

## My Life As a Monk in the Ramakrishna Order

SWAMI BHUTESHANANDA

I am very happy that one long-cherished dream of mine has been fulfilled at last. I had been thinking of visiting the USA, partly because, the place is so much associated with the memory of Swami Vivekananda, and partly because I remember some of the devotees who happened to come to Belur Math from these parts of the USA. I was very much impressed by the earnestness and devotion of those friends. So it is natural that a desire should arise in my mind to come to this place and meet many more such souls.

Now, I do not know what I should talk about. This is not supposed to be a lecture as such, but a friendly, informal talk. Normally, at such gatherings in Calcutta, I invite questions from the devotees and, depending on their responses, I decide upon a topic for discussion. That seems to me more interesting because it can then be a two-way traffic. But here, the swami, who is the head of this institution, has suggested that I talk about my life—a subject which we as monks usually avoid. Of course ‘my life’ means practically my life in the organization because the other part of the life is practically non-existent. I am not sure if this will look like praising myself and saying how spiritual I have been. I do not think I can afford to make that claim so that I may deserve to be heard by you. But then when we meet in a gathering of friends we are free to talk in any way we like. Therefore, whatever you hear

from me today, you had better take with a little reservation. I feel a sort of constraint on myself because to talk about oneself is not a very pleasant task. The swami’s wish, however, is like a command to me. So I shall speak of my early days to indicate mainly how I came into contact with the Ramakrishna Mission. That may be somewhat interesting to you who may not be aware of those past events.

### Early days

I was born in a village in West Bengal, but I mostly lived in Calcutta where I had my education. Therefore I had the opportunity of coming in contact with many of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. I studied in a school which happened to be associated with ‘M.’, the writer of *The Gospel*. You have heard of ‘M.’ His name was Mahendranath Gupta. When I studied in that school he was no longer teaching there. He had retired. But the school had that hallowed association. In that school there was a teacher who was a bachelor and had been very closely connected with the Ramakrishna Mission. It was through him that I was first attracted to the Mission. Of course, as far as my memory goes, I had a desire in my early days that I should be a monk. From where that idea came to me I do not know, but somehow it was there. The only thing I can remember in this connection is that I came across a book

written by one of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples, namely, Girish Chandra Ghosh. There Girish Chandra presented a novel idea of Sri Ramakrishna particularly through one of the characters portrayed by him. I was very much attracted to the ideal from the study of the book. My mother, however, did not take kindly to the idea of my reading that book, and she kept it away from me. So I did not have access to it afterwards. But that book created a lasting impression on my mind. As I have told you, the idea of being a monk was dormant in my mind but I had some queer ideas about monastic life.

Those of you who have ever visited India may have come across wandering monks who go about from place to place, with almost nothing on. They have big matted locks of hair, smear the body with ashes and keep wandering from place to place. That was my idea of a monk and I thought, perhaps, I would in course of time be one of them. But it was not to be.

By the way, in my childhood I was living in an area where Holy Mother used to stay and where Swami Saradananda Maharaj looked after her. The area is called Baghbazar. My early life was spent there. One day I was just having a stroll by the riverside when I saw some students of our school singing some devotional songs in the company of the teacher I have already mentioned. Out of curiosity I went there to see what they were doing and to hear the songs. The teacher invited me to come and join them. I did accordingly. I liked that group immediately and soon after began to visit that group of young men who used to gather in the afternoon in a small chapel-like building, dedicated to Shiva. Gradually I felt more and more closely drawn towards them. Everyday there used to be devotional songs, evening prayers, and then a few of the young men would stay back and meditate in that

chapel. I liked that too. Gradually, as these practices continued, my relation with those devotees became deeper and more intimate. Then I thought, why should I go there only in the evening and not in the morning as well? So one morning I went there. At that time the large group was not there and so the devotional songs were missing. But I liked the *pujā* or worship which was going on and sat down to meditate. That was the beginning. It soon became my place, excepting the school hours and the nights when I used to go home and prepare my studies. It so happened that gradually everything seemed unimportant except meditation and studying in small groups. There was a collection of books mostly on Mission literature and holy scriptures.

