

Being a Lotus

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Lotus has a big place in Indian spiritual and cultural heritage. We find lotuses everywhere in our spiritual traditions. We find Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna), the *vigraha*, sitting on the lotus not only at the Belur Math temple but also in many other temples. We find many pictures of the Hindu deities who keep sitting on a lotus.

A few days ago, when I was visiting a few countries in South-East Asia, I got a chance to visit many Buddhist temples. It was amazing to see the Buddha sitting on a lotus. Why do we find all these great, divine and saintly personages associated with the lotus? It is because the lotus is a symbol of peace and harmony. So when we see the pictures of Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and others seated on a lotus we find they are the embodiments of peace and harmony. With this harmony within, such people are able to bring and develop harmony outside.

A lotus, however, is not just a symbol of peace and harmony. It also has another message for us. We know that lotus grows in water the bottom of which is all muddy. And as it comes out the leaves of the lotus keep floating on the water but the water does not stick to it. Therefore the lotus also stands for this great ideal of being inside water and yet not being touched by water. The leaves of the lotus do not get wet. That is the ideal. These are the qualities devotees aspire to attain as spiritual seekers. On the one hand, they try to cultivate deep peace and harmony within and, on the other, they strive to follow the ideal of being *in* this

world and not being *of* the world.

Sometimes people speak of renouncing the world. When somebody raised this question to Swami Brahmananda, the great swami exclaimed: Who is outside of this world! We all are in this world.

True, being in the world is not a problem. Take the example of a boat. A boat remains on water. That is just the right place for the boat to be. But if water gets inside the boat it sinks and brings disaster. Titanic is an example. But as devotees, as spiritual seekers, can we find a way of not allowing the world to get inside us? And that is what spirituality means—not allowing the world to topple us.

Spiritual life really means a life of dwelling in the Spirit. The world is very diverse but the Spirit is one. Spiritual life means being focused on the Spirit. Since the Spirit is one, spiritual life really means being focused on that one.

The terms such as ‘monasticism’, ‘monastery’ or a ‘monk’—all these are associated with monastic life. This can be traced to the Greek word *monos* which means alone. To be a monastic or a sannyasin one has to become aware of oneness at some point. To be a spiritual seeker, at some point, we have to become aware of being alone. Spiritual life will begin in a serious way for us when we realize that in spite of enormous support around us—the support of friends, family, community, society etc—we are alone at some level. That is why I think it is said in *Manusmriti* that no matter how much people might love us, or how many people we

might view as being our own, the most that they can do is to accompany us up to the cremation ground. The journey beyond the cremation ground has to be done alone. We come into this world alone and we leave this world alone. All the different connections that we make are between these two points ie, between the points of birth and death. When we become intensely aware of aloneness only then we begin to ask truly profound and deep questions. Until then religion has not become an urgent matter to us. Being alone is different from being lonely. Loneliness is a problem. But aloneness is a very different thing.

In the early 1960s in the United States there was a big best-seller called *The Lonely Crowd*. It is possible for one to be surrounded by people all the time and yet one may feel very lonely. But aloneness is a wonderful quality which spiritual seekers should cultivate.

Once Mahendranath Gupta, the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (*Kathamrita* in original Bengali) asked Sri Ramakrishna how is it possible for lay devotees and householders who have so many family responsibilities to be dedicated entirely to God and the spiritual ideal. In reply to that question, Sri Ramakrishna said that there are two kinds of yogis (He used the word *yogi* to mean a true spiritual seeker)—*guptayogi* and *vyaktayogi*. The *guptayogi* is one who keeps himself hidden from public glare and does not put on the garb of an ascetic. A *vyaktayogi*, on the other hand, is one who can be easily identified as a yogi. Anyway, what Sri Ramakrishna meant to say was that the householder should renounce mentally. That is to say, there are two ways of leading a spiritual life. One way is to hide the fact that I am engaged in spiritual practices. I renounce, detach myself mentally from the world. But outwardly I am right there with everyone. Internally of course I know that I

am alone. The *vyaktayogi*, on the other hand, will have some external signs of renunciation—a specific robe, a different name, etc. But the internal or the mental giving up is common to both.

If we look at Indian history of the last thousand years of subjugation—six centuries of Moghul rule, and three and a half centuries of British rule—we find that the prevalent social structure needed to be revitalized. And that is why in the 18th and the 19th century reform movements came up. Those reform movements that tried to re-structure the Indian society were often led by the lay members. The spiritual movement, however, were led by the monastics. And Swami Vivekananda is credited with being the leader of such efforts to channel the spiritual life of the Indian nation in a new direction. The kind of monasticism that we have today is little bit different from what it had always been for centuries.

