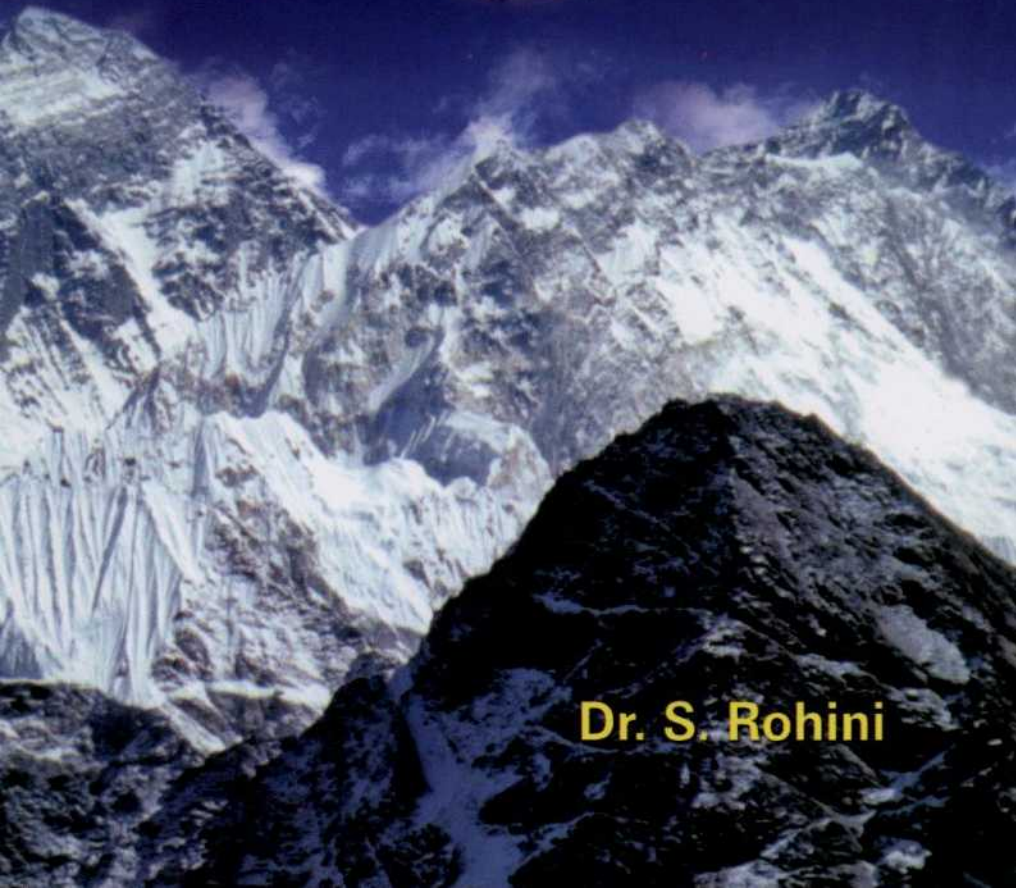


The Spiritual Journey of A Himalayan Monk



Dr. S. Rohini



His Holiness Sri Shantananda Puri Maharaj of Vasishtha Guha (Himalayas), born in 1928, is a disciple of Parama Poojya Sri Swami Purushottamananda Puri Maharaj of Vasishtha Guha, Himalayas.

Swamiji is a scholar par excellence in Vedic Scriptures as well as in Puranic texts. His deep knowledge and lucid exposition of Srimad Bhagavatam, Bhagavad Gita and Ashtavakra Gita have made him a popular guide to spiritual aspirants. His simplicity, transparent deep faith in the Divine force and absolute surrender to the Supreme have made him an ideal combination of Jnana, Bhakti and Vairagya.

Swamiji's prodigious learning and deep devotion to the tenets of Indian philosophy and culture have reflected themselves in all his works, which are practical guides for inner personal experience and to raise oneself to a higher level of being. His emphasis has always been on 'Practise, practise, practise'.

This book is a short biography of Revered Swamiji written by one of his devotees, who was a senior officer of Govt. of India, belonging to Indian Economic Service. It is a humble venture to recount the spiritual journey of a living Guru who has transformed the lives of many disciples and devotees.

Om Ganesaya Namah

**The Spiritual Journey of a
Himalayan Monk
(Divine Grace in Abundance)**

Dr . S. Rohini

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– By Dr. S. Rohini

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Introduction

A biography of a Master is a sweet remembrance of the various milestones of alternating jubilation, despairs, humiliations, honour etc. encountered by him during his sadhana and more especially how the Lord reveals His presence in various stages and was supplementing his sadhana with His abundant grace just like a mother following her toddler son learning to walk and rescuing him whenever he tumbled. Even in all the autobiographies written by saints like Swamiji's Gurudev, the intimate sadhanas done by them are never revealed in their entirety. This is because different paths for different sadhaks are prescribed by their own gurus and they are not to be followed automatically by any reader of the biography.

It is perhaps revulsive to many readers to read about a lot of so called miracles claimed to have been performed for the benefit of the people in distress by the gurus. The readers may think that most of them are mere fiction fabricated by the disciple authors in order to enhance the glory of their own Gurus. In this book also a few of such miracles find a place. As far as other disciples are concerned, they knew their Guru Dev well enough and either might have been a witness to such events or have met in person those people who were the beneficiaries of those miracles. For them the narration of such other miracles

strengthens their faith in God and His infinite powers. The Swamiji used to plead not guilty whenever the people concerned expressed their gratitude for the miraculous solutions of their problems. He used to emphasise that it is the mantras given to them and the infallible powers of the Supreme Lord behind them which helped them and he always disclaimed his involvement. So if rightly understood then anecdotes of miracles would only go to strengthen their faith in the never-failing powers of God and His deep compassion as a result of which He contrived to remain in the background and pour His grace on those people in distress who chanted the mantras given by the Guru to solve their problems.

This book is a humble venture to recount the spiritual journey of a living Guru who has transformed the lives of many disciples and devotees. He himself comes from an illustrious line of Gurus in Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa *parampara*. His own life is a living example of the extraordinary *sadhana* which flowered with the benediction of his Guru. It is said that fools dare where angels fear to tread. Possessing no special merit, the task has nonetheless fallen on my shoulders whose spiritual antenna remains wayward. But being the command of the Guru the task has been commenced. May the All Merciful Guru lead the scribe onward

- Dr. S. Rohini

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Swami Shanthanandapuri Photo

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Prologue

**Gurur Brahma Gurur Vishnuh
Gurur Devo Maheswarah
Gurussakshat Param Brahma
Tasmai Shri Gurave namah**

Sanatana Dharma or Hinduism as it is more popularly known, has given an exalted niche to the Preceptor or the Guru. Guru, as its etymology connotes, is one who dispels darkness. The Guru lifts the veil of ignorance or *avidya* and showers knowledge for Self-realization. The Spiritual Guru is a nonpareil philosopher and guide. Even incarnations of Vishnu, like Sri Rama and Lord Krishna needed a Guru and sought their advice and guidance. Vasishtha the Preceptor of Sri Rama was a Guru par excellence. The Yoga Vasishtha is a classic account of the path hewn by the Guru for a disciple, who was on the brink of ending his life, having got disgusted with his worldly existence. These teachings are as much relevant today as in the days of yore. Arjuna had learnt warfare from his temporal Guru, Dronacharya. But in the battlefield of Kurukshetra when overcome by despondency, it was Lord Krishna's exhortation immortalized as the Bhagvad Gita, which lifted his wilting spirit and showed him the path of right conduct. The tenets of the Gita continue to enlighten mankind as a whole.

In more recent times there have been Great Masters, whose advent cannot be disputed, like Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bhagawan Ramana Maharshi and Shirdi Sai Baba whose teachings are ambrosia to those on the spiritual path. Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Sai Baba excelled their Gurus, but nonetheless their Gurus had fostered the blossoming of their spiritual lives.

The Gurus came unsought to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, where he was a humble priest in the Kali temple of Rani Rasmani. The Gurus came in search of the chosen disciple, who was to bring about a resurgence in the *Sanatana Dharama* during turbulent times. First, it was the Brahmani, who took young Gadadhar (as Sri Ramakrishna was then known) under her wings, and initiated him into the tantric and vaishnava modes of worship. She was also the first to proclaim him as an incarnation of God in an assembly of scholars, at a time when many people, not comprehending the manifestations of his spiritual experiences, described in the scriptures as *mahabhavas*, were inclined to regard him as insane. Next, it was the turn of the wandering monk Totapuri, who initiated Sri Ramakrishna in the non-dualistic Vedanta philosophy. Sri Ramakrishna experienced the beatitude of the *samadhi* state under Totapuri's guidance. Nonetheless, Totapuri had to bow down

to Mother Kali before departing from Dakshineswar as Sri Ramakrishna taught him that the Divine Mother and Brahman are one and the same. Later, Sri Ramakrishna was to yearn for the arrival of his disciples, who came at the time ordained, chief amongst them were Rakhai and Naren. They later became renowned as Swami Brahmananda and Swami Vivekananda. When his earthly incarnation was coming to an end, Sri Ramakrishna transferred his powers to Naren. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna which was a diary of events noted meticulously by a close disciple Mahendranath Gupta, has recorded this incident. The Master said to Naren, "Today I have given you my all and I am now only a poor fakir, possessing nothing. By this power you will do immense good in the world, and not until it is accomplished you will return." The tradition of Gurus is thus carried forward.

There is long and unbroken lineage of Gurus in Bharatvarsha. Though many Masters have appeared in different parts of the country and were separated by time and space the Guru represents the Brahman and hence all Gurus are to be revered. The teachings may seem to differ, the paths may seem to be varied, but ultimate reality to which they lead is the same. Kabirdas the great mystic poet whose couplets are pithy aphorisms, craved for his Guru and would not rest until he gained his Guru's

acceptance. Brought up by parents of a different faith, he defied established norms and took refuge at the feet of Guru Ramananda who initiated Kabirdas in the *Ram mantra*. The trappings of religion conceal the Truth. No wonder in his ecstasy Kabirdas was to declare that if God and Guru stood before him, he would first pay obeisance to his Guru who showed him God.

* * *

Chapter One

Early years

Thanjavur in Tamilnadu is the cradle of civilization in southern India. Art, literature, music and dance flourished in this region. The *Periya Koil* or Big Temple of Thanjavur which is the abode of Lord Shiva, is an architectural marvel and a tribute to both the aesthetic quality and engineering genius of the old chola dynasty. The Cauvery river flows gently along its plains bringing prosperity and justifying the title 'Granary of the South'. The *Bhakti* cult was all pervasive and innumerable are the saint-poets whose holy feet trod on this land. In this sacred town there lived a pious Brahmin couple in the early decades of the last century. They were N. Vaidyanatha Shastri and his wife Meenakshisundari Ammal. Vaidyanatha Shastri came from a lineage of Sanskrit scholars. Their native town was Kshetrapalpuram. His father, Neelakanta Shastri was a renowned scholar especially in *vyakarana* (grammar) and was steeped in the advaita philosophy. He was a Sanskrit teacher in the local school in Tiruvaiyaru near Thanjavur. His home was a hub for wandering monks who came to study Vedanta. While on his death bed he took '*aapath sanyasa*' which is an accepted form of renunciation at such a critical

junction. His *Samadhi* lies within the precincts of the *Samadhi Sthal* of the saint-poet Tyagaraja, who is one of the trinity of carnatic music. Even today there is a regular worship at his *Samadhi*.

Like his ancestors, Vaidyanatha Shastri too was an accomplished Sanskrit scholar and had acquired the *shriromani* degree. His forte was the *mantra shastra* which he studied thoroughly and practiced intensely. This bestowed on him the visions of several deities who presided over these *mantras*. He was also proficient in astrology. Besides Sanskrit, Vaidyanatha Shastri knew English and several Indian languages including Urdu, Hindi and was fluent in Marathi and Gujarati. When Vaidyanatha Shastri took up the vocation as *nazir* in the *munsiff* court, it ensured an assured source of income. But it incensed his father to such an extent that he threatened to destroy all the Sanskrit books in his possession. He wanted his son to take up an occupation which would utilize his Sanskrit knowledge. In obedience to his father's wish, Vaidyanatha Shastri took up the post of superintendent in the Saraswati Mahal Library in Thanjavur. The Saraswathi Mahal Library is one of the oldest libraries in Asia. It has palm leaf and paper manuscripts of over 60, 000 volumes, in a number of Indian and European languages majority being in sanskrit. The library came up for the royal pleasure of the Nayak Kings who ruled Thanjavur in the 16th and 17th centuries. After the Maratha conquest, the library was developed

extensively under the enlightened rule of the scholarly Maharaja Serfoji II (1750-1832) a descendent of Chhatrapati Shivaji. Vaidyanatha Shastri was in the cataloguing section. Sir John Woodroff alias Sir Arthur Avalon was a frequent visitor to this library. It is to the credit of Sir John Woodroff to have provided the first English translation of the Tantrik and *mantra shastras*. In this endeavour he got the invaluable assistance of Vaidyanatha Shastri who had both the theoretical knowledge and practical experience in the *mantra shastras*. His significant contribution was also duly acknowledged by Sir Arthur Avalon alias Sir John Woodroff. In the year 1932, Vaidyanatha Shastri moved to Tiruvaiyaru where he took up the vocation of professor of *sahitya* in the Rajah's college of Sanskrit and Tamil studies. He remained at Tiruvaiyaru till 1950. After a brief illness Vaidyanatha Shastri passed away at the age of 64 in 1960. Swamiji had in fact predicted the date of his death much earlier while seeing the horoscope of his elder brother. He had great affection for his father, who was in many ways his first Guru as well. His death caused a deep wrench in Swamiji's heart.

