

Saints and Miracles

SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA

A matter of experience

The subject mentioned in the title involves many questions which must be answered. What is religion? What is the purpose of life? What is saintliness? Have miracles anything to do with religion or saintliness? These are some of the most fundamental questions that I shall try to answer.

First of all, let us try to understand what is meant by 'religion'. If you study any religion of the world, you will find one fundamental truth—the truth of God. Every religion believes in the existence of God, and every religion tries to give certain proofs of God's existence. But if there are proofs, there are also counter-proofs to disprove His existence. The great seer and philosopher Shankarācharya said, you cannot at any given point of time gather all the intellectuals of the world together and come to a decision as to whether God exists or not. But what is it that one group of people is trying to prove and another trying to disprove? It is the idea of God. But God is Reality. He is *not* an idea. So where lies the proof? The proof lies in the fact that God can be known, can be realized, can be experienced. To accept and believe that others have seen God is not enough. You must have the direct, personal experience of God and that is the one and the greatest proof. Religion means just that—to realize God. Sri Ramakrishna said as much. When Narendranath (later Swami Vivekananda) asked him if he had seen God,

he replied: 'Yes, I see Him more clearly, more definitely, more distinctly than I see you.' Elsewhere he says: You hear about milk, that is one thing. You see milk that is another thing. But when you drink milk that is another experience altogether. Unless you drink milk you can never know what milk is really like. Similarly, you hear about God, read about Him, or even you may have a vision. Still, that is not enough. You have to be intimate with Him; you have to realize your union with Him. *That is religion.*

The real problem is that few have seen God with their eyes, or heard His words with their ears. Our senses cannot give us that experience of God. Then, how to experience God? Our great saints and sages point out that you cannot have an experience of God so long as you are within the three states of consciousness, namely, waking (*jagrat*), dreaming (*svapna*) and dreamless sleep (*sushupti*). You have to transcend these three states of consciousness to realize God. There is, however, always the possibility of a human soul transcending these three states of consciousness and reaching the fourth state, namely, the *turiya* or the transcendental state.

Then of course every religion and every teacher gives us some methods and means by which we can experience that Truth. Religion is experimental as much as science is experimental. If you go to a scientist, he doesn't tell you to believe in what conclusions he has arrived at. He says, come to my laboratory, I will show you the

experiment. Then you go and check it for yourself. Similarly in spiritual life or religion, an illumined soul, who has experimented and experienced that truth of God, can point out to you the methods and means by which you may find it out for yourself.

Miracles

Again here comes another point, divine experience is transcendental in nature. It is naturally above nature, because nature means what we experience, what we know. 'Transcendental', on the other hand, means something beyond. There is a belief all over the world that one who transcends the senses and has the experience of God gets supernatural powers. It is believed that such persons can perform miracles. That is why in popular perception saints have become synonymous with miracles. But that is a fundamental misunderstanding. When I was a boy of fourteen, there came a so-called saint. This man was a guest in a house next door to us. He had this supernatural power. If you thought of any fragrance, say of rose, jasmine, or any bad odour, for that matter, and touch his toes, then your fingers would have that smell. Naturally, I was quite excited and I wanted to be his disciple immediately. But there was an elderly person who knew me. He told me to go and read Swami Vivekananda's *Rāja Yoga* and some particular aphorisms of Patanjali to understand what was happening.

It is a fact that people want to see miracles performed by saints. They can accept one as a saint if he can perform miracles. Jesus also performed miracles, and people accepted Jesus as a great divine man. But when it came to following him, there was none. We read in the Bible how even many of his disciples went back and no more walked with him when he did not show any miracle. Then certain scribes and

Pharisees said to Jesus: Master, we would like to see a sign of your being the Messiah. But Jesus said unto them: An evil and adulterous generation seeketh for a sign. Think, how firm he was! When King Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad for he had heard many things about him and he hoped to see some miracles done by him. He put many questions to Jesus. But Jesus answered him nothing. So we find that from that time many of his followers deserted him. Jesus then said unto the twelve apostles: Will you also go away? Simon Peter answered: Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.