Gradually my idea of monastic life began to change. The external rituals of monastic life ceased to have much appeal for me and I felt intensely drawn to the ideals embodied in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. So, that way the attraction for the Mission grew stronger and the vision, clearer.

I often accompanied the group to Belur Math, the Headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission, where several direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna had still been living. I came into contact with Swami Saradananda who was staying in Udbodhan. That must have been in the year 1916 or '17. But, interestingly, I had yet to see the Holy Mother. I knew that she was living there at that time but I thought that to approach a holy person of her stature, one needed some special preparation, without which it would not be easy to appreciate her deep spiritual life. So I did not feel inclined to meet Holy Mother, though some of my friends had already visited her.

Of course, I should tell you that from the beginning Holy Mother was a very shy

person. She would not even speak to her own disciples, I mean, the male ones. Only a few had direct access to her. Otherwise, even when they approached her for spiritual guidance, she would sit with her veil drawn over her face. Nobody could see her face and she used to speak in such a low voice that it was almost inaudible. There used to be one or two lady disciples of Sri Ramakrishna—Golap Ma and Yogin Ma near her and they would repeat her words to the disciples. That might be one of the reasons why I did not have the urge to visit her. But then, on one fortuitous occasion I had her *darshan*.

It was the occasion of her birthday celebration. There was a large gathering. Devotees from far and near came to pay their reverence to the Holy Mother who, as a result, had to spend the whole day meeting them. We, a few young men, also went there with one of the disciples of Swami Vivekananda. He was commonly known as Jnan Maharaj. He used to be very intimate with the younger people. When we visited Belur Math, Swami Shivananda Maharaj, who was in charge of Belur Math, would ask us: 'Have you met Jnan Maharaj?' If we said 'no', he would say 'Then go to him.' That was because Jnan Maharaj loved to talk about spiritual life and keep us, youngsters, engaged in various activities of the Math. Now, this Jnan Maharaj took us to the Holy Mother. One of the persons who were attending on the Holy Mother said: 'Mother is very tired. So, Jnan Maharaj, you may come alone and pay your respects to her, not your troupe of boys.' Then Jnan Maharaj replied: 'If my boys cannot see the Mother, I must pay my respects to her from here only. I cannot go alone.' Then what could be done! We were all allowed to go inside. So we had the opportunity to meet the Mother and touch her feet. People often

ask me about my reminiscences of the Holy Mother. I say, 'If that lone meeting with the Holy Mother could be called a reminiscence, then yes, that is my reminiscence. I have that and nothing more.' Unfortunately it was so. But, then, the influence of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and their direct disciples upon young people like us who had a little urge for spiritual life was irresistible. It completely changed their lives. This happened in my case as well.

### Renunciation

In Bengal monasticism was not as popular as it was in Northern India. It was only through the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna that a new type of monasticism captured the imagination of the young people. My association with Belur Math grew stronger over time. But it had one effect. I became more and more indifferent to my studies and more and more drawn towards the ideals of the Math and the Mission. I tell you all these because you may like to hear about this part of my life.

Let me tell you that I wanted to renounce even before completing my school final examination as I thought it was useless. I used to ask myself: What is the use of this study that will not give me God-realization? Finally, I expressed my desire to join the Order, but Swami Shivananda Maharaj, who was the head of the Belur Math at that time, would not encourage me to do so. Instead, he asked me to complete my studies first. Even though I went on trying for some time to persuade him to accept me he would not budge. Then I thought that it was useless to continue that way and decided to run away from home and go to the Himalayas straight. At first I thought of going on foot and without any money. I did not then have the slightest idea about the distance. Later on, two others—one friend who was a little

senior to me in age, and the teacher, about whom I told you earlier—wished to come along. So all three of us started on foot. I had about, say, one-sixth of a dollar in small coins with me. None of us was accustomed to begging. Consequently we often had to go without food, sometimes some food came luckily. After three days of such tough life we became completely exhausted. So we returned with the idea that we should collect some money from friends in Calcutta and purchase tickets for the Himalayas. I first went to a teacher who I knew was very helpful. But do you know what happened? He found that we had been starving for three days. So he gave us some food to eat and secretly informed our mothers who at once came running and weeping. So I was caught then and there and brought back home. That was the outcome of the first attempt.