Meenakshisundari Ammal hailed from a family in Kasakudy, near Karaikkal, which was in a French colony. She was married when she was just nine years old. At that tender age she had to take charge of the entire household duties, which included service to the *sannyasis* who were frequent

visitors. After completing her daily chores, Meenakshisundari Ammal's time was spent in performing her daily *puja*, reciting *stotras* and doing *japa*. She was initiated in the Sri Vidya cult of worship in 1936. She used to regularly chant the Lalitha Sahasranamam and do *puja* with the vermilion (*kumkum*) which she used to make herself at home. She was proficient in both Sanskrit and Hindi which she learnt from her husband. The birth of her first born son in 1921 was a miracle. She was alone at home and her husband was away at work. Seized by labour pain and in a semi-conscious state, she had the vision of Mother Durga, who severed the umbilical cord and placed the child next to her. In grateful remembrance the couple called the child Durgadas. He grew up to be a brilliant student and secured a state rank in his school final. After completing honours in mathematics, Durgadas joined the Department of Telecommunications from where he superannuated from the post of Director. The second child, a son, was born seven years later on 6th may 1928 at 9.30 A.M.in Thanjavur. The child's birth star was Anusham, referred to in northern India as Anuradha. As Meenakshisundari Ammal was at that time regularly reading Valmiki Ramayana, the child was named Janaki Ramanan and was addressed as Ramana at home. This child was destined in his later years to be known as Swami Shantananda Puri, who would seek refuge at the feet of Swami

Purushottamananda. A girl child was born to the couple in 1932, named Bala Devi, who was again a brilliant student. As student of Honours course in physics she secured a gold medal in the University of Madras. She joined the Indian Audit and Accounts Services (IA&AS) and held several high positions. The last child, Harihardas, was born in 1938. He was also an Honours student in physics and joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). He was allotted the Gujarat cadre where he rose to the rank of Chief Secretary of the state. Meenakshisundari Ammal lived up to the ripe old age of 93. She never wore reading glasses and all her faculties remained unimpaired till the end.

While all the children were sent to a normal school, Vaidyanatha Shastri chose to send his second son Ramanan to the local Sanskrit college which enabled him to write the Government entrance examination for the *siromani* course after four years of study. As all the children were bright, this decision can only be attributed to the father's intuition of Ramanan's destiny. The *upanayanam* or sacred thread ceremony for Ramanan was performed at the age of six and he was initiated into the *Gayatri mantra*. This was an essential prerequisite for admission for Sanskrit study. Seven year old Ramanan was admitted to Raja's college in 1935, where for four years he learnt *sahitya* (literature), *mimamsa* (a vedic exposition), *tarka*

(logic) and *vyakarana* (grammar). The course was equivalent to that of *Sastri* in northern India. Vaidyanatha Shastri did not rest with merely admitting his son in Sanskrit College. He coached him personally in the nuances of Sanskrit and honed his skills. He also imparted to his son the correct method of recital of important sections of the Vedas like *rudram*, *purusha suktham* etc. Being loquacious, he would discuss with Ramanan several aspects of Sanskrit literature, expatiate on the intricacies of the *shastras* and the science of mantras and various religious and cultural topics. Swamij has often mentioned that his book 'Infallible Vedic Remedies', contains several *mantras* which he had learnt as a child from his father.

Eleven year old Ramanan who appeared for entrance examination for the *Siromani* course, could not even reach the desk in the examination hall. The headmaster was somewhat sceptical on account of his age and was even reluctant to let him appear for the examination. Ramanan passed the entrance examination. But he could not join the *Siromani* course as the minimum age stipulated was 14 years and six months. Providence was always at hand. The headmaster of the local school who was acquainted with Vaidyanatha Sastriji, happened to casually ask him about the future education of Ramanan. The headmaster had studied Sanskrit under Ramanan's grandfather, for whom he had

great respect and regard. When he was appraised of the situation, the headmaster ventured to ask whether Ramanan would be fit for being admitted in the fourth form. Although Ramanan was studying Sanskrit, his father had taken great pains to coach him at home in Mathematics and English. Learning about this the headmaster unhesitatingly gave him two question papers, one for Mathematics and another for English and asked Vaidyanatha Shastri to coach his son, adding that he would be tested on these very same questions. Thus Ramanan entered 4th form (8th standard) in the local school. Swamiji looks on this incident as one of the earliest instances of the grace of the Almighty. The headmaster was only slightly acquainted with Ramanan's father and there was no apparent reason for extending such an unusual illegal concession. Perhaps God had marked him as HIS victim even when the latter was young and was prepared to lure him by any means. In his own words "How I wish I could have visualized the Lord's beneficent presence much earlier in my life". Swamiji would jocularly describe the initial hiccups he had to face in the High School. He had studied only Sanskrit apart from devouring English fiction. Subjects like Geography and History were alien to him. When in Geography class the teacher asked him to point out India, the boy was in a fix. This set his classmates roaring with laughter, jeering him as a boy from the *patashala* (Sanskrit school). In his book 'Musings of a Himalyan Monk' Swamiji wrote thus:

“I was extremely cross with my father as all my brothers and sister were given the normal education in English schools and colleges from childhood while I alone was given Sanskrit education, which was considered to be of no professional value for earning one’s livelihood in those days. How grateful I am today to the Lord for getting such a strong foundation in Sanskrit which has enabled me in later years to study the scriptures like Srimad Bhagavatam, Ramayanam, Upanishads and other Vedantic texts like Sankara’s directly without the need of a tutor or translation of Sanskrit commentaries. Even though mastery in Sanskrit is not a must for God - realization, still it is a great privilege to possess the key to open the golden doors to the ancient wisdom of the seers (Rishis). How and on what basis God selected me and got me trained for the days to come while I had shown no promise of any development, intelligence, knowledge, religious or spiritual inclinations, still remains a mystery to me. Is this what is called Causeless Grace (Ahaituka Karuna) of the Supreme Divine Mother.?”

Swamiji regarded himself as a student of no special abilities with no interest in any particular subject or activities like sports. He hardly had any friends as this was not looked upon with favour by his parents. He used to say that he was bored and nothing interested him. A parallel can be seen in the life of Bhagawan Ramana’s childhood. Writing

about Bhagawan Ramana's childhood days, Sri B. V. Narasimha Swami wrote, ' — till almost the end of his schooldays, he cared at heart for nothing- not even for sports or games. Life had not revealed any purpose or motive strong enough to attract him.' The only attraction that the young lad Ramanan had was towards the *Paramacharya* of Kanchi. Vaidyanatha Sastriji used to take young Ramanan along with him for the *darshan* of the Sankaracharya of Kanchi whose headquarters was at that time in Kumbakonam. Of all his children, Vaidyanatha Sastriji elected to take his second son Ramanan along with him, while on his regular visits to have the *darshan* of the sage of Kanchi. These visits left an indelible attraction towards this saintly soul. After reaching home, Ramanan would don his mother's saree, covering his head in much the same fashion as the Sankaracharya and holding a staff in his hand would sit quietly in a corner of the house. The seer of Kanchi was very fond of the young boy and would seat him next to him and throw the garlands he received around his neck. Once, the sage asked the seven year old boy to narrate some story in Sanskrit. Without any hesitation the boy started to recount the story of Jnana Sambandhar in a dramatic fashion in much the same way as he had heard it from his father. After finishing the story the boy ran away to play. Sometime later the attendants of the seer came in search of him saying that the Sankaracharya was looking for him. When the boy was taken to the sage, he put a red shawl

around his shoulders. This is the first indication of the grace and blessings of *mahatmas* which was to be showered on him throughout his life.

Although the close association with the sage of Kanchi did not prolong after his youth, Ramanan was never forgotten as future events would indicate. A godsend opportunity came when he was around 14 years old to accompany the Sankaracharya during his *padayatra*. It was during one of the regular visits of Vaidyanatha Sastriji's visit to the sage, when the latter suggested that he leave his son with him for some days. This was in the year 1942 when the Sankaracharya was touring on foot different parts of Tamilnadu with a vast entourage of scholars and devotees. Swamiji recalls those days as filled with bliss. He was in close proximity to the great sage who took special care of the young boy and would kindly enquire whether he had his meals and had got a place to sleep etc. The seer placed him under the care of one swamiji known as Nerur Swamigal. In his reminiscence "Fragrant Flowers", Swamiji has written thus :

"I used to float in an ocean of inexplicable bliss sleeping on some days in some temple premises, sometimes on the verandhas of some houses en route, eating whatever was available along with Nerur Swamigal who used to be either invited along with me to some houses for bhikshas or used to beg alms from three houses en route (known as MADHUKARI BHIKSHA). Parmacharya used to walk long

distances listening to the reading of some spiritual texts and discussing them with scholars. In some temples where he used to camp for performance of Puja and lunch etc., he would talk to an assembly of local villagers about Scripture, Dharma, Right conduct, God etc. This was all perhaps a training for me devised by the Almighty for my future as a wandering monk in my later years. Perhaps, it was this close contact with one of the greatest saints of the 20th century that earned me the ochre robe in later years. What a beautiful Divine scheme to train me in the path of Self-realisation and what a Grace!”

Vaidyanatha sastriji had initiated Ramanan in many mantras at an early age. The boy was extremely fond of the *Vana Durga mantra* which he used to chant continuously. This made him fearless even as a child. More significantly, the constant invocation of the deity brought about almost a physical proximity with the deity. Swamiji has said that he could feel the slight pressure of Divine Mother resting on his right shoulder with Her legs dangling on his chest. Several years later when Swamiji was preparing to go to Tanzania at the behest of the Govt of India, he had a chance meeting with an astrologer in a party. The astrologer was being pressed by those around him to predict their future. Suddenly he turned to Swamiji and exclaimed, “Verily, here is a person on whose shoulder sits Sri Rajarajeshwari!” Salutations

to such a Guru who is constantly bathed in the Grace of the Divine Mother!

After completing his sixth form in 1942 Ramanan again faced the impediment of age bar and hence could not get admission for college education. He spent the time learning typing and shorthand. This came handy in his college days for taking down notes during lectures. A year later, Ramanan joined St. Joseph's college in Tiruchirapalli where he did his intermediate and later B.Sc in physics. Vaidyanatha Sastriji was a man with limited means. At the recommendation of the Sankaracharya of Kanchi, Ramanan approached a certain *zamindar* in Trichy for financial help. He was the sole trustee of a Trust meant for awarding scholarship. When Ramanan went to meet him, forgetful of the advice of Sankaracharya, the rich man spoke in a taunting fashion. He wanted to know why Ramana had taken admission in a Christian college and also why he had not kept the traditional tuft of hair on his head as becoming a Brahmin. To both the queries, Ramanan politely replied that the Sankaracharya himself did not see anything amiss with this. The answer incensed the interrogator. Needless to say that no assistance was given. Swamiji in his book 'Musings of a Himalayan Monk' has recorded this incident. But divine intervention was not far behind. Ramanan who had to remain in the hostel for his studies, could get the hostel fee and boarding charges waived. Vaidyanatha Shastri

took Ramanan to meet the college principal, Rev. Father Erhart, a German who admitted him in the Clive's hostel. In lieu of waiver of fees, Ramanan had to serve drinking water at meal-time to the student-diners. There were six such 'water-boys' for every 100 students. The principal was a kind hearted man. Once there was a delay in paying the college fee. When Ramanan went to Rev Father Erhart to explain the delay, without a moment's hesitation, he himself paid the fee. Later when Ramanan went to repay the sum, Rev Father Erhart declined to accept it. Swamiji has mentioned that half the tuition fee was already being paid by the principal himself. Commenting on this episode Swamiji wrote in his 'Musings', "Is it that I am unique or mad in finding retrospectively the compassionate hand of the Lord behind every major event in my life or is it that a few like me are privileged and chosen to have their eyes opened to the splendid glory of the Lord manifested in every phase of one's life from time to time so that we surrender ourselves to that benign glory unconditionally?" His student life in St. Joseph's college came to a close in March 1947. Swamiji has said that he would read English novels in the classroom. Besides the classics he enjoyed reading romances and mystery novels. Although Swamiji is reticent about his college days, he must have been a meticulous student, disciplined and methodical. One of his class-fellows remembered him as very neat and orderly in appearance and actions. He

said that as a 'water boy' he would not spill even a drop of water.