Methods and means

Here is the crux of the matter. Before I come to that, let me explain what these miracles are and how they can be performed. In fact, you do not have to be religious or spiritual to perform these miracles. Take for instance, what science is doing today. Aren't they performing miracles in a way? Science is, indeed, performing miracles by controlling the external nature.

In the same way, miracles may be performed by controlling our inner nature. In other words, these can be done by the simple principle of concentration of mind. If you have gained the power of concentration, no matter how you gain it, then with its help miracles can be performed. The main factor is a concentrated mind. You may ask whether it can be demonstrated and proved, well, yes, it can be demonstrated. But how to do it? A scientist can demonstrate certain things, but suppose I have no understanding of science, can he prove anything to me? He may demonstrate to me the experiment. But I have no understanding of science. I would not be convinced. He may try to explain. But, to me, it will be all Greek. The same

way with the miracles. They can be demonstrated. But you will have difficulty understanding how they are performed.

The word *samyama* is used by Patanjali. Patanjali was a great yogi who is said to have lived around second century BCE, though the date is not uniformly agreed upon by scholars. But Patanjali was not the originator of yoga, he was simply an editor and compiler. The yogic principles existed centuries before Christ. The word *samyama* means intense concentration. So Patanjali says, by making *samyama* or through concentration, one obtains knowledge of the past and the future. If you concentrate upon the subconscious mind, you can know your past and also you can know your future. By making *samyama* one can obtain knowledge of one's past lives. Again, making *samyama* on the distinguishing marks of another man's body or face, one obtains knowledge of the nature of his mind. Moreover, if one makes *samyama* on the form of one's body intensely enough to separate it from the eyes of the beholder, then the body becomes invisible. See, I may be standing here right before you but you will not be able to see me. Rest assured, I am not going to demonstrate this. Patanjali says, by making *samyama* on the hollow of the throat, one overcomes hunger. By controlling the nerve currents that govern the lungs and the upper part of the body, the yogi can walk on water. By controlling the force which governs the *prāna*, he can surround himself with a blaze of light. By making *samyama* on the relation between the ear and the ether, one obtains supernatural power of hearing. By making *samyama* on the relation between the body and ether or by acquiring through meditation the lightness of cotton, the yogi can fly through the air.

Dangers

However, after all this, Patanjali says that these are powers in the worldly state, and are obstacles to *samādhi*, to your attaining the knowledge of God. By giving up these powers, the seed of evil is destroyed and liberation follows. Why does Patanjali add this aphorism? Because, as a general rule, these powers come to you if you deliberately practise concentration in certain ways, and once you attain these powers, you may not want to give them up. There is a great significance of this aphorism. You may not be consciously seeking any power, you may not be concentrating in a particular way to attain it. If you meditate upon God and get absorbed in the consciousness of God, then suddenly you may feel that you have got some power. If you go and continue to use that power, your door to spiritual life and spiritual growth will be locked.

At one time a young disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, while meditating, suddenly got the power of seeing and hearing things from a great distance or knowing about somebody's thoughts situated 200 miles away! This power disturbed him so much that he came to Sri Ramakrishna and asked him what should he do. Sri Ramakrishna advised him to discontinue meditation for a few days.

Sri Ramakrishna used a parable to bring home to his disciples the utter futility of such power. The story goes that there were two brothers. One brother renounced the world and became a yogi. When, after twelve years, he came back to his village, the other man asked him: 'Brother, what have you accomplished in the past twelve years?' He replied: 'Come with me, I will show you what I have achieved.' So they both went to the bank of a river. The yogi

brother said: 'Look, I can walk on water.' And so saying, he went across the river on foot. His brother then took a ferry boat, gave the boatman a nickel and crossed the river. He told the yogi, 'Brother, look, what you have achieved is worth a nickel.' Thus, when you come to think of it, these powers are worthless. From a truly spiritual point of view, they are just rubbish garbage.