After sometime I gathered some money from friends and purchased a ticket and went straight to a place at the foot of the Himalayas, namely, Haridwar. Ramakrishna Mission has a centre there. First I went to that centre. At that time they were celebrating the birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. I naturally joined that celebration. After it was over, the monks left for a remoter place in the Himalayas called Rishikesh, where the ascetics usually went and lived. We had some of the swamis of the Ramakrishna Order staying there at that time and I, a boy at that time, went with them. They thought that if the ‘boy’ roamed about here and there his life would be spoilt. So they took me to the place where they had been doing *tapasyā* or religious practices. I went there and stayed with them. But one sannyasin, Swami Dayananda, went on persuading me to go back and complete my studies first and then join the Order. After his constant persuasion I felt that, perhaps, the swami was right. So I agreed and came

back to Calcutta at a time when my final examinations were about to take place. To cut a long story short, I finished school, went to college and then found the opportunity of staying in an ashrama, a centre which was not affiliated to the Ramakrishna Order but was very closely connected with it. While staying there I used to come to Belur Math and meet the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and other swamis of the Order. That ashrama where I stayed is no more there and it ceased to function soon after I left that place. It seemed to have existed only for me! From there I approached Swami Saradananda Maharaj who was kind enough to initiate me into spiritual life some time ago. Now I told him that I wanted to be initiated into *brahmacharya*, the first important ceremony before being ordained into monkhood. I was happy to find that Saradanandaji did not dissuade me. He said, ‘You see, only the head of the Belur Math, (and at that time it was Swami Shivananda Maharaj) initiates someone into brahmacharihood. So you go to him.’ I said, ‘I am afraid of him because I told you he has turned down my plea several times.’ Saradanandaji said, ‘Go to him again and also tell Jnan Maharaj.’ He knew that Jnan Maharaj was intimate with us. So he added, ‘You go and tell Jnan Maharaj on my behalf to take you to Swami Shivananda Maharaj.’ Jnan Maharaj did take me to Shivanandaji Maharaj, who heard everything and consented that I would be ordained into *brahmacharya*, but on condition that I should complete my education. So you see, again the same constraint. But I thought, well, let it be; let me go through the college. I agreed and then became ordained in 1923.

During my college days, whenever there was a vacation I would run to Belur Math. It seemed as if that was the only right place for

me. After graduation I came to Belur Math and joined the Order. I had the good fortune of staying at Belur Math at a time when Swami Shivananda, Swami Subodhananda were permanently residing there. Swami Saradananda, who was staying in Calcutta, frequently visited the Math. Most of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, who were still living, used to come to the Math and stay there occasionally. So I had the good fortune of meeting them often. That way my life as a monk started.

### A new idea of monastic life

I need not give a detailed description of all the Math and Mission centres I served. But I shall mention one important thing. I have told you already that I was closely associated with Swami Saradananda Maharaj and that it was from him that I received my initiation. Besides that, when I came to live in the Math I had the great privilege of being in direct contact with Swami Shivananda Maharaj, the revered President of the Order. Through the kindness of one of his secretaries I got an opportunity to give him some personal service. I attended on him, massaged his feet and so on. In other words, I became one of his *sevakas* and lived in close contact with him. That gave me the blessed opportunity to know the real significance of monastic life. This knowledge and insight could not be attained only by reading books. It comes through association with the living presences of holy lives.

It was, of course, a rare privilege to remain in close proximity with a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. But there was another urge in me which was becoming stronger and stronger, namely, to spend some time exclusively in meditation and, as you may call it—to be alone with God. One day when I was massaging the feet of Swami Shivananda Maharaj, I asked him: ‘Maharaj, I cannot

decide for myself which will be better for me—living in your holy presence here and doing some personal service to you, or living a life exclusively devoted to spiritual practices. I feel both urges strongly. So please tell me what will be good for me.’