After completing his education the search for a job began. The first assignment that Ramanan got was that of a teacher in the District Board High School at Poonamalee near Madras (now Chennai). He was to teach special Physics to the fifth and sixth formers. The basic salary he got was just Rs. 65 besides an allowance of Rs. 18. As the job entailed staying far from his native place, Ramanan took up a job, again as a teacher, in the Town High School at Kumbakonam. He was designated the class teacher in one section of VIII standard and taught English and Physics and also taught Physics for all sections of VIII standard. Later he moved to Rajamadam near Pattukottai and took the post of a teacher in the District Board school. Here he taught English for the SSC students and Mathematics and Physics for the VIII class. About three years were spent as a teacher. He had a natural flair for teaching and was popular with both the students and management.

A turning point in Ramanan's life was his selection as an auditor in Defence Audit. He was interviewed for the post in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1949. Swamiji has mentioned that he had earlier appeared for various interviews but was not successful. Narrating his selection in the Defence Audit, Swamiji wrote in the 'Musings';

“At last, in one interview for the Audit Department in 1949, out of the three members in the Board, all IA&AS officers, one was an M.A(OXEN) in Sanskrit while another was a Sanskrit scholar. Early in the interview when once I indicated that I had a Sanskrit background they plied me with questions on various aspects of Sanskrit literature. I was in my elements in that field and was able to answer brilliantly. I was finally selected. Can it be a chance or was it deliberately designed by the Lord?”

Selection to the post entailed leaving his home and moving to Meerut in North India.

* * *

Chapter Two

The Quest

Young Ramanan, who was just 22 year old, took up his post as an Auditor in the Office of the Deputy Director of Audit, Defense Services, Meerut in 1950. He was a stranger in a distant place. The immediate need was for a suitable accommodation. When he went to join his post, there was a pleasant surprise awaiting him. Again, providence had come to his rescue and as further events would unfold, it could be ascribed only to divine intervention. He unexpectedly met his college mate, Kothandaraman, who was working in the same office. The latter helped him to secure accommodation the same day and they became next door neighbours. Next room was of Seshagiri. It was in Seshagiri's room that Ramanan first chanced upon the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. As a 12 year old, Ramanan had once an occasion to sift through the Gospel in his maternal grandparents home. At that time he had put aside the book after sifting through it casually for a while. But this time it was a different experience altogether. Reading the Gospel, rather devouring it, Ramanan's quest for a Guru and desire for spiritual enlightenment was not just kindled, it flared up into a volcanic longing. He

started to meditate and observe silence on Sundays. He would not even go out to eat on Sundays as this would entail having some conversation. He would spend long hours just looking at the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna. He would meditate daily on Sri Ramakrishna and the Divine Mother. He would chant the holy names like Narayana, Govinda loudly in the evenings besides chanting the sacred texts of *Vishnu Sahasranam*, *Lalita Sahasranam*, *Soundarya Lahari* etc. The quest had begun.

Destiny had taken Ramanan to the lap of the Himalayas, the region where *sadhus*, *mahatmas* and their *ashrams* abound along the banks of the holy Ganga. Meerut being just 200 kms from Haridwar and Rishikesh, Ramanan started to frequent the Sivananda Ashram at Rishikesh from 1950 onwards. Swami Sivananda was a towering personality. He used to do *japa* for long hours standing immersed in the Ganga. Swami Sivananda was born in the illustrious family of Appayya Dikshitar, a great philosopher-saint in Tamilnadu. Having been trained as a doctor, he left for Malaya (now Malrasia) where he served in a hospital attached to a rubber plantation. The doctor's profession gave him first - hand experience of the suffering of humanity. He left Malaya and returned to India for spiritual fulfillment. He performed extensive pilgrimage. His spiritual quest brought him to Rishikesh. In his autobiography Swami Sivananda wrote:

“A personal Guru is necessary in the beginning. He alone can show you the path to attain God, who is the Guru of Gurus and obviate the snares and pitfalls on your path. Self-realisation is a transcendental experience. You can march in the spiritual path only by placing implicit faith in the words of the sages who have realized the Truth (Apta Vakya) and attain knowledge of Self.”

He received holy initiation as a sannyasi from Paramahmasa Viswananda Saraswati on the banks of the Ganga at Varanasi. The Guru gave him spiritual strength and blessings. Swami Sivananda, though immersed in meditation and prayers, did not forget doing service to the sick and poor. He undertook an extensive tour, all over India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), for mass dissemination of spiritual knowledge during 1950. Swami Sivananda lived the life of a great yogi and saint. He attained *mahasamadi* on 14th of July 1963.

The youth Ramanan, was guided by the divine hand to the holy presence of Swami Sivananda. He had an irresistible longing for the company of holy men. Unlike, most youngsters of his age, the world held no attraction for him. Ramanan also had responsibilities as an elder brother to his younger siblings. Swamiji has recorded in his book, ‘Fragrant Flowers’ about his meeting with Swami Sivananda:

“Slowly it began to seep into my mind that **Satsang was a sine qua non for any spiritual**

progress. I came to hear of SWAMI SIVANANDAJI MAHARAJ of the Divine Life Society, Rishikesh. In answer to a letter of mine, he sent me a Tulsi Mala, a book named “Mind, its mysteries and control” and some printed forms of a spiritual diary. October 1959 or so I began to visit his Ashram at Rishikesh, occasionally. Swami Sivananda was a realized soul, having a magnificent and loving personality with a lot of wit and humour.

In 1952 during one of Swamiji’s visits to Sivanandashram at Rishikesh, he came across a *Digvijaya* Souvenir where Swami Sivananda had mentioned that even today there are *mahapurushas* or self-realised souls, citing the names of Krishna Prem Maharaj (Ronald Nixon) of Uttar Brindavan and Swami Purushottamanandaji of Vashishta Guha. This statement made a deep impression in the mind of Ramana.

“I became very happy because if only I could find one of them I should be enabled to get all first hand knowledge of God straight from the horse’s mouth instead of meandering to find out a competent Guru. Yes, Sivanandaji Maharaj was no less realized but my eyes were blinded. Each mahapurusha comes to this world with separate lists of people who are to be uplifted and my name was not perhaps, in the list of persons entrusted to the care of Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj. There was another vital factor too.” (Fragrant Flowers).

Ramanan had to wait for another five years before he could set his eyes on his Guru. His relentless quest was on. Meanwhile, he had an opportunity to meet Krishna Prem Maharaj during an official tour to Ranikhet in the Himalayas. His friend, one Banerjee, told him that in the weekend he was going to meet his Guru. When Ramanan enquired who his Guru was, he was elated to know that it was none other than Krishna Prem Maharaj. Krishna Prem Maharaj lived in his *ashram* at Mirtola near Almora. The *ashram* was located in a rough terrain which could be covered only by foot. Also, Krishna Prem Maharaj did not encourage visitors. Once when the Governor of Uttar Pradesh wrote to Krishna Prem saying that he wanted to meet him, Krishna Prem Maharaj replied “But I don’t want to meet you.” But when Ramanan went to Mirtola he got a warm and affectionate welcome from Krishna Prem Maharaj. Ramanan was allowed to stay in the *ashram*. Being winter, the night was bitterly cold. Ramanan was lying on his bed shivering with cold as the blankets given to him did not suffice. While Ramanan slept, Krishna Prem himself walked into his room and covered him with extra blankets. Swamiji fondly remembers till day the compassion shown by Krishna Prem Maharaj.

“Throughout my stay, Krishna Premji never once asked me about my academic or professional qualifications, my profession or status. He accepted me as an aspirant (*sadhak*). He was always radiating around him an aura of holiness and

spirituality. On the morning of the day I was to return to Ranikhet, Krishna Premji accompanied me by walk upto the nearest bus stand which was about 3 kms away and put me in the bus, an unexpected honour which even Governors could hardly aspire for. Till today, what all honour, praise, or regard I get from various people are all attributable to my Gurudev's grace only." (Fragrant Flowers)

Ramanan met extraordinary sages like Swami Sivananda and Krishna Prem and his reverence for them was boundless. The continuous and repeated reading of the Gospel had sown a deep yearning for a Guru like Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa.

"In 1951, after reading 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna', I used to weep daily about my misfortune of not having been born in the days of Sri Ramakrishna Parmahansa (to be referred to as Thakur) and become one of his disciples. I never knew or could never even guess what a tremendous austerity one should have done in previous births in order to earn the enviable position of becoming even a speck of dust at the feet of such a great Master as Thakur who was a special incarnation (Avatara Varishtha), meant to inspire the modern world. Everyday, I used to spend hours looking at the photo of Thakur and opening up to him mentally all the mental anguish of my heart in not being able to have a proper spiritual guide. Side by side with it, all worldly and base desires for wealth, sex, comfort etc., were also equally flourishing at

another corner of my mind. My mind was a battlefield- a real kurukshetra.

In mid 1952, I made a resolve that I will have no Guru unless he be from the lineage of Thakur. My Guru should be utterly desireless and established in Brahman(the Supreme reality). He should possess no wealth or Ashram buildings nor should he have a bevy of sannyasi disciples organized into an administrative institution, one being Accounts officer Swamiji, one P.R.O Swamiji, one Quartermaster Swamiji and so on.He should be one who would go into Samadhi once in a while as Thakur used to do, while hearing songs about the Divine Mother. I never thought for a moment as to what qualifications I myself possessed to deserve such an eminent master. When I think of it in retrospect, I hang my head in shame for my rank foolishness. Still it is a miracle how the Divine Mother fulfilled my desire in this respect to the last word. I only prostrate to the Divine Mother in inexpressible heartfelt gratitude and intense love.”
(Fragrant Flowers)

During one of his visits to Sivanandashram, Rishikesh Ramanan was taken to the kitchen by Swami Sivananda while the latter went for his meal. Suddenly, in mid-course during the meal, Swami Sivananda pointing out to Ramanan asked one of his attendant Swamijis, “What do you say, shall we give this Sastriji Mundan Sanskar.” (ritual shaving of the head while giving *sannyas*). Ramanan hastily

intervened saying, “Maharaj, not now. I have a lot of responsibilities in my house and I am the main earning member in my family.” Swami Sivananda laughed and kept quiet. As the readers would have guessed by now, the reason was far deeper. He was not ripe enough to renounce yet and secondly he wanted a Guru from the lineage of Thakur. Swami Sivananda used to lovingly address Ramana as, Sastriji. Though Swami Sivananda did not give any initiation to Ramana, his spiritual ardour blossomed under the fostering care of this great sage.

The time was drawing near for meeting his Guru. One day in October 1956, while on his way to Sivanandashram to spend his puja holidays, Ramanan was accosted by a fellow traveller in the bus at Rishikesh. He was a total stranger. He asked Ramanan whether he would like to accompany him to see Swami Purushottamananda of Vasishtha Guha and spend a couple of days or so in his holy company. Ramanan’s joy knew no bounds. It was a name kept treasured in his heart all these years. He had been longing to meet him ever since he read about him but did not know how to reach him. The stranger was the son of the A.D.C. to the King of Patiala. He was Pritam Singh Pathania who worked as a manager in the Tractor Division of Escorts. “Whoever loved, that loved not at first sight” wrote the pastoral poet, Christopher Marlow. Swamiji’s first meeting with his Guru is best described in his own words :

“I reached Vasishtha Guha and at last, saw my Guru Maharaj looking at me with a radiant laugh. What surging happiness did I experience at that moment! It was love at first sight. I became his bonded slave from that moment. His compassionate glance was a subtle DIKSHA (initiation). He greeted me asking, “How many years is it since you have known me and how long has it taken you to come here?” I could not believe my ears. I stood dumbfounded after prostrating on the ground. How had he known that I had read about him as early as in 1952? Was he hinting that had my longing for him been deep and intense enough, I could have been brought to his holy feet much earlier? For two or three more days I stayed in the Guha enjoying Maharaj’s conversation with various devotees from morning to evening, sometimes playful, interspersed often with childlike laugh and sometimes serious-mostly in English.” (Fragrant Flowers)

This meeting was a major turning point in the spiritual journey of Swamiji. Thereafter, the boundless grace of Gurudev led him onwards in the path to self-realisation.

Chapter Three

The Compassionate Guru of Vasishtha Guha

Vasishtha Guha is situated about 22 kms from Rishikesh, on the road to the holy *dharm* of Badrinath. The Centenary Arch, built to commemorate the birthday of Guru Maharaj, is visible from the main road. The *ashram* is located in a quiet valley near the village of Goolar Dogi, in Tehri Garhwal district. The holy Ganga, which emerges from the confluence of the gentle Bhagirathi and the awesome Alakanada at Devprayag, flows majestically alongside the *ashram*. Today as one descends from the highway to the valley, the Guha or cave is visible. But this was once part of a dense forest and thick grassland, where wild animals like tigers and bears roamed freely. Swami Purushottamananda chose Vasishtha Guha as his final abode for austerities and meditation and his *Samadhi* lies here.

Swami Purushottamanandaji hailed from Tiruvalla in Kerala. He was born on 23rd November 1879 under the Utharattaathi star to Parvati Amma and Narayan Nair. The boy was named Neelakantan. After completing his X standard with high rank, Neelakantan was jubilantly looking

forward to join Form VI which is equivalent to matriculation. But at that juncture he was suddenly afflicted with rheumatism and paralysis which left him bed ridden.