Saintliness

The next question is: What is saintliness? In this connection I am reminded of an incident. Once I visited Assisi in Italy and went to Saint Benedict monastery. There was a young monk who could speak English and he was telling us what miracles the Saint had performed. I listened to him. Then I asked him: 'Are you here as a monk to learn how to perform those miracles?' The monk got confused and would not give any answer. So the question is, 'What is saintliness?' Is there any criterion by which we can recognize saintliness? Very difficult indeed.

I pointed out in the beginning that the goal of spiritual life is to realize God, to experience God. The effects of spiritual practices are all inward. That is why it is so difficult to recognize a man of God. Even when a divine Incarnation comes, he is not readily recognized. Take for instance Jesus whom the orthodox jews condemned as gluttonous, a wine-bibber and a friend of the publicans and sinners. Take, for instance, Buddha. He had a following when he was practising severe austerities. They followed him everywhere. But when Buddha realized that the practice of extreme austerities led him nowhere, he gave it up. Those followers left him saying he had degraded himself. Again, look at the life of Sri Ramakrishna. He was considered a crazy man. My grandfather, a lawyer, happened to see him

when he was a young boy. Once Sri Ramakrishna was required to go to a court and be the witness in a particular case. But he refused to be the witness and said to my grandfather: 'Look, if I go and give the witness, it would not go in favour of your case, you'd better leave me out.' My grandfather said, 'We used to call him *Gadaipāglā* or crazy Gadai.' When I gave my grandfather a book on Sri Ramakrishna's life to read, tears would flow down from his eyes! So, if I put the matter in a crude way, it is like asking a cabbage seller to evaluate a diamond. Is there, then, no way to judge the living saints? After Christ or Buddha or Sri Ramakrishna passed away, people gradually began to recognize how great they were! But is there any way to recognize a saint when he is still in his earthly body? Yes, it is possible. But, for this, one has to be a spiritual aspirant, with a longing for that eternal life. That is the test. As you sit in the presence of such a spiritual giant with an open mind, you will find your mind moving towards God. Just as you think of medicine when you go to a doctor and of legal matters while visiting a lawyer, similarly, when you go to a holy man your mind naturally thinks of God. This we have seen from our day-to-day experience in the company of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. At that time we felt that to realize God was such a simple, easy matter, like holding a fruit in the palm of your hand. Actually, they made you feel that way.

Then again, from the external behaviour of such persons, you can see and feel their love, their compassion, their sympathy. They do not consider any person to be a sinner, hence they do not hate anyone. But one thing is important—there should be no dichotomy between what one has in his heart and what one speaks. I asked Swami Turiyananda: 'What is religion?' And he

answered: To make the heart and the lips the same. In other words, you have to be sincere, honest and in right earnest.

Another characteristic of a saint, or a real man of God is that he carries no label of being a Hindu, or a Christian or a Buddhist. We recognized this characteristic in the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. We looked at them and found they were not exactly Hindu, not exactly Christian and so on. The answer would come from inside that they were men of God.

The inner life

In their inner life also, there is a continuous awareness of the unity of Ātman and Brahman. And that is also the way to attain the knowledge of God. The Lord says in his teachings of the *Gītā*: Though a man may be soiled with the sins of a lifetime, yet, let him be rightly resolved in utter devotion to Me, and that man is holy. Holiness shall soon refashion his nature and he will be established in peace eternal. ‘O son of Kunti, the man who loves Me shall not perish’ (9.30-31). In the second chapter the Lord speaks about the signs of a holy man. Arjuna asks Krishna, ‘How can one identify a man who is firmly established and absorbed in Brahman?’ ‘*Sthita-prajñasya kā bhāṣhā*?’ (2.54). Mark the words—‘*Sthita-prajñasya*’—‘One who is firmly established in the Self’. A spiritual aspirant may be struggling but not yet established in the Self. But that does not mean that he is a failure. He may fall but will rise again and ultimately become firmly established in Brahman. Arjuna further asks: In what manner does an illumined soul speak? How does he sit, how does he walk? etc. In answer to these questions Sri Krishna says that such a person knows bliss in the Ātman; he remains satisfied in the Self alone—‘*ātmani eva ātmanā tushtah*’. He wants nothing else.