In the olden days the idea was that one who is a *sannyasin*, a monk, or a nun, one who gives up the world and goes to a forest or a mountain top would have no connection with society. The only time they came down was to beg for food. In return, they gave some spiritual teachings to those who gathered round them. But as they did not belong to the society at large, they were exempted from social duties and responsibilities.

But what Swami Vivekananda professed was so different from the traditional attitude! He said he will bring the Vedanta of the forest right into the centre of the society. That is why the monks of the Ramakrishna Order and many other Orders do not now go to the forest and stay there in isolation. They are right there amidst the din and bustle of the city. They are there of course, yet they are not there. It is a little bit like the lotus. They live in the heart of a city bustling with life and activities, yet somehow they are out of it—being *in*, as

well as being *out* at the same time.

The idea of *nitya-sannyāsi*

But this ideal of being in and simultaneously being out is not meant only for the sannyasins. As spiritual seekers, this idea applies to all of us. All of us must consider how can we be a part of the society, a part of the family, a part of the community, and yet be not so gripped by them so that we do not lose sight of our spiritual goal.

Of course, this is not a new teaching in some way. In the *Gītā* (5.3) Sri Krishna says,

*Jneyah sa nitya-sannyāsi
yo na dveshti na kāṅkshati /
Nirdvandvo hi mahābāho
sukham bandhāt pramucyate. //*

—‘O mighty-armed one! Whoever hates not, nor desires, should be known as one established in renunciation. Indeed, one who is above such contraries is easily liberated from bondage.’

Lord Krishna here is describing one who is an eternal *sannyāsin*. He is referring to a spiritual seeker irrespective of whether they have taken formal vows of monasticism or not. If I am a spiritual seeker, renunciation should be a part of my life. The only difference is that renunciation is only internal, or internal plus external.

We all know when ‘M’, Mastermahashay, started visiting Sri Ramakrishna, how he had admonished him time and again. He asked whether ‘M.’ was married or not, whether he had any children or not and so on. These questions somewhat unnerved ‘M.’ who felt a little bit guilty. He thought he had missed the boat; he should have been a sannyasin, but now that was too late for him.

Once ‘M.’ asked Thakur: What determines who will be a sannyasin and who won’t. We conventionally think that the answer would be something like this, that

you have to have an intense spirit of renunciation and *vairāgya* if you want to be a sannyasin. If your *vairāgya* or dispassion is less than a burning type you won’t be a sannyasin. This kind of thinking almost makes one feel as if being a *grihastha*, being a householder, is the next best choice. But that was not what Thakur said at all. He did not raise the question of greater or lesser renunciation. He simply said: ‘That is the Will of the Mother.’ And this is very important. If someone has become a sannyasin, that person should not think I have somehow greater *vairāgya* than others. And if someone is leading a householder’s life, he or she doesn’t have to think that somehow they have less *vairāgya* than others. It does not have to be that way.

If you think about it deeply, you will find that the opportunity of practising detachment and sacrifice is present everywhere. It is probably more in a householder’s life. Think how much sacrifice you do as a parent! When you have a newborn baby at home, you are to pass sleepless nights. No mother, or no father thinks ‘I am just going to sleep and I don’t care if the baby is crying’. So you have sacrificed your sleep. Then you sacrifice your peace because you have to suffer so much worries and anxieties to bring up them. You have to be concerned about the food they get, about their education and other things.

There was one little incident in the life of Swami Akhandananda. Many of you perhaps know that. Nevertheless it bears repetition. The swami’s father had a desire. He wanted to become a monk when he was young. But he could not. His son Gangadhar (who later became Swami Akhandananda) had this great desire to wander alone in the Himalayas depending on God alone. Gangadhar knew if he told this to his *gurubhais*, the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, they would not allow him to

leave Baranagore Math and travel alone. The brotherly bond was so strong. So he did not tell them. He did not tell his mother even. He only expressed his desire to his father. His father said: Very good, just do one thing. Let me know the day you are about to leave; I will come to see you off. So Swami Akhandananda secretly got a ticket and told his father. Both came to the Howrah station on the day of journey. When the train was about to steam out of the station, the swami bowed at the feet of his father and boarded the train. His father blessed him and as the train was about to start his father was standing there waving and blessing his son. The swami described later the thought that came to his mind at that moment. He reasoned: I am a young man. The whole life is ahead of me and here is my aged father. I am the sole support in his old age. And without thinking who is going to look after him, he came to the platform to bless me so that I may succeed in my spiritual life.