Even as a young boy, Gurudev had a strong spiritual disposition. Listening to the story of Prahalada he experienced a wonderful sense of joy and wished he could attain such devotion. His physical condition did not depress or distress him owing to his spiritual disposition. His devotion and faith in the deity of Guruvayoor made him undertake a hazardous journey to that temple town, although he was barely able to walk. Remaining at Guruvayoor, he experienced sheer bliss and even his health somewhat improved. Neelakantan was keen to pursue his studies but destiny willed otherwise because of his illness. Yet, even while lying in his sick bed he taught himself Sanskrit, and mastered it thoroughly so that he could read the Bhagavatam, which is certainly not an easy composition to learn and master. His proficiency complemented by his devotion made him highly popular in the spiritual circle in his home town Tiruvalla. An ardent devotee of Sri Ramakrishna in Tiruvalla, had established a Ramakrishna Sangh. He persuaded Neelakantan, to attend the *kirtan* sessions which were held by rotation in the homes of the members of the *sangh*. There Neelakantan who used to be addressed as Swamiji, was persuaded to read some portion of the Bhagavatam. His very first

exposition was on the melodious Gopika Geetham which is the epitome of *bhakti*. After his reading and commentary, the listeners were transported to an exalted state and everybody shed copious tears. It was his association with this *sangh* that also led him to Swami Nirmalananda the then president of the Ramakrishna Ashram at Bangalore. Guru Maharaj (Swamiji's Guru) while dedicating his autobiography to Swami Nirmalananda Maharaj, has recorded his first meeting with him:

“It was in the Valia Kottaram (Big Palace) near Subramania Temple at Haripad (Kerala State) that I was fortunate to have my very first darshan of Shri Nirmalananda Swamiji. Attracted by the magnetic spell of that divine person's eyes and drawn towards him, I gently walked up to him and was fortunate to repose my head in that lap. I had, in effect, offered my very body there. It is my firm belief that, even now, that head continues to repose there itself.”

Swami Nirmalananda took him under his wings and seeing his purity, devotion and innocence gave him the sobriquet *Bhakta*. Gurudev has time and again expressed his devotion and gratitude to Swami Nirmalananda. It was Swami Nirmalananda who introduced and commended Gurudev to Swami Brahmananda. Swami Nirmalananda was a perfectionist, a quality imbibed from the Great Master, Sri Ramakrishna. He inculcated these qualities in the young novice. Every action would be

closely observed and lapses would be corrected and it was not uncommon to be upbraided even in public. This did not deter the young man whose spiritual ardour was intense. He regarded it as priceless good advice designed to eradicate completely his ego and incompetence. Swami Nirmalananda, was in fact preparing him to get *diksha* from none other than Swami Brahmananda (Rakhal Maharaj) the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna, who was to visit some places in Kerala around the year 1916. Informing of his visit, Swami Nirmalandaji told Neelakantan, "Your God has come. He will give you *mantra diksha*." To have obtained *mantra diksha* from the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna Parmahansa is in itself an eloquent testimony of the spiritual calibre of the future Swami Purushottamandaji. He felt that he was being initiated by Lord Dakshinamurthy Himself. Later he was to get his *Sannyasa diksha* from the then President of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj known as *Mahapurush Maharaj*. This was on *kartik purnima* at Belur Mutt in October 1923. He was given the monastic name of Purushottamanda. What an appropriate name! Soon after his *sannyas*, although closely associated with the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission and possessing considerable organizational skill, Gurudev resigned from the organization and chose to be a wandering mendicant in the *devabhoomi* of the Himalayas following the call of his heart. This was in fact predicted by Swami Nirmalananda who had once read Gurudev's palm.

In his wanderings Gurudev had to undergo a lot of privations. He had to endure excruciating physical suffering which on occasions even goaded him to end his life. In his Autobiography, Gurudev has mentioned occasions when out of despondency he had tried to drown himself in the Ganga but, he was pushed to the banks. Such incidents convinced him that the Lord wanted him to live, to carry on His work. While at Uttarkasi, Gurudev developed fever which turned into bleeding dysentery. He was advised by his friend to return to south as the cold weather was inhospitable to his physical condition. Also because of his earlier affliction in his legs, travelling which was a good deal by foot, was not easy. But Gurudev did not turn back. After travelling through various pilgrimage centres like Badri, Kedar, Gangotri, Brindavan etc., Gurudev came to Brahmapuri near Rishikesh. Once while meditating in a jungle near Swargashram, he found that he was enveloped by light on all four sides and he was sucked in its brightness. He has said that experience was his first sign-post to self-realisation. Later, he met an official from the Forest Department who mentioned to him about Vasishtha Guha and extolled its virtues, further adding that it was the best place for *tapasya*. Just hearing the name, Gurudev's mind got attracted to Vasishtha Guha and he was awaiting an opportunity to go there. The first opportunity came in June 1928. Travelling along the river bank and sometimes even swimming in the river, he reached the *Guha*. It was

bliss to behold the *Guha*. A rich man was staying in the main *Guha* who was indifferent to *sadhus*. But there was a *Brahmachari* in an adjacent small cave who offered some refreshments. After a few days there was torrential rain and the *Guha* was submerged in water and so Gurudev had to leave the place. But the place remained etched in his memory and he was determined to return there. The following year he ventured again and reached *Guha* late in the evening. The rich man was still there and he had a *pahadi* attendant. Gurudev requested for some provisions to cook his frugal meal and even offered to pay for them. But the rich man refused point blank, saying he had nothing with him. The *pahadi* attendant who was a brahmin intervened, offered to take him to his house where he gave him food and shelter for that night. After sometime the rich man who stayed in the main *Guha* left the place, but not before undergoing a change of heart.

From then on Gurudev remained at Vasishtha *Guha*. Once, at the insistence of his mentor Swami Nirmalananda, Gurudev had to go to Kerala in connection with some work in the Ramakrishna Ashram. But he did not want to get entangled in mundane affairs and returned to *Guha*. He would go to the nearby village which was about 5 kms for his *bhiksha*. In his autobiography, Gurudev has recorded even the small acts of kindness shown to him. Once while going for *bhiksha* in the village,

Gurudev was given some salt by a boy, which was such a precious commodity that the villagers would never part with it. Touched by his kindness, Gurudev enquired from the boy what he would like to have. When the boy replied that he wanted to study, Gurudev started to teach him and few other boys. Later with the help of the Rajah of Garhwal, Gurudev succeeded in opening a school in Goolar which even today is running as a Government Inter college. Today, during important events like Gurudev's birthday, the school children of Goolar are invited to partake in the feast and all the students given some wollen sweaters, uniforms etc each year. In fact the children of Goolar college are an important part of all festivities of the ashram.

Gurudev spent much of his time in the *Guha* in deep meditation. *Bhakti* had blossomed to *Jnana*. Gurudev used to say that *Bhakti* and *Jnana* are two sides of the same coin. Once an American couple came to see Gurudev bringing with them a special instrument which could indicate whether a person was awake, asleep or in *samadhi*. They wanted to strap the instrument to Gurudev in order to assess in which state he was. Initially Gurudev refused. Later, when he agreed, the instrument went kaput. Gurudev picked up a stick and started to hit the instrument, much to the dismay of the visitors, as it was a sensitive and expensive one. But strangely enough it started to work. When the visitors tried to read the meter they were bewildered. They were

not able to decipher from the reading, the state in which Gurudev was. The needle seemed to indicate that he was simultaneously in all the three states. Gurudev laughed and told them, "Aye, you cannot catch me!"

Gurudev was not a dry *vedantin*. His heart was overflowing with love for all, even plants and animals. Once a few mango-grafts were planted in the ashram. The next day Gurudev noticed that one plant was wilting in the sun. He held his upper garment above the tender sapling and called out to his disciples to fix a shade. Another time Gurudev desired that a compound wall be erected as a protection from flood waters. For this purpose masons and labourers were engaged. The work was stopped by Gurudev suddenly before it could be completed. When asked about it Gurudev said, "Look, not that I wanted a compound wall to protect the buildings. I wanted to help the poor villagers so I started the work. Money should not be given gratis. It will make them idle, you see." When an epidemic occurred in the nearby village and many people died, Gurudev offered them succor. He had a good knowledge of the uses of various herbs and roots in the forests. On one occasion some householders were staying in the ashram. Gurudev had advised them not to step outside their rooms at night. But one person did not heed the advice. While strolling out in the night, he encountered a big bear and let out a scream. Hearing this

Gurudev came out. He went near the bear and spoke softly in English, "Go away, go away." The big, black Himalayan bear, meekly turned around and walked away to the nearby jungle. For many years a tiger used to share the cave with him. Gurudev would, therefore, ask the visitors to leave the place before dusk. It so happened that on a certain day some of the villagers were sitting around Gurudev in the evening and their departure was delayed. Gurudev saw the tiger approaching. He cautioned the people around him to remain quiet and sit still. The tiger meekly walked into the cave for its night's sleep.

Presumably, Gurudev during the early years of his stay at Guha did not encourage those who came to see him to stay for a long duration. Shri Atma Ram Mehra, a Railway contractor, was probably one of the earliest visitors who had met Gurudev at the Guha sometime in 1928. Shri Mehra had only daughters and he desired to have sons. Gurudev gave four mangoes to Shri Mehra's wife who bore four sons. All of them were given their names by Gurudev himself. The second son Shri Lal Krishna Mehra, is one of the constant devotees at the Guha. He was given *mantra diksha* by Gurudev himself.

Swami Balananda, who had come to Gurudev sometime in the late 1930's has left some reminiscence in his book, "Purushottama Gatha-Prem Sudha" (Story of Purushottama- Nectar of

Love). Hailing from Kerala, Swami Balananda was on a spiritual quest and reached Rishikesh where he met several *mahatmas*. But nobody could satisfy him. Then one *sadhu* suggested to him to meet Swami Purushottamananda. When he met Gurudev, he was in for a big disappointment as Gurudev told him to go back to Rishikesh and do his *sadhana* there. Heart-broken he set out to the banks of the Ganga flowing near the *Ashram* with the intention of ending his life. But suddenly a *brahmachari* came running behind him saying that Gurudev wanted to meet him. Swami Balananda then got his initiation from Gurudev.

Gurudev was frugal in his speech but they were pithy. He had a unique style of conveying a message. Once the *brahmachari* and *sannyasi* disciples had forgotten to cut grass from the forest for the cows of the *Ashram*. Gurudev did not say a word, but quietly completed the task himself. Another time, they went for the afternoon siesta after lunch without washing the utensils. When they woke up, they found that all the vessels were washed and neatly arranged. When the truth dawned on them, they felt very ashamed. He would make the inmates do various physical activities like levelling of the land, gardening etc., as a part of their *sadhana*. This was to eradicate their *tamo guna*. Gurudev himself would sometimes take the cows for grazing to the forest. There was a cow

named Radha and Gurudev was specially fond of her. But when it was carried away by some wild animal, Gurudev displayed no emotion.

During the years that Gurudev lived in *sahaj samadhi* in the Guha, hundreds of people flocked to see him not only from the plains of north India but from all parts of the country, and even abroad. These were people from all walks and strata of life. Gurudev was an embodiment of both *bhakti* and *jnana*. Everybody got instantly attracted to his child-like laughter and he constantly exuded a state of bliss which was possible only in one who is in constant communion with the Supreme Being. At a glance Gurudev could divine the character of a person and what was in his mind. Swami Jnanananda Giri, who hails from Switzerland and has been living in India (at Mussorrie and now in DehraDun) for nearly fifty years, has given a thrilling account of his first meeting with Gurudev. With a beatific smile which exploded to a cheerful laughter, Gurudev picked up a picture postcard, which was received in that day's mail, and waving it before his visitor asked, "Do you know this country and place?" The picture post card was of Zurich in Switzerland, depicting that part of the town where Swami Jnanananda Giri was born! Once the Ambassador of Switzerland met Gurudev and asked him whether it would not be better for the welfare of the masses if he lived with them rather than in seclusion in a cave. In his inimitable style

Gurudev replied, "Sitting in a cave one can influence the minds of people far away. One can move mountains! It is not necessary to go anywhere." The diplomat was dumbfounded.

Way back in 1953, Dr.K.M. Munshi Ex-Governor of U.P (founder of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan) visited Vasishtha Guha. And this is what he was to write later:

"He is, I discovered, a deep vedantin and his ways are simple, innocent, almost child-like; he smiles and smiles all the time. Loneliness, starvation and a hundred other aches mean nothing to him; he lives a real life, possessed of God which gives him perpetual Joy and Peace. He has won this state after years of sadhana.

Before we parted he admonished me. He asked me, had I not had enough of life? It is high time I realized what I really was. 'I wish I could,' I replied."