Maharaj gave a categorical reply: ‘When that feeling is there in you, you must go, you must go.’ That was Shivanandaji Maharaj’s habit. When he wanted to emphasize something, he would repeat his words to make his point. Then the swami added: ‘But my boy, before you go, get yourself prepared. Try to go deep and deep into the practice of meditation here itself so that you may be able to utilize your stay in the Himalayas exclusively for spiritual practices: for that a preparation is needed. So do prepare yourself here.’

Then he did not allow me to continue my massaging. He sat up and with full enthusiasm went on encouraging me. ‘But’, he said, ‘your health is not good.’ He knew that I had suffered from some illness sometime back. Therefore he continued: ‘You should go to a place where you will not be required to do extreme austerity and where your health will not break down. Try to think of such a place and I am also thinking about where you should go.’

Then after two or three days later, he decided that I should go to Benares. He suggested that place because we have got an ashrama there where there is also a hospital run by our sadhus. Maharaj wanted me to go there so that I could get good food and medical help if needed. My mind, however, yearned to go deep into the Himalayas. Still, I accepted his suggestion and went to Benares. There I had taken shelter in a temple, a little distance from our centre. There I stayed, practising *sādhanā* and begging food from the devotees in the city. You see, for monks begging is not prohibited. So I started living

that way. Then, after some time I wrote to Srīmat Swami Shivanandaji Maharaj that my health had not broken down in spite of this kind of life. So if he allowed me, I might go to Uttarkashi now. He permitted and gave his blessings.

I went to Uttarkashi and stayed there. I mention this fact because I want you to understand that the Ramakrishna Mission not only encourages various philanthropic activities but also lays stress on the enrichment of the inner life of a monk. One is just as important as the other.

It was Swami Vivekananda who gave us this idea of monastic life. He said, '*Ātmano mokshārtham jagat hitāya ca*'—'for liberation of the self and for the good of the world.' These twin ideals are mixed together. They are mutually beneficial. Swami Shivananda Maharaj did encourage me to undertake *sādhanā* but at the same time, did not forget to remind me that living such an exclusive life of austerity was good for some time, but not for always. You go and experience that life and then come back and be an active member of the Order, because both sides together make up one's spiritual life. One side should not be stressed at the cost of the other. I learnt this important lesson in the course of my monastic life in the Ramakrishna Order. I did not have that idea before. As I told you, in the early days of my life, my idea of a monk was that he should live exclusively for his spiritual attainment without any concern for others. Here is a teaching of Sri Ramakrishna which is best understood through the interpretation of Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda himself learnt it at the feet of his Guru. The idea is

that the people around you may need your service and the service unto them is, in fact, service unto God. That was an ideal which was never emphasized in earlier days. I learned that great lesson after staying in the Order for a number of years.

### Message for the householders

Now a word about the life of a householder. What should a householder do? Sri Ramakrishna has answered this question by saying, 'You do your duty as a householder, but hold on to God.' First hold on to God with one hand, and then do your duties with the other. Not the other way round, mind it. In the householder's life it is absolutely necessary that at times they should separate themselves from their everyday surroundings and go to some quiet place to meditate. There they will think that there are only two things in life—one is the devotee's own life and the other is God. Nothing else should come in between at least for the time being. This retreat should be a place where the environment will be congenial. Then only you will have that deep anchoring in spiritual life that may help you perform your duty as a householder more efficiently until the difference between the two will disappear. Your life as a householder and your life in God will completely merge together. That is the ideal. But in order to attain that state, you will have to occasionally estrange yourself, cut yourself off from the householder's duties to spend some days exclusively for life in God. Sri Ramakrishna knew our difficulties. So he assures us that, even if this life of seclusion is lived only for a month or even for a few days, it can be immensely helpful. ■

\* This article is based on an informal talk Srīmat Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj, then Vice President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, delivered at the Hollywood Temple, Southern California, on 18 August 1988. Courtesy—Vedanta Society of Southern California.