Akhandananda said, 'I realized my father's sacrifice is many times more than mine.' I mention this incident to show that the practice of detachment, renunciation can occur no matter where you are, no matter who you are. So, that is the idea of the *nitya-sannyāsin*.

So Sri Krishna says in the *Gītā*, '*yo na dveshti na kānkshati*'. If I can eliminate from my life all hatred, if I hate nobody and '*na kānkshati*'—if I can eliminate all hopes and expectations, then I am at peace.

You may have heard another great teaching of the *Bhāgavata* that says, '*āshā hi paramam dukham, nairāshyam paramam sukham*'. It means living with expectations is a life of profound misery and living without expectations is a life of perpetual joy. So I can be happy right now if I can touch my heart and say—'I don't expect anything from anyone'. It is difficult.

As because you don't expect something does not mean you will not get it. You are

going to get what you are going to get. And what you are not going to get, you are not going to get. That is another favourite verse from *Pancadashi* by Vidyāranya Swami.

*yat abhāvi na tad bhāve
bhāvi cet na anyathā;
eti cintā vishyam nat bodho
brahmane vartakah.*

That is, that which will not happen will not happen, that which will happen will happen. Knowing this, the wise ones become free from the poison of anxiety, and free from all delusion. That is how a spiritual seeker ought to live. Recognizing that what I deserve in life will come to me, all I need to do is to carry out my duties and responsibilities as best as I can and live without expectation. That is what Krishna says, '*na dveshti* (no hatred), *na kānkshati* (no expectation)'. If I can live that way, all *dvandva*, that is to say, all conflicts, all the choices between opposites will go away and I will become '*nirdvandvo*'. All inner and external conflicts will then disappear. '*Sukham bandhāt pramucyate*'—such a person easily becomes free from bondage. That is what we are trying to do, that is what spiritual seekers are supposed to do. If we see that the goal is *moksha* (liberation), then we have to become free from bondage. And to become free from bondage, all that we need to do is to eliminate hatred from our heart, try to live without expectations, and try to lead a life free from conflicts. All these come if I can consciously touch the deep centre of peace in my heart, discover the deep harmony within me. That is exactly what the lotus does. It is a symbol of peace, harmony, and being in the world and not of the world. If we can live this way, we will be able to deal with the problems and issues that we have in our lives in a much more intelligent way.

There is no problem, both personal or collective, which does not have a solution.

God would never send us a problem without any solution being present somewhere. Often, for every problem, solution is very easy. But we are not able to see it because our vision has become clouded. We need clarity. Sometimes, mostly in Uttarakhand, sadhus greet each other in Hindi—‘*Darshan saaf hai?*’ That is, ‘Are you able to see things clearly?’ They are not asking about physical eyesight. They want to know if you are able to see things clearly. In other words, they ask if my mind is filled with peace, calmness and harmony so that I can see everything clearly.

Problems appear complicated because we are complicated. If we become simple, then we are able to find solution to our problem right away. And discovering that in our deep simplicity is what being a lotus really means.

Spiritual life and service

For instance, the problem of inequality. Sometimes I have to stress this because often there is this popular idea (both here, and as well as in the West) that spiritual life, which among many other things include prayer or meditation, is a very self-centred activity. If you sit and pray, what good does it do to society? Actually, this argument is not true because living a life of prayer and meditation is a life of service. We sometimes think that only if I go and do some relief activities, go and feed the hungry, go and build homes for the homeless, give education to the ignorant—that is service. Yes, of course, that is service too. But to limit service only to such activities is not right. Because even if I live a peaceful life, a life of non-violence, a life dedicated to an ideal, if I spend time sincerely praying daily, doing my *japa*, doing my meditation, I am already doing a lot of service to society. If I become a good person, if I eliminate the weaknesses of my heart I am reducing at least one potential troublemaker from the

world. That is not only some service, but more than that. Swami Brahmanandaji in the book, *The Eternal Companion*, says that if there is one sincere spiritual seeker in a family the entire family gets the benefit of it. So when you are doing your prayer and meditation at home, do not think it is only for you. Your whole family gets the benefit of it. And the more the number of people who do this kind of practice, they are not only serving themselves but also they are serving their family and the community.

What is there in this kind of an ideal-driven life? There is a lot of strength involved in it. Ordinarily we see expression of strength in the life of one when one joins the army, or someone does remarkable acts of bravery. We are able to understand that strength. That is true. What often is not recognized is that a simple person trying to lead an honest life, a life of truthfulness, a life of purity, even when there is no support for it from the community is also the manifestation of great strength. When many, many people indulge in all sorts of bribery, lies, and gossip—that simple person refuses to be a part of these all. And when there is such a case, you are likely to have not many friends. People find you, maybe, boring.