Dr. Marion Wenger of the University of California and Dr. B.K Bagchi of the University of Michigan Medical School came to India in 1957 to research on the yogis. They found Yogis who permitted them to tape electrodes on their skin while they went into a trance like state. They found several yogis who could slow the heart down to where no beat could be detected even with

stethoscope for three or four minutes. They also met Gurudev. They were amazed to see his remarkable ability to sweat at will, by visualizing himself in a warm climate, while he was in a Himalayan cave in the winter, almost naked.

Gurudev used to occasionally go to south. Once during his visit to Madras, Gurudev met one Shri T.R. Srinivasan who was a regular visitor at the Ramakrishna Mutt. Srinivasanji was a keen *sadhak* and he gravitated towards Gurudev and followed him to many other places outside Madras. He has recounted his experience which has been published by the Sri Purushottamanada Trust, in the souvenir to mark the 125th birthday of Gurudev. Once Srinivasanji went to hear a talk given by Gurudev in an auditorium on two consecutive days. On the first day he found Gurudev engulfed in light. The second day he found that his appearance was like that of Lord Narasimha. On a certain occasion, in Kerala, Gurudev was talking about Christ and Srinivasanji could see a halo around him. This was no mere optical illusion as a stranger sitting next to him also made the same observation. Once Srinivasanji took Gurudev to his friend's house. His friend Prof. U.S. Ramachandran told Gurudev that he had undergone a surgery in his stomach but there has been no relief from pain. Gurudev placed his hand on his stomach and the pain ceased altogether from that moment.

When Gurudev went to Kerala in 1952, he went to Pullad to meet a boyhood friend. When he went there he found little girls doing “*Thiruvathirakali*”, which is a folk dance of Kerala in which the dancers form a circle and sing rhythmically to the clapping of their hands. When the dance was finished Gurudev called the lady of the house and dictated the “*JNANAKUMMI*”, in Malyalam. The song composed impromptu, would proceed with the first letter in each line arranged in an alphabetical order. This has become very popular in Kerala and is sung whenever there is *bhajan-kirtan*. Gurudev had also composed some poems in English.

Innumerable are the people who received his benediction and were saved from calamities. A very senior disciple of Guru Maharaj, a gracious lady, now about 90 years old, was saved from near death in 1954 during the *kumbh mela* at Prayag (Allahahbad). The lady now familiar at Vashishta Guha as Barabanki Maa (Shanti Mehrotra), had gone to have the ceremonial bath in the Ganga along with her mother-in-law and uncle and aunt. She also had her little daughter with her. As the arrangements were not adequate, they were caught in a sudden surging crowd. In the melee and a stampede, she fell on the ground clinging to her child, while all her relatives toppled over her. There was no hope to escape and death seemed imminent. Shanti Mehrotra called out to Gurudev.

Suddenly, from nowhere two mounted policemen on horseback arrived on the scene. They tore through the crowd, picked up the prostrate lady and all the members of her family and took them away to safety. Smt. Shanti Mehrotra narrated this incident to her husband when she reached home. Hearing this he went to thank the District Magistrate. Imagine his surprise when he learnt that the administration had made no arrangement for mounted police! Later, when she met Gurudev with his endearing laughter he remarked, "You were saved!"

Even after shedding his mortal coil Gurudev has been keeping a loving eye on his devotees. Gurudev himself has said that after shedding his mortal coil he can give unlimited help to his disciples. Once a devotee's wife had to deal with a sick child in a distant place. She was all alone and with no means of communication. Suddenly Gurudev manifested before her and gave her some sacred ash and some instructions. Needless to say that the child recovered. A lady devotee, who used to come to Guha from Gurudev's time, was yearning for *mantra diksha*. The Swamiji at Guha declined to give *mantra diksha*. Swami Shantanandaji Puri was then a householder. He told her, "If your longing is so intense you will get it from Gurudev himself." When he met her sometime later she ecstatically informed him that Gurudev had appeared in her dream and given her *diksha*. It is

not as if Gurudev is partial to the devotees whom he had met.

Shri R.C. Mishra, who has recently retired as a lecturer in the Government inter-college in Uttarkhand came to Guha after the *Samadhi* of Gurudev, when he got posted at Goolar, the village near the Guha. He and his family are ardent devotees who are rendering a lot of service at the Guha. When his eldest daughter, Sunita, was to appear for the X Board examination, it was informed that the practical examination would be held in Narendranagar which is a good 50 kms from Goolar. Mishraji's wife Krishna, became very worried. She had four other children including an infant son and so could not leave her house. Mishraji too had his college duties. One day, early in the morning she was sitting in a somewhat drowsy state. She saw an old man with just a white cloth around his waist, tapping at her doorway with his stick. He called out to her, "Why are you worried about the practicals? I will take it myself. Just give me something to eat," She called out to her daughter, who came back to tell her that nobody was there. The same day Mishraji got a call from the examiner who was to conduct the practical examination, saying that as he could not come to Narendranagar, Mishraji himself was to conduct the examination at Goolar itself

The years of penance that Gurudev had performed in Vashishta Guha has further sanctified its holy precincts. Innumerable visitors to the Guha, many of them strangers, are overwhelmed by the vibrations that reverberate inside the cave. Shri M. L. Kohli, an ardent devotee of the Guha, has been a witness to certain unusual events which occurred recently. Once a lady of Indian origin and a citizen of Australia went inside and remained there for sometime. When she came out she was weeping uncontrollably. She took away all the gold ornaments, which she was wearing in plenty and gave them to a young girl a daughter of R. C. Misra standing nearby. She went away saying that the purpose of her birth has been fulfilled. She was never seen again. At another time a family of four entered the Guha and they came out saying that an old monk in a white beard was seated in the middle of the cave. But when it was checked, nobody was found inside the cave. A similar experience was narrated by a foreigner while climbing above the valley after her visit to the Guha. There are both young and old who have had the vision of Gurudev although they had never met him. Gurudev himself did not believe in miracles. In fact, his autobiography is entitled as the "Story of Divine Compassion". Nonetheless, these extraordinary events have been encapsulated only to bring home to the reader that while he himself was on the austere spiritual path, he understood the problems

of people caught in the worldly affairs and most graciously he came to their succour.

Swami Dayananda Saraswathi of Rishikesh, who is an internationally renowned *sannyasi*, took a photograph of the cave from within. There is no electric connection inside the cave. Only an oil lamp burns near the *sivalinga* kept at the end of the cave. When the photograph was developed two parallel rays of light were seen emerging from the *sivalinga* and making loops and circles all over the mountain wall and disappearing at the base. This incident along with photograph was published in the 'Fragrant Flowers'. Swami Shantanandaji Puri has explained this supernatural phenomenon. It probably represents two *siddhas* who were performing penance inside the cave. They have now merged with the absolute. Gurudev had said that a number of *siddha purushas* are doing austerities inside the cave for the welfare of mankind. The Guha is a deep tunnel. It was partially closed at the instance of Gurudev so that the the tranquility in the interior space is undisturbed.

In February 1961, Gurdev developed some illness. He was 82 years old then. Gurudev refused to see any physician. The events preceding Gurudev's *mahasamadhi*, have been described by Swami Nirvedanandaji.

"An important event took place on Saturday, the elventh. That day was Ekadasi. Not minding his

illness, Swamiji took bath early in the morning. Then he called all the inmates of the Ashrama to his room. He enquired whether everyone had had his ablutions, etc., and asked those who had not, to wash their face, feet etc., and come. When everyone arrived, he asked them to sit erect in some posture (Padmasana etc.), without touching each other. Swamiji himself was seated in his couch. Then he asked them to recite certain Slokas and hymns. After sometime he gave a few words of advice. It was a sermon on the ever- pure Atman. He also stressed the importance of complete surrender to God and depending on Him for everything. He cited his own life as an example of Divine grace, namely, how the Ashrama was being run without the least effort or anxiety on his part, and so on. Another point of emphasis in his advice was to be sincere in everything, to pray to the Lord with a sincere heart and to live with a mutual love. And to some of his disciples living far away, he gave certain instructions through letters which were written by others at Swamiji's instance. He was very particular that his illness should not be mentioned to anyone. So he asked them to read out every letter and when he found that a hint about his illness had been made in a letter or two, he asked them to destroy those letters and re-write strictly in according with his instructions. Therefore, although the Ashramites desired to inform some Guru-bhais who were away at that time, and for whom they had even drafted telegrams earlier without the

knowledge of Swamiji, they were refrained from sending the message. Apart from general advice, Swamiji gave individual instructions also to some of those present. Then he exhorted them not to lose courage when everything was over -meaning, when he would have left the physical frame-but to be strong. He also blessed them - some of them with a pat on the shoulder when they knelt down before him. The servant boy who lived as a member of the Ashrama, was also a recipient of his grace that day. This is reminiscent of what his own Guru, Swami Brahmanandaji, did during his last days. Says his biographer:

“Then he called all the disciples and devotees who were present to his side. For each he had a blessing and an affectionate word.” ‘Ah, my children’, he told them tenderly: ‘never forget God, and you will realize the highest good. Don’t grieve. I shall be with you always.’ “(The Sage of Vasishtha Guha - The Last Phase)”.

On the following day, i.e. 12th February, Gurudev’s condition showed no improvement. Two doctors and a specialist came to see him and advised complete rest. But Gurudev was talking energetically to them. He gave them some advice on spiritual matters and a copy of his book, “Spiritual Talks”. Gurudev had been enquiring all along as to on what day *Shivratri* would fall. Monday the 13th of February 1961 was *Mahsivaratri* day. Gurudev was up early in the morning and had his

bath. The *Ashramites* were keeping vigil day and night, to attend on him from the day he fell ill. On 13th morning, Gurudev asked one disciple to sit near the door and read the Eighth Chapter of Bhagawad Gita (entitled “The Discourse on the Immortal Brahman”) and the Eleventh Chapter of Sri Durga Saptasati. On all holy occasions such as *Shivaratri*, it was the custom of the people in the nearby villages, to visit the Guha and have a dip in the Ganga. That year despite the damp and chilly weather, many people came. Among them was an aged brahmin woman, who was devoted to Gurudev. She was the one who first gave bhiksha to Gurudev, when he settled down in Vasishtha Guha. Again, it was her son who had given Gurudev some salt, long ago. Gurudev never forgot such incidents. When she came to salute Gurudev, he asked a brahmachari to bring a new *jari* bordered *dhoti* and gave it to her and two rupees. The woman would not accept it but when Gurudev told her to take it, she accepted them as *Prasad*.

On the very auspicious occasion of Mahasivaratri, on 13th February, 1961 at 10.50 p.m gurudev took *mahasamadhi*. It was the second quarter (*prahara*) of Mahasivaratri. Of the four *praharas*, the second is considered to be the most auspicious as the midnight *Sandhya* (junction) occurs at the end of this quarter. It is also believed that it was in this period that the Supreme Brahman manifested Himself in the form of Jyotirlinga.

Mother Earth heaved in sorrow to see her beloved son depart. There was a mild tremor exactly at the moment of Gurudev's *Samadhi*. Fortunate are those who came under Gurudev's spiritual umbrella. Gurudev's life was his message. At the entrance of the *Guha* Gurudev's central message is displayed. It reads thus:

“What are we seeking? Bliss!

What we are seeking is within us. Within us is a huge roaring ocean of divine and infinite bliss, a single drop of which can completely destroy all our woes forever and transport us to a high state of ecstasy. But foolishly we look for this outside. To imagine that wife, children, wealth, name, fame etc., can bring happiness is a mere illusion. Our state is like that of a deer which contains the musk in its own navel but in its ignorance seeks this divine scent in its surroundings, in trees, creepers, grass etc. The teachings of our great sages alone can, therefore, give us pure, unalloyed and eternal bliss”.

* * *

Chapter Four

Cascading Grace of Gurudev

From the moment Ramanan (Janaki Ramanan fondly called as Ramana by parents and friends) saw Gurudev he was enslaved by his boundless love and grace. He was startled to hear Gurudev referring to his earlier attempts to trace his whereabouts in the past few years. From the time he came across his name in one of the souvenirs published by the Sivanandashram in 1952, there arose a deep longing to meet him. Ramana had made enquiries about Vasishtha Guha from many people since then. But nobody was able to guide him. It was only six years later in 1957 that a chance meeting with a stranger led him to Gurudev.

Gurudev certainly would have had a knowledge of who his select disciples would be. This was evident in the very first meeting itself. After being in the sanctified presence of Gurudev for two or three days, when Ramanan went to take leave of him, Gurudev told him clearly, “You are coming for my ensuing birthday and will do *Bhagavata Saptaha for 7 days.*” On hearing this, Ramana was taken aback. He had studied Sanskrit way back in his

boyhood days but he had never read the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. The *Bhagavatam* was the scripture closest to Gurudev's heart and it was the launching pad in his spiritual journey. Gurudev chose Ramanan to be the standard bearer of this scripture. He had some other disciples who were very proficient in Sanskrit. But he chose Ramanan on his very first visit. His choice was peerless as future events would unfold.