He has found a sweetness inside. He has renounced all cravings as well as torments of the heart. ‘*Sthita-prajñastado ’chyate*’—Such a person, Sri Krishna says, is called a man of steady wisdom (2.55).

So you see there is a fullness in such a person. All desires have left him. He is not shaken by adversity, not hankering after happiness, is free from fear, free from anger, free from things of desire.

When a spiritual aspirant practises meditation, there grows in him a love for God and he feels a sweetness, a joy, a bliss inside. A kind of happiness comes through contact with objects of desire as a general rule. But such happiness is short-lived and temporary. This bliss or spiritual joy, on the other hand, is something that is permanent, abiding. If you analyse the happiness that you derive by coming in contact with objects, it turns out that it is the inside happiness that you see outside. It is like a dog chewing a dry bone. You see how he enjoys it. He does not realize that he is enjoying his own saliva. In the same way it is our own juice that we are enjoying when we come in contact with external objects. Real happiness lies inside. When an illumined soul has reason to be happy, he does not rejoice. When he has reason to be unhappy, he does not weep. The opposites of life will always exist outside. There will be heat and cold, pleasure and pain, but the man of steady wisdom, an illumined one, remains unmoved. Like a tortoise drawing its limbs in when faced with adverse situations, a seer withdraws his senses from the objects of the outside world.

The purpose of human life

A spiritual aspirant who is trying to control himself keeps away from the things and objects of desire, but in the mind, there still lingers desire. Even one who knows the right path may still be

dragged away from it. The senses are unruly. The more you become attached to sense-objects, the more you become addicted. Addiction finally turns into anger. And, as you become angry, you confuse your mind, you forget the lessons of experience. You lose the power of discrimination. Ultimately, when you lose discrimination, you lose sight of the only purpose of life (2.62-63).

Conversely, when a person has no lust, no hatred, he walks away unperturbed among the things of lust and hatred. To obey the Ātman is to find sorrow melting into peaceful joy.

A person of uncontrolled mind, however, does not guess that the Ātman or God is present in him. Then how can he meditate? Here lies a wonderful truth. You see, our mind is restless. It is constantly running to the external world. We cannot even imagine that God is within us, even though we are carrying God all the time within us. We cannot guess it because of the restlessness of the mind. Yet we want happiness. Where is peace without

meditation? And without peace, where is happiness? The turbulent wind turns the ship from its course. The wandering winds of the senses cast man's mind adrift and turns his better judgement from its course. The recollected mind, on the other hand, is awake in the knowledge of the Ātman when it is dark night to the ignorant. The ignorant are awake in their sense-life which they think is daylight. But to the seer, it is all darkness. Water flows continually into the ocean but the ocean is never disturbed. Likewise, desire flows into the mind of the seer, but the seer is never disturbed. Desire may arise sometimes but it soon melts away. Therefore, the seer knows peace while the man who stirs up his lust can never find peace. Only one who has forsaken desire is free from ego or pride, and knows peace. This is the state of enlightenment. Such a man does not fall back from it into delusion even at the moment of death. He is forever situated in that enlightenment. This state can and has to be attained while living on earth. It is possible for everyone to achieve this, and that is the only purpose of life. ■

* This article is an edited version of a lecture Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1976) delivered at the Santa Barbara Vedanta Temple on 26 May 1963. The great swami was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda. He was the founder of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood, and a versatile writer.

MASTER: "Rādhā had attained mahābhāva. There was no desire behind the ecstatic love of the gopis. A true lover does not seek anything from God. He prays only for pure love. He doesn't want any power or miracles.

"It is very troublesome to possess occult powers. Nangtā taught me this by a story. A man who had acquired occult powers was sitting on the seashore when a storm arose. It caused him great discomfort; so he said, 'Let the storm stop.' His words could not remain unfulfilled. At that moment a ship was going full sail before the wind. When the storm ceased abruptly the ship capsized and sank. The passengers perished and the sin of causing their death fell to the man. And because of that sin he lost his occult powers and went to hell.

—From *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*