There is a great temptation to compromise the principle, if there is any, and get into the milieu. But contrarily, if someone decides to live an ideal life and say ‘This is my ideal and I am not going to compromise it’ that requires enormous courage. But this kind of courage and strength are not often recognized in our society. Recognized or not, all the same there is great strength involved there.

Suppose a person with a very limited income has been trying to make ends meet, trying to manage responsibilities of the family such as seeing that everyone gets food to eat, that the children get education even when things appear hopeless. But that person goes on discharging those duties day

after day and I think there is enormous courage in him.

Let us not judge others

Another point is, let us not judge other people. There is a tendency in the hierarchical social structure in which we live to look down upon people who we characterize doing ‘inferior’ jobs. That is the kind of language we employ to designate them. We say a class III employee, a class II employee and so on. That is unfortunate because there is no ‘inferiority’ or ‘superiority’ in work. At least that is what Swami Vivekananda has taught. There is no reason why a king should feel superior and a cobbler mending shoes should be inferior. Swamiji points out that a cobbler may not be able to rule a kingdom but neither can the king do the job of a cobbler. Swamiji reveals to us this truth in his book on *Karmayoga* that each is great in its own place.

Today a major part of the world population faces the scourge of inequality. So, as devotees of Thakur, Mā, and Swamiji we have to ask ourselves if we see everyone equal. As I said just now, the world suffers from the problem of inequality, not simply inequality based on the difference between the rich and the poor. That is a major problem no doubt. But it is not simply the question of money. There are other things as well, for example, the distinction made between genders. We know how even today the dominance of the patriarchal society continues to exist. Women in such societies do not have any say in most matters affecting their life. Their merit is not recognized and conscious effort is made to put them down on the basis of gender. So all these discriminations based on wealth, gender, colour, caste, race are there. If I am a spiritual seeker and I indulge in all these, then I am not true to myself.

The more we try to imbibe the qualities

associated with the lotus, the more we will see things clearly. We will then begin to look at the whole problem in a different way. Then I ask myself: What is my identity? Is my identity separable from the amount of money I have? Is my identity separable from my gender, caste, religion and culture? What is my true identity? As we gradually attain the clarity of vision we will begin to see that we are divine spirit. I am not the body, not the mind, nor any of these things—I am Ātman, as the *Gītā* says. Body, mind, and other things are just external coverings. The real ‘me’ is beyond gender, beyond possessions, beyond all these things. With this clarity of vision it will become easier for me to respect others. If I am not able to respect others it really means I am not able to respect myself. If I truly respect myself I will respect everyone, no matter what work that person is doing, no matter what the religion, culture, gender of that person is. So respecting others is a very spiritual practice. That clarity will come if I become a true spiritual seeker.

The same principle applies to the problem of apathy, the problem of indifference. Today, societies all over the world are becoming increasingly diverse—diversity of religion, caste and culture. There is so much diversity in our own country—India. We still seem to divide the country into North and South on the basis of caste and religion. But as a true spiritual seeker, one who is truly approaching the ideal of being a lotus would say that he refuses to make that distinction. He will make an effort to see God in the heart of everyone. However, I cannot see God in the heart of others unless I see God in my own heart. How we see others is a direct indication of how I see myself. If we see ourselves as human beings, we are able to see everyone as human beings. There is no difficulty at all. But if I am able to see myself truly as a

child of God, then it will become easier for me to see everyone as a child of God. Otherwise everyone says, God is a father, or a mother, we are all God's children and so forth. These we repeat just like a parrot. But when we go out into the street we are not able to see the children of God. Often time we hear people say—Oh! These are terrible people, so selfish! This sort of consideration is so bad. Swami Vivekananda once said that those people who always complain that this is a very selfish, nasty world, I ask them: What are you doing here?

The fact that I am here in this world probably means I am nasty too. I am selfish too. Otherwise I would not have been here. These are the kinds of insights that come to us if we hold on to that symbol of the lotus.

Three ways of achieving peace and harmony

As I said in the beginning, lotus stands for peace and harmony. There are three complimentary ways of achieving peace and harmony which come from three primary sources. Let me just mention them one by one once again.

The first source is a moral life, ethical life—the life of *dharma* that commands us to resolve to live honestly, truthfully, not telling a lie even jokingly. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that truthfulness is a *tapasyā* of the *Kali-yuga*. If we can hold onto truth, all other qualities necessary for spiritual progress will automatically come to us.