A few days before Gurudev's birthday, Ramanan received a letter from Vashishta Guha informing him that Gurudev was expecting him to conduct the *Bhagavata Saptaha*. Gurudev's orders could not be evaded. Ramana set out with a lot of trepidation. The reading from the *Bhagavatham* is done early in the morning (normally lasting for 6 to 8 hours). Along with an old panditji, Ramana read out a portion on the first day. Soon after this Gurudev called out to him and said, "Aye, the visitors here do not know Sanskrit. So everyday in the afternoon you will give a lecture in Hindi on the portion read out in the morning." The task became even more daunting now as he had been reading mechanically and he had no idea of the contents. But he had to comply. He went to the banks of the Ganga and sitting there read through the *Bhagavatam* till 2 p.m. Ramanan was nervous as the portions relating to philosophy and higher knowledge were hardly comprehensible to him when he himself could not understand, how

could he expound on it? Somehow he managed to cull out some stories from the text. He then braced himself for his first talk in Hindi, after invoking Gurudev's blessings. This was in fact the *sadhana* prescribed by Gurudev for the future as written by Swami Shantanandaji Maharaj. In the foreword to his first book, "Srimad Bhagavatam: Its Message for the Modern Man" Swamiji has written that though there were ups and downs in his *sadhana* he never parted company with reading *Bhagavatam* at home. He further wrote :

"I look upon Bhagavatam as Lord Krishna himself and Krishna is the Supreme formless Brahman, my very self.

It is Srimad Bhagavatam (given to me by my Guru) that made me grow from a crass donkey to an Arab stallion. It led me smoothly to the state of *sannyasa* (monkhood). It made me desireless, free from attachment and ego and I matured into the mental stage of a *Sannyasin* long before I donned the ochre robe formally after initiation."

From 1957 onwards the reading and exposition on the *Bhagavatam* was being done by Ramanan normally once a year, a tradition carried forward even after Gurudev's Mahasamadhi. In 1958 Gurudev had gone to Lucknow and Ramanan who had some official work at Kanpur went to see him at Lucknow. Gurudev who used to refer to Ramanan as Vyasji, called upon him to start reading and

exposition of the *Bhagavatam*. In a book penned by Swami Nirvedanandaji, (published in 1975) “The sage of Vasishtha Guha- The last phase”, there is an account of this :

“A young disciple of Swamiji, an Auditor in the Defence Accounts Department, posted in Poona, had come to Kanpur on official duty. When he read in the newspaper that Swamiji had arrived in Lucknow, he rushed there for having his darshan. At Swamiji’s bidding he stayed there for a Bhagavata Saptaha. He was to be the ‘Vyasa’. He had once done the Saptaha reading - the first in his life - during the Birthday celebrations of Swamiji at Vasishtha Guha only a few weeks before. His clear pronounciation, accent etc., were appreciated by everyone including Swamiji. For all that he was not a professional “kathavachak”. But he had a fair knowledge of Sanskrit; in addition he had a devotional temperament too.

Now, when Swamiji bade him to do the Saptaha in Lucknow also he considered it a blessing and carried out the job with sraddha and devotion under his guidance.”

This tradition of conducting the Bhagavata-Saptaha by Ramanan continued until the Mahasamadhi of Gurudev. Later after a long break, the practice was renewed, until 1998. Therafter, Swamiji had some severe problem in his throat and could not conduct the full Saptaha. But he would

commence the Saptaha and also give an exposition in brief for an hour or so. Hearing the rendition of the Bhagavatam by Swamiji is a soul elevating experience. His recitation of the Sanskrit *slokas* is verily like the flow of the mighty Ganga, and even if one does not understand a word one would hear it spell bound. The exposition he would give of various episodes was not a mere narrative, but would bring out their esoteric significance. It was intended to be lessons in *sadhana*. For instance, this was how Swmiji describes the episode of Rukmini's love for Krishna and her subsequent abduction. He would say that it signifies the relation between the *Jivatma*, the individual soul and the Supreme self. "Rukmini" means the golden -hued. The *Jivatma* is described in the scriptures as golden colored. The *Jiva* (individual) is wedded in every birth to a life of "*sisupala*" which means bearing and rearing of children. Having heard about the Lord, the Jiva is no longer willing to be wedded to the life of sisupala but wants the Lord Himself. Probably, it was no coincidence that Ramanan's meeting with Gurudev, and his assigning him the conducting of the Bhagavata Saptaha, also coincided with a sudden surfacing of the in-depth knowledge of the holy text.

All the Sadhana, starting from the first accidental reading of the 'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna' in 1950, culminated in Gurudev's calling Ramanan at 4 p.m on his own birthday in

1959 and giving initiation (mantra Diksha), unsought and unasked. This was the topping compassion of Gurudev as initiation is like issuing of a passport for liberation.

After his *sannyasa*, Swamiji has conducted *Bhagavata Saptaha* in many places and in many languages. Dr. Sarat Desai, who was one of the renowned skin specialists in India, came by chance to Vasishtha Guha in 1993, while on his way to Badrinath. There he met Swamiji and like many others was captivated by him. Dr. Desai arranged for a *Bhagavata Saptaha* to be conducted at Pune in the ashram of Maa Anandmayai in 1996. As there were separate Hindi and non - Hindi audience, Swamiji gave lectures both in the morning and evening, for 4 hours in each session. The session in the morning was in English while that in the evening was in Hindi. This was a marathon task but accomplished with great elan. His friend from his college days, Shri Nagasundaram, came from Bangalore to Pune to do the reading of the scripture. Earlier in 1993 Swamiji had done the *Saptaha* at the Athithi Ashram in Tiruvannamalai. Here too Shri Nagasundaram did the reading of the scripture in Sanskrit. Also, at Tiruvannamalai itself, in the house of one Mrs. Gowriamma, Swamiji gave a detailed exposition on the Tenth Skanda. At Tiruvannamalai the discourse was in Tamil. In 1995 at the request of Shri Jayaraman, Chief Post Master General, Swamiji conducted a *Saptaha* at Dharwar.

As on other occasions, Nagasundaramji did the reading of the scripture. Sometime in 1996 a full scale *Bhagavat Saptaha* was conducted in Ludhiana at the residence of Shri Sat Pal Agarwal. For the benefit of a group of Dutch citizens, the Bhagavatam discourse was given in the Vanamaali Ashram, Rishikesh sometime in 1997 - 1998. The Aurobindo Centre in New Delhi was privileged to have Swamiji to conduct the Bhagavatam in 1999. Following this at the instance of Shri Madanlal Himsatsinghka who had devoted his life to the service of the Mother and the Aurobindo Ashram, a *Bhagavat Saptaha* was conducted in Bangalore in 2000. This was in Hindi. Once more Nagasundaramji offered his services. This was the last occasion when he participated in the *Saptaha* done by Swamiji. In 2003, Swamiji gave a *Bhagavat Saptaha* discourse in Chennai (then Madras) at the house of the then chief P. M. G - Mr. Jayaraman and Mrs. Maithili.

The *Bhagavat Saptaha* at the Aurobindo Centre, New Delhi (9.5.'99-16.5.'99) was significant in some ways. Neither Swamiji nor the organizers of the *Saptaha*, who were his devotees were associated with the Aurobindo Centre. The search for a suitable venue led to the identification of the Aurobindo Centre. Initially, there was some reluctance to provide the space for a week-long discourse to an unknown Swamiji. But once the *Saptaha* commenced and Swamiji began his

discourse, everybody was swept off their feet. Swamiji was having acute pain in his throat at that time. But the discourse went off without a hitch. On the third day when he was narrating the *Dhruv charit*, an extraordinary spectacle was beheld by a few people assembled in the lecture hall of the Aurobindo Centre. On the dais where Swamiji was seated, a picture of Gurudev was kept. This was specially made for the occasion by an old devotee of Gurudev, Late Shri K.C. Sharma. A strong and a broad beam of golden light emanated from Gurudev's portrait and entered Swamiji's chest. Suddenly, Swamiji himself was transformed and looked like Lord Narasimha with the mane of a lion and in golden hue. Behind him a golden flame of the size of the thumb kept swinging, disappearing and re-appearing alternatively on his right and left side. Probably, it was Gurudev himself in his subtle form enjoying the Bhagavatam! Another interesting episode relates to the experience of a famous mother and daughter duo. Mrs. Ajit Kaur, a renowned writer in Punjabi and her daughter the internationally famous painter, Mrs. Arpana Kaur, who met Swamiji during the latter's visit to Aurobindo Centre, New Delhi. When they bent down to touch his feet and got up, behold! there was a rose flower in their lap. There were no flowers anywhere near Swamiji nor were they carrying any flowers. There was a passage of nearly forty years from the time the first discourse of the Bhagavatam was done at Vashishta Guha and the one at the

Aurobindo Centre in New Delhi. The *sadhana* that must have been done in the interregnum must have been intense and steadfast. At the behest of Gurudev, he had to pass through the life of a householder for nearly 30 years. Although he had to wait for a long time for the formal monkhood, Swamiji was abundantly blessed by Gurudev.

Attracted by Gurudev, Ramanan started to visit Vasishtha Guha almost every month from 1956. He had never bothered to enquire about the lineage of Gurudev. It was sheer heaven to be near Gurudev that such thoughts never even occurred. This was indeed strange as he was keen to have a Guru only from the Ramakrishna *parampara*. At the same time after meeting Gurudev, he never went anywhere else either. Only about a year later when Ramanan was given a copy of Gurudev's biography that he was delighted to learn that Gurudev hailed from the lineage of Sri Ramakrishna. The wish that the Guru should be from the Ramakrishnan Paramahansa *parampara* was met. But there was yet another condition for acceptance and that was the Guru should be one who goes into *Samadhi* once a while. Gurudev in his infinite compassion revealed his *Samadhi* state as well. Once Ramanan was asked to read a portion of the Brihadarayaka Upanishad. While doing so he found that Gurudev had passed into the *Samadhi* state. Unlike many others who had directly asked for *mantra diksha*, Ramana never asked for it. But it was given unsolicited on

Gurudev's birthday in 1959, which is indeed a rare blessing. Gurudev summoned Ramana who was engaged in feeding of the guests and without any preliminaries like bath etc., initiated him. Ramanan was floating in cloud nine after having received *mantra diksha* from Gurudev. But soon he was to get an unexpected command from Gurudev which left him shell shocked. This has been vividly described in the "Fragrant Flowers" :

"In Nov.-Dec. 1959, a few days after my Mantra Diksha, myself and Gurudev were coming down from his room, in the evening all alone. My Master's hand was on my shoulder and we were going down the steps. On the very first step apropos nothing, suddenly he told me, "Aye, you are not fit for Sannyasa now. You have still some strong samskaras of a householder left in you. You better marry soon." These words shocked me to the core. I was 30 years old and was fully convinced in my heart that I was an eminent candidate fit for Sannyas because of my knowledge of Sanskrit and some study of scriptures. My Gurudev's words were a severe blow to my ego. I became like a balloon from which all air had escaped. I removed the hands of my Gurudev from my shoulder and sat down on the step. My Master went down the steps, looked up from the last step with eyes brimming with compassion and told me, "Aye, why are you worried? One day you will get "that" also." Obviously he meant Sannyas by the word "that" and his prophecy was fulfilled nearly 32 years later."

In the previous year i.e in 1958 when Ramanan was leaving the Guha after the birthday celebrations, Gurudev had asked him, “Aye, do you have to go back to Meerut? Why don’t you stay here?” Earlier, he had got a similar hint in an epistle penned by Gurudev where he wrote, “God and the world are two opposite ends. One has to abandon the world in order to reach God. You are intelligent. You should know what to do.” Later Ramanan was to regret that he never understood the implicit command for renunciation. The die had been cast and now Ramanan steeled himself for the life of a householder.

In September 1960, Ramanan got married to Parvathi, who was born and brought up in Bombay. She was a graduate from the Bombay University and was of modern outlook. Her father was the Chief Engineer in Kohinoor Mills. A day before his wedding, Ramanan received a lovely message from Gurudev conveying his blessings and comforting him through a Sanskrit sloka which meant.

“Marriage is not meant either for enjoyment or for begetting progeny. A householder who leads a life of restraint seeking his wife’s intimate company at proper times sanctioned in scriptures is also deemed to be a BRAHMACHARI.” (Fragrant Flowers)

Gurudev’s *Mahasamadhi* was fast approaching. Ramanan had meanwhile got his transfer orders

from Meerut to Poona (now Pune). On 13th February 1961, which was the holy day of *Shivaratri*, the day Gurudev had chosen to leave his body, Ramanan had gone for the *darshan* of the *Jyotirlinga* at Triyambakeswar, near Nasik. The news of Gurudev's Mahasamadhi was like a mortal blow. His physical absence meant a void which could never be filled. But he was always cradled in the Guru's loving hand which he became conscious of at every turn of event. His official duties were rigorous and involved extensive touring as it related to auditing of defence establishments. In official circles and in social circles he was known as RAMANAN (Kshetrapalapuram Vaidhyanatha JanakiRamanan). He discharged his duties conscientiously and with devotion. Ramanan was known for his meticulous performance and his skills as an auditor earned him the appreciation of his superior officers. He was a gifted teacher which earned him the post of Training Accountant in his department. A junior colleague Shri Sankaranaryanan was one of the notable beneficiaries. Ramanan coached him for all the subjects for his appearing for the Subordinate Accounts Service (SAS) which comprised drafting, précis writing, accountancy, costing, rules and regulations etc. Shri Sankaranaryananji has nostalgically recalled with great affection the personal interest and care that was taken by Swamiji in coaching him and preparing him for the examination. Ramanan had played a vital role in the shaping of his career. (Shri Sankaranaryanan is now at Puttapurthi in the service of Sri Satya Sai Baba)

Ramanan would even prepare tea and give him so that he could remain awake in the night and study. It was not only Sankaranaryanji but anybody who came for any help would not go empty handed. Ramanan was highly popular in the official circles with one and all including his seniors, colleagues and juniors. His efficiency and meticulous execution earned him the appreciation and plaudits of his seniors while his generous disposition and ability won the hearts of his colleagues.

