what we do in such a situation. We accuse one another. Prior to marriage, parents are the last refuge of a woman. She shares her joy and sorrow, good and bad things with them. And after marriage, her last prop is her husband. And we find Hriday mercilessly trying to deprive her of that support! What did Mother do here? She didn’t depend on any human being. Depending entirely on God, she took everything in her stride and forbore silently. That is why she used to say, one should forbear all adversities and depending on a situation at times one has to offer flowers even at the feet of a goat.

Dependence on God

Holy Mother depended on God so much

that not only she could put up with everyone in this world, but also accepted all without distinctions to be her own—not just toleration, but wholehearted acceptance by paying due respect to each and everyone. This paying a premium on everyone’s self-esteem and forbearance went hand in hand in her life. That is why she would say: Whatever you want to do, listen to others’ suggestions at the same time. Give them a little freedom of opinion and action and watch them from a distance so that the work doesn’t get spoiled. Give everyone the satisfaction of having some say in matter of work and you yourself maintain a low-key profile, watching everything from a distance.

This is a very practical lesson, not only for the householders but also for those who have to get along with many people.

Let us give an example. Once Sarada Devi had to send some customary gifts to the house of Radhu’s father-in-law. But there was a problem because Mother feared that Nalini, another niece of her, would invariably create a trouble and make an issue of this proposal as she had a perpetual enmity with Surabala, the crazy mother of Radhu. Both were jealous of one another. To avoid a hitch, Holy Mother approached Nalini and sought her considered opinion in this matter. This unexpected honour pleased Nalini so much that she forgot all old enmities with Surabala. She checked seriously the list of items Mother wanted to send to Radhu’s in-laws like an expert and commented: These few things won’t look nice, aunt. Forget their conduct. Besides, Radhu is a fool, without any discrimination whatsoever. But you have a dignity, after all. Why should you be so petty in your choice? You send things that befit your status.

Having said thus, Nalini added to the list

many more things. This may be a small incident, but very significant. It reveals Holy Mother's worldly wisdom. This type of unpleasant situation develops frequently in family life. We can get rid of such problems and bring peace in domestic life if we take other members of the family into confidence, consult them, and give them some amount of freedom to express their views.

This world is inhabited by people of diverse attitude and taste. We should respect this diversity. Peace gets disturbed if we do otherwise. Sarada Devi was extremely cautious about this danger. Let us recall an incident. It was the time of Durga Puja. Mother was then staying at Jayrambati. One day she asked a brahmacharin to purchase new clothes for the children of her brothers. The young brahmacharin hailed from Koalpara, and like other youths of the time, he too was a sympathizer of the Swadeshi Movement. It was but natural that he will like to boycott foreign stuff and prefer indigenous material. So he purchased everything that was Indian. The clothes were of a coarse variety and not lovely. Naturally, the young girls disliked them. They asked the brahmacharin to return the clothes and insisted on having fine-spun varieties. Obviously, the brahmacharin got annoyed. He said, 'In that case they will be English-made; should we use those goods?'

Mother happened to be nearby. Having heard everything the brahmacharin said, she smiled and said to him: My son, they (the British people) too are my children. I have to live with all; can I afford to be stubborn or inflexible? Get those things they want.

Holy Mother couldn't hurt anyone's feelings—that was against her nature.

Therefore, whenever she needed British-made clothes afterwards, she used to send some other person to buy them. This is an object-lesson to us all. We can avoid unnecessary conflicts and live in peace if we assign someone the task he likes.

We have to live and move with different types of people in family and society. So we must be careful in our dealings. As we find ourselves in different situations, it is not unlikely that we have to encounter many remarks and chit-chat. However, we have to take all this in our stride and bear them patiently. Apparently many seem to be very good individuals, but they are very haughty. They flare up at the slightest provocation as they don't have fortitude. They brag they can't tolerate any misdeed or wrongdoing; so they express their disapproval of such conduct then and there.

This sort of militant attitude is not very praiseworthy because lack of forbearance is a sign of weakness and imperfection. Spirituality means steadiness that makes one even-minded and calm. If you seek to redress a wrong forcefully, it will give rise to a brawl and intensify disquiet all the more. On the other hand, if you try to escape from an adverse situation, the virtue of fortitude will elude you. So, the inability to bear is a sign of imperfection; it never helps you to lead a healthy, peaceful life. Here lies the utility of Holy Mother's teaching. She has shown us the way. If we follow her advice we can remove our imperfections and then and then only will our personal and social life become beautiful, full of joy and that will create a proper ambience for the practice of spirituality that can give us fulfilment. ■

* This article is based on a speech Swami Shivadananda delivered in Bengali at the Institute on 10 January, 2018. The swami is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, currently posted at the Institute. The speech has been translated into English by Swaraj Mazumdar.