Most of us are truthful most of the time. It is not to say that a person who lies, lies all the time. That does not happen. Our strength and virtues are tested when we face a crisis. When does truthfulness become a virtue? It is on those occasions when being truthful you stand to lose something. And, in spite of that fear of loss, you do not compromise. There will be occasions in life when by telling a lie you might escape some

punishment, or you might escape some loss. In such situations if you refuse to lie, then it is a virtue. So that is what the spiritual seeker does.

That is why when India became politically free we chose the motto from the *Mundaka Upanishad*—‘*Satyameva jayate*’—‘Truth alone triumphs’. If we truly believe it, then we would never lie. We are often very proud of our great spiritual heritage, the Vedas and the Rishis and so on. Rightfully so, we ought to be proud of our heritage. But we also need to question, why there is so much corruption in this great country of ours with this great Vedic cultural heritage and philosophy? How do these two things go together? Why do not people see any contradiction involved in waking up early in the morning, taking bath, going to a temple with great devotion and then going to the office and then telling lies and taking bribes? So there is something wrong somewhere. This is a question that everyone has to ask themselves.

It may not be possible to remove all sorts of corruption in the entire country. But one thing we can do. *Everyone of us can say I can eliminate one corrupt person from this country and that is myself.* If I try to remove corruption from my own heart, I have already served my country well. So even by leading the life of *dharma* we help the country. This holding on to the life of *dharma*, honesty, truthfulness gives enormous courage, clarity of vision and helps us to turn into a true lotus.

The second source is true *shraddhā*, to have faith in God. If we like to call ourselves true devotees, we should ask ourselves what makes me a devotee. Not simply because I read religious books, not because I do a little bit of meditation everyday, not because I attend some lectures in some ashrama, or at some other places holding religious discourses, or a pilgrimage that I make, or a

periodic fast that I observe. All these do not make us a devotee. In what way am I different from those who do not call themselves devotees? One of the reasons *dharma* is getting a bad name today is that people who like to call themselves religious do not reflect the qualities essential for a spiritual life. We see people who call themselves devotees are not always truthful and honest. The younger generations observe this; therefore very often they feel disillusioned with religion in general.

Then *shraddhā* or faith in God. When I say I believe in God, that God is there, I always remember that God is. It is a very uncomfortable feeling for many to know that God is seeing them all the time. We want God to come and help us only when we are in trouble. God actually is a problem when everything goes fine for us. Sometimes people think they would not be able to enjoy life if they are all the time aware of God, as if God should only come to us when there is a problem like calling an ambulance! You do not call an ambulance everyday for a ride or a drive. So we want God as a troubleshooter.

Therefore, as a devotee, I have to ask myself what makes me a devotee. Am I a devotee in the true sense of the term?

Another source of helping us become a true lotus is this deep awareness of the divine, of God dwelling in my heart. Sri Krishna says in the *Gītā* (18.61):

*Ishvarah sarva-bhutānām
hrid-deshe'rjuna tishthati /
Bhrāmayan sarva-bhutāni
yantrārudhāni māyayā //*

—‘O Arjuna! The Lord dwells in the heart of all beings revolving them all by His mysterious Power *Māyā*, as if they

were objects mounted on a machine.’

Being aware or remembering that God, *Ishvara*, dwells in our hearts will also help us to be spiritual, to become spiritual seekers. The more we try to imbibe the strength and insights that come to us leading a life of ethics, a life of faith in God, and a life of looking deeply within our heart, we will be able to cultivate peace, harmony and being in the world and, at the same time, not being worldly—the qualities that we associate with the lotus.

Ultimately, we will see that, as Sri Ramakrishna used to say, when the lotus blooms bees themselves would come. We don’t have to wait or expect appreciation or recognition from anyone. When the lotus of the heart blooms everything becomes filled with joy.

Sri Ramakrishna lived in this same world of ours. When we go to Dakshineswar many see that it is a crowded place, maybe a little bit cleaner now than a few years ago. It is a pity that many of us see only the difficulties or facilities that meet us there. Sri Ramakrishna also lived there but he saw things differently. And what he saw there was just the blissful Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna did not say that only he was able to see Her, and asked us to only believe in Her. No. It is not that. What did he say to Narendranath when the latter had asked: ‘Have you seen God?’ His reply was, ‘Yes, I have seen Him. You too can see Him’. And that was not something he said only to Narendranath. Through that message Sri Ramakrishna is telling that to everyone of us. We too can see God. And in order to see God we have to be a lotus. The more this lotus imagery becomes alive and meaningful in our heart the better and richer will be our spiritual harvest. ■

* This is the synopsis of Prof. Shankari Prasad Basu Memorial Lecture Swami Tyagananda, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of Boston, delivered at the Institute on 20 January 2018.