While at Tanzania (East Africa) Ramanan decided to take up the examinations of the Institute of Cost and Management Accountants (ICMA) London. He succeeded in clearing them all at the first attempt. Swamiji in his "Musings" has mentioned how he was able to thereafter secure the Associate Membership.

"I applied for Associate membership on the basis of my earlier experience under the Government of India. For that I had to submit a 20 page answer seriatim to their questionnaire with searching, in-depth and intricate technical questions on the actual workings in various Government Factories with which I was involved some four years back. It was to have been authenticated page by page by the topmost boss of my department under the Indian Government. As the officers under whom I had worked had all died

or retired or gone away to other formations it would have been next to impossible to get my experience-questionnaire authenticated but miraculously as the Administrative Officer working under the big boss in India was a good friend of mine, he authenticated the statement under his own signature embossing it with the departmental seal and I got my Associateship in 1971.’ God’s intervention which was never sought for shows how badly God wanted to attract Ramanan to His own forces.

While Gurudev was showering his grace for worldly qualifications, he tightened the grip so that it does not lead Ramanan far away from the spiritual path. This is what Swamiji himself has written in this regard:

“On my return to India I wanted to encash on my new qualification by applying for top cost-management jobs but nowhere was I called even for an interview for the next 15 years to come (till retirement). This is where the Lord put his feet down as He perhaps thought it was time for me to turn towards spiritual sadhana more earnestly. Enough is enough.” (Musings).

The circumstances surrounding the birth of his only son have been narrated in the “Fragrant Flowers”. The boundless compassion of Gurudev can be savoured in every little detail in this account. Immersed in heavy office duties to which was

added unavoidable social events like parties and the self-imposed onerous task of appearing for a rigorous examination like the ICMA, there was left very little room for prayers or meditation. When such was the stranglehold of the world, a child was born after about 10 years of marriage, in February 1971. This, which would have been normally an occasion of great joy, was also the harbinger of an impending calamity. After a few days, the child was found on the 4th day after birth to have a rare type of blood disorder known as A-B-O incompatibility which is invariably fatal. At that moment of great sorrow, Ramanan distinctly heard Gurudev's voice calling to him in his characteristic fashion, "Aye, tell the mother of the child to write *Ram Nam*." Initially, there was some scepticism as Ramanan found it hard to believe that Gurudev would remember him who had been slack in his *sadhana*. But when the command was repeated it was clear that this was no illusion. The next task was to convince the child's mother. This was much easier than apprehended. As the mother started to furiously write *Ram Nam*, the child recovered within a week and a half to the utter bafflement of the doctors. The disease had vanished without a trace. The hospital may have regarded this as a freak case. But it was the Guru's grace which saved the child from certain death. The child was appropriately named as "Ramachandra".

While at Tanzania, Ramanan was to experience a few more incidents which further strengthened his

belief that Gurudev was guarding him from mishaps. While returning from a late night party, the car which Ramanan was driving, got caught in a deep mire and got stuck. The neighbourhood was notorious and it was a dark and lonely spot. Mrs Parvathiji who was holding her infant son was filled with apprehension as she was wearing a lot of valuable ornaments. She started to take the name of Ram. This incident has been recorded vividly in the Fragrant Flowers:

“Within seconds which looked like eternity, a Mercedes Benz with a CD plate (Corps Diplomatique) appeared on the scene, driven by a well dressed African gentleman with a lady by his side. He stopped his car by himself, enquired about my plight and asked me to sit in my car and reverse it while he himself a giant of a man, lifted the bumper in front of the car, standing in knee-deep mud and mire, in his fine suit. If our positions had been reversed I could never have spoilt my suit and helped him to take out his car. Before I could stop the car after reversing, come down and thank him, the African diplomat got into his car with his clothes dripping with mud and drove away without a backward glance. We reached home safely by the main road. Next day morning, the child’s mother told me, ‘Do you know who rescued us yesterday night? It was SRI RAM Himself who, at the request of our Gurudev, had come in a Mercedes Benz car’. Tears came into my eyes.” (Fragrant Flowers).

Another testing time was on the eve of departure from Tanzania. A serious audit objection surfaced in the working of the Ministry where Ramanan was posted. There was reportedly a huge loss resulting from alleged overpayment to a contractor. The topmost boss, an Englishman in the Finance wing was declared *persona –non-grata* and repatriated. RAMANAN was working in the same wing. While the passports of all Indians serving in the Ministry were impounded. The matter was being taken to the court. Astonishingly RAMANAN alone was spared. Mrs. Parvathiji started to write *Ram Nam* furiously to stave off danger. RAMANAN also by now resumed his daily meditation. He was able to leave the shores of Tanzania without any fuss. He alone was never interrogated by the police or detained at any stage. On reaching Bombay another problem arose. An announcement was made that the passengers had to leave behind all their baggage including jewellery which will have to be assessed for payment of customs duty and get them released next day. Mrs Parvathiji was wearing a lot of gold ornaments. Now, what happened thereafter has been related by Swamiji:

“I left it to the Lord and when my turn came, the Customs Officer who scrutinized the official Passports asked me what was my designation under the Government. This was because in the Passport, under the column, “Designation and Office” it was only written, ‘Government Servant’.

I asked him in reply, "As the passport has been issued by the Headquarters of the Ministry of External Affairs and not by any passport officer, don't you think that they would have recorded my designation unless they did not want it to be revealed." The Customs Officer again asked me in a conspiratorial tone as to whether I was from the "Intelligence." I replied with a smile 'Do you expect me to acknowledge it here in public in case I happened to be from Intelligence?' In a reverential tone, the officer allowed me and my family to go out without bothering to look at the jewellery the lady wore with the parting words, "It is O.K. Sir. You may go." Surely the Lord was my partner in the subterfuge as otherwise how could I have ever answered the Customs Officer in the dubious way I did unless inspired by the Lord and got away with it." (Musings of a Himalayan Monk).

After the *Mahasamadhi* of Gurudev, Ramanan did not maintain any link with Vasishtha Guha and his *Gurubhais* for a number of years. Subsequent to his return to India sometime in November 1971, Ramanan used to go to Rishikesh for weekend retreats to various ashrams but studiously avoided going to Guha. He was hence greatly surprised to get a letter from Swami Nirvedanandaji after a gap of about seventeen years in 1978. Ramanan was then posted in Meerut. Swami Nirvedananadaji had a chance meeting with a colleague of Ramanan while travelling to Haridwar, from whom he got

Ramanan's address. This would show not only the great love that Swami Nirvedanadaji had for Ramanan, but also shows the indelible impression that he had made on *mahatmas* of his calibre. Swami Nirvedanandaji asked Ramanan to meet him at Haridwar, if possible. Ramanan repaired to Haridwar. It was an emotional reunion. Swami Nirvedanandaji was shocked to know that Ramanan had not been to Guha after Gurudev's *Mahasamadhi*. He chided him for his lapse and without further ado took him to Vasishtha Guha. There Ramanan wept uncontrollably at the *Samadhi* of Gurudev. This was a significant moment of his life. Now, once again Ramanan started doing the Bhagavat Saptaha every year during Gurudev's birthday at the Guha. Swamiji has described his reunion as the crocodile grip of Gurudev.

Between 1974 and 1986 he was deputed to various institutions like the University Grants Commission, A. P. Industrial Development Corporation and Union Public Service Commission heading the Finance Departments. As Ramanan was posted mostly in cities in northern India like Meerut, Delhi etc., it facilitated the revival of his contact with Guha. Although he was not visiting the Guha there was no slackening in his *sadhana*. But coming again in the orbit of Guha certainly helped in hastening his spiritual progress. After retirement he continued his austerities and meditation. He would avoid eating outside even in the house of his siblings. His

friends were those who were sincere aspirants for God realization and even in casual conversation no worldly subjects were discussed. He used to spend at least six months in a year either at Guha or Uttarkasi. During one such visit to the Guha when Ramanan was conducting the *Bhagawat Saptaha*, Mrs Parvathiji had a vision of Gurudev inside the cave. At first she could not believe her eyes, but Gurudev assured her that it was indeed he who stood before her. He told her, that an old bearded ex-army-man will come to the Guha, for the first time, on that day, and would go away after politely refusing to have lunch. This incident would confirm the reality of the vision, he said. Gurudev further promised to initiate her the following day. Sure enough, she was able to confirm this incident. The next day she got the *Ram mantra* which she dearly desired to have. How fortunate was this lady to have received Gurudev's blessings. Gurudev's compassion knows no bounds!

While staying at Chennai after retirement, Ramanan was entrusted with an assignment by none other than the Sankaracharya of Kanchi. The message was conveyed through Mr. Jayaraman, the then Post-Master General, who was closely associated with the sage of Kanchi. Seeing the world torn by strife, with animosity rampant even within families, Sankaracharya desired that if the Siva Sahasranama, which is in the Linga Purana

is popularized it would ease tensions. The Sankaracharya had directed that the Sahasranama may be translated into Tamil by the person who taught Sanskrit at Kotturpuram in Chennai. It is really amazing that the sage of Kanchi said so, as Ramanan did not maintain any contacts with the Sankaracharya after his boyhood days. This reveals not only the prowess of the Sankaracharya but also the fact that Swamiji was specially chosen for this work over many others. This incident has been vividly described by Swamiji :

“I was aghast at this prospect as all Sahasranamas contain a lot of esoteric significance and the meanings have been written by divine inspiration by great men like Adi Sankaracharya (for Vishnu Sahasranama) Bhaskaracharya (for Lalita Sahasranama) etc. My protest was of no avail and the matter was entrusted to me. I searched in all the libraries of Madras but no copy of the Linga Purana (which contained the Siva Sahasra Nama) was available for reference. One day while I was coming out of the Oriental Library near the Marina beach in sheer despair, a gentleman coming from outside accosted me and asked me as to what book I was in search of. He was (as he later on told me) an Assistant Librarian. When I unburdened my heart to him, he said that in the University there was one Professor V who had done his Ph.D by submitting a thesis on Linga Puranam. He took me on his scooter to Dr. V who gave me a copy of Linga

Puranam for my perusal in his office room. Incidentally, he gave me the address of a person in Madras who had a copy of Linga Puranam along with an ancient Sanskrit commentary by one Ballala. It seemed as if someone had offered me amrita (the divine elixir of immortality).” (Fragrant Flowers)

Swamiji regarded this experience as a *sadhana* as he had to go through the Siva Sahsrnama several times both for the purpose of translation and later on for the proof reading. While the book was getting ready for printing, Ramanan suffered a fracture of the backbone. As the spinal cord is the repository of the subtle *kundalini shakti*, Ramanan did not want to undergo any surgery. This left him bed-ridden for three months. In this state, lying prone on the bed, he went through the proof copies. Later on, this was translated in to Hindi and Telugu. Swamiji has been suggesting the reading of this Sahasranama especially to couples who are on the verge of separation or even separated due to apparently irreconcilable differences. It has proved to be efficacious and miraculously separated couples have come together again.

The Anand Ashram at Kanhangad, founded by Papa Ramdas had exercised a great influence on Ramanan because of its high spiritual vibrations. His first visit was in 1990 when Swami Satchidanandaji Maharaj was at the helm. (He has since attained *Samadhi*). The place would be

reverberating with the chanting of Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram, from early morning to late in the night. On the eve of his departure, he got the command of the Divine Mother to go to Mookambika, a famous Devi Temple beyond Udipi in Karnataka. From Kanhangad, it entailed a bus journey of seven hours. He protested saying that he did not have enough money to undertake the trip and return to Bangalore, and that he had also to pay for the meals taken in the *Ashram's* canteen. But he was assured that he need not worry on that account. The previous day, Swami Satchidanandaji had asked RAMANAN to meet him before his departure. When he went early next day morning, he was surprised to know that the dues to be paid to the canteen have been waived by Swamiji. It came as a surprise as it was Ramanan's first visit to that *Ashram* and he had met the Swamiji only on the day of his arrival and departure. At every step he found himself being divinely guided and led forward by a supreme force.

There were even more surprises in store after reaching Mookambika. He could not secure any accommodation and was wondering what to do. Suddenly one gentleman approached him and said that he had been travelling in the same bus as Ramanan. He said he knew a priest who would give them accommodation. But on reaching the priest's house, it was apparent that the gentleman was not known to the priest. Nonetheless they got a room in

his house. That was the last day of a festival season and the deity was being taken out on procession. The priest asked them to go and witness this. After the *darshan*, Ramanan's companion left saying he will join him later. Ramanan had a good *darshan* of the Devi and witnessed the *aarti* and returned to the priest's house, where he had his meals. But there was no sign of his companion. Doubtlessly, it was the Divine Mother again who had sent a guide to assist Ramanan.

While remaining as a householder without the trappings of a monk, Ramanan was leading the life of a *sannyasi* sans the ochre robes. The desire to formally renounce was always smouldering within his heart and his family would not have been unaware of this. Since the son was rather young there was some delay. At the time of Ramanan's retirement his son was in class X. In June 1991 Ramachandra, his son entered the final year of Engineering at IIT Kharagpur. The preparations for the last farewell to the life of a householder commenced.

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Chapter Five

Final Renunciation

It is very difficult, in fact well nigh impossible, for lay persons, to even imagine the feelings of one on the path of renunciation. Adi Sankara, as a young boy left his home and a grieving mother to revive the *Sanatana Dharma*. Prince Siddharth who lived in the lap of luxury, left his kingdom and a beautiful wife to become the Buddha. The lives of all great saints have entailed sacrifice of their own hearth and homes for the welfare of mankind. Our Swamiji had to wait for his final and formal renunciation, as his Guru had so ordained it. A day came when he got a clear message in his heart obviously due to divine machination that it was time enough to get out of the world and become a monk. He burnt all his certificates of academic qualifications. Initially he had kept one fixed deposit of Rs. 25,000 in his own name but this too was transferred after it occurred to him that this was contradictory to the principle of *sannyas*, and was tantamount to a 'No Confidence motion' against God if he took it. Mrs Parvathiji was away on a lecture assignment at Madras and Ramachandra was in the hostel, at IIT Kharagpur. The family was used to his annual sojourn to Uttarkasi. In June 1991 when he

went it was thought that this was another hardy annual. But it was not to be so. Swamiji has described his last days as a householder thus:

“I went away to Uttarkasi in June 1991 and everybody took it as my usual yearly trip, but I knew that there was to be no more return. My mind was calm and almost blank like. There was no sort of emotion and there was not even a thought that I was leaving the house forever. Whose house was it and where is the question of leaving it? It was as if I had always been a sanyasi and now moving from one place to other Imperceptibly, I had already become a Sannyasi at heart. Does one become a Sannyasi only when a bell rings and one is given the Ochre robe? There was neither any excitement nor any grief or regret. I had just enough money to reach Uttarkasi and a little more.” (Fragrant Flowers)

Swami Shankaranandji a Gurubhai of Swamiji who was to give *sannyas* was aware of Ramanan’s intention when he came to Uttarkasi and he gave him an effusive welcome. Ramanan would live on *bhiksha*, alms, taken from charitable institutions. He had to wait for another eight months or so to take the final vow of renunciation as Swami Shankaranandaji had indicated that he would be giving *Sannyas* only on *Shivaratri* which would fall on 2.2.1992. But the interregnum was a severe testing period. Mrs Parvathiji arrived suddenly without prior intimation at Uttarkasi. She said that she had decided to come

there for *Sadhana*. She was given a separate room and she cooked her own food. Ramanan stayed in the verandah of Swami Shankarananda's room. There was no sign of her leaving the place even after a month. This worried Swami Shankaranandaji who told Ramanan that it would be difficult for him to ordain him as a *sannyasi* with the lady around. Ramanan faced the situation stoically, as Mrs. Parvathiji said in no uncertain terms that she may even stay for a year if she felt like. But Gurudev had everything programmed in advance. Sometime in November 1991, quite unexpectedly there was an urgent message received from their neighbour at Bangalore. It was informed that Ramanan's house was burgled and hence they should rush to Bangalore and lodge a police complaint. This greatly agitated Mrs Parvathiji who immediately started making preparations to leave. To her consternation she found that Ramanan was not accompanying her as he felt that he had already become a Sannyasi at heart on the day he left the house and now nothing belonged to him. She left without him. Ramanan made no efforts to contact her thereafter to enquire about the matter. A month later a letter was received from her. She informed that no valuables were stolen although the house was broken in and thanked Lord Ram for protecting them. What can we say except that it was a grand ruse staged by none other than the Supreme Lord, testing the *vairagya* of the *Sadhak* and simultaneously relieving him from the dilemma created by the lady's presence at Uttarkasi.

While this event itself was cataclysmic, there was another literally earth shaking event. This was the devastating earthquake in the Uttarkhand region which occurred on 21st September 1991. When the town was being rocked by the earthquake, at 2.30 a.m., Ramanan was sitting in meditation. The building was shaking wildly. The damage caused by this earthquake is in recent memory and is well known for the extensive destruction it caused. In Uttarkasi several buildings had collapsed and there was a tremendous loss of life. In the midst of such devastation, Mangal Ashram, (where Swami Sankaranandaji was living) was miraculously insulated from the destruction which was taking place all around. Not even some containers kept on the shelf had toppled down, while just next door a building had totally crashed.

With no likely impediments for the *Sannyas*, Swami Shankaranandaji was relieved. He gave all the *Sannyas* mantras to be gone through in advance so that they could be pronounced correctly at the time of initiation. He also gave him some books which dealt with the code of conduct and duties of *sannyasins* as laid down in the scriptures. *Shivaratri* was the designated day. The previous day was one of fasting and keeping vigil through the night. With deep concern Swami Shankaranandaji himself supervised the observance of these preparatory sine-qua-nons. Swamiji has given a lucid account of his *Sannyas*:

“I had already discharged my debts to the Gods, manes, etc., through ASHTA SRADDHA ceremony and had my head shaved except for a small tuft of hair. I was full of some unknown excitement tingling through all the pores of my body and I was fully awake without a tinge of sleepiness. For some time I was doing the Gayatri Japa and for some time I was reading some portions from the Mahabharata. At about 2.20 a.m. I got up, had my first bath and started VIRAJA HOMAM, the last worship using sacrificial fire - a ceremony meant for the purification of body and mind, in the exalted presence of SWAMI SANKARANANDAJI MAHARAJ. The mind was absolutely pure and not a single thought of the world around ever crossed my mind. The mind was in a state of calm and ineffable bliss. At 4a.m. we went to the Ganges. The sacred thread and tuft of hair, the last vestiges of caste were cut and thrown. I had my dip in the Ganges several times and **threw off my clothes into the river. I was stark naked and became a ‘nobody’**. There was a peculiar sense of total divinity in me.

It was 2nd February 1992, and the water in the Ganges chilled me to the marrow. I found that I was almost losing consciousness due to the extreme cold. I prayed fervently that I might survive till at least I could pronounce the Preshya Mantra thrice with my hands upraised standing waist deep in the water and thus die as a full fledged Sannyasi. Suddenly an electric-like burning force coursed through my entire body. With full consciousness I intoned the Preshya

Mantra. I felt intoxicated. The sense of intoxication remained with me fully for about three years after Sannyas. I came out of the water naked and prostrated before the Sannyas Guru while chanting a vedic hymn.

The Guru called me by the name "SHANTANANDA PURI" and then gave me the loin cloth, dhoti (all ochre coloured), danda (a bamboo stick of prescribed specifications) etc., each to be taken by chanting a Vedic Mantra.

I became a Dandi Sannyasin. Immediately I threw away the Danda (stick) in the Ganges with another mantra and thus became a Parmahansa formally.

(Fragrant Flowers)

The life of a monk is one of strict observance of austerities. In the case of Swamiji he was enjoined by his Guru during his meditation to be always on the move and not to remain for long in one place. A week prior to his *Sannyas*, instructions came from Gurudev in very clear terms. Vasishtha Guha and Mangalashram at Uttarkasi were two places, where Swamiji could have remained as long as he desired. But the directive was that he should not remain there taking "guaranteed meals." Instead he should be a *Parivrajaka*, a wandering monk, for at least seven years. A further condition was that in the first two years, he ought not to stay in any ashram for more

than four days at a time, the exception being Dakshineswar, Belur Mutt, Brindavan and Naimisaranya and the four months constituting the *chaturmasya* when the monks have to remain at one place. These were indeed daunting conditions imposed on one who had taken *Sannyas* in an advanced age of 64 years. His *Sannyas* Guru also tried to dissuade him that it would be a great physical strain on him. But Swamiji had resolved to obey His GURUDEV's command. Swami Sankarananda laughed it away saying- "In all your official life you have been touring extensively and it is this vasana which had advised you and not your Gurudev". Hearing about this, Shri K.V. Subramaniam, a highly talented person proficient in several Indian and foreign languages and a *sadhak* of a high order, who had chosen to be a brahmachari and who was staying in Mangal Ashram, offered to accompany Swamiji. But again, he got the command of Gurudev, "Aye, Parivrajak Yatra is a Tapsya (a discipline of austerity) and not a picnic. **For Tapsya one goes alone.**" (Fragrant Flowers). Swamiji, now set out alone. He was to be in future a Messenger of the Lord, meeting many people across the land and guiding them on the spiritual path. Initially, he had to undergo some privations but everywhere with the grace of the Divine Mother, the problems vanished.

Swamiji set off to Vasishtha Guha from Uttarkasi. He was penniless. His *Sannyas* Guru gave him Rs 50/ and a *sannyasini* at Uttarkasi who had studied

Chandogya Upanishad under Swamiji gave him another Rs 50/. This was just adequate for the busfare to reach Vasishtha Guha. From there, he set off to Dev Prayag. Here, Swamiji has recorded that he got his first lesson to accept the will of God without showing any preferences of like or dislike. Spurned by the priest at the Ram Mandir in Dev Prayag, a Naga Baba, suggested that he could get *bhiksha* from some nearby houses. But the unclean surroundings put him off. After a while he could get some clean food from an ex-principal of a college, a Brahmin. For showing his repugnance earlier, so Swamiji felt, he was deprived of food for almost two days after that. There were few other occasions, when his attempt to get *bhiksha* at some ashram or other was foiled but soon enough some relief would come. Recalling such incidents, Swamiji wrote, "I learnt that every morsel of food comes by God's Grace. My Gurudev, in how many diverse ways you taught me to grow as a monk and to develop deep faith in God." (Fragrant Flowers)

There was an interesting episode at Brindavan, where Swamij went during April 1992. When coming out of the ISKON temple library with a number of books for reading purpose, he was accosted by a young beggar with a rather attractive countenance. He bowed reverentially and saluting with his folded palm said, "All your life you have read a number of books. Leave off these books and do more of meditation." A further surprising fact was that he

spoke to Swamiji in Bengali. (Swamiji had learnt Bengali in order to savour the books about Thakur). After that day the beggar was not to be seen. Swamiji wondered whether he was Gurudev himself.

Gurudev had indicated that Dakshineswar was one of the few places where he could stay for more than four days at a stretch. Swamiji went to Dakshineswar, his heart overflowing with joy as he was to tread the ground where Thakur had walked. But he could get neither accommodation nor food there. As he was pondering what to do, he heard an inner voice directing him to the Yogada Ashram. The President of the Yogada Ashram was an American who strangely enough had the same name as Swamiji. After a lot of interrogation, he was allowed to remain there for 15 days. Later the President was to confide in him that they did not want to entertain an unknown *sannyasi* but some unknown force made them relent. Swamiji had a memorable stay at the Yogada Ashram. There used to be a twelve hour meditation session and cosmic exercises in which he participated. The entire atmosphere of the *Ashram* was charged with high spiritual vibrations. The President Swamiji was kind enough to request Swamiji to extend his stay by three more days in order to participate in the birthday celebration of Shri Yukteswar Maharaj, the Guru of Parmahansa Yogananda. On the day of his departure, the President presented him with a large packet of imported almonds (*badam*) and a copy of the

“Autobiography of a Yogi.” Swamiji was able to spend a good part of his time in the Kali temple and at Thakur’s room in Dakshineswar.

In July 1992, Swamiji went to Belur Mutt and requested for accommodation for a few days. He had no references to give. He was allotted an old room near the banks of the Ganga. He had at that time no inkling that it was a very special room as the room directly above housed the articles used by Swami Vivekananda. He was overjoyed when he came to know about it from some of the monks of Belur Mutt. The room occupied by Swamiji was usually never given to visiting *Sannyasis*. Swamiji profusely thanked Gurudev for bestowing this proud privilege on him.

From Belur Mutt, Swamiji set out to Kamarpukur, the birthplace of Thakur armed with a letter from Belur Mutt. At Kamarpukur, Swamiji was to get an insight into the indivisibility and oneness of Thakur and the Holy Mother. At that time although he had some esteem for the Holy Mother, it was not at par with the feelings that he had for Thakur. Swamiji was sitting in meditation before the statue of Thakur draped in an ochre robe. When he suddenly opened his eyes, he was astonished to find in it the statue of the Holy Mother covered in a white saree, and with her flowing hair falling on her shoulder. He could not believe his eyes and kept staring for several minutes at the statue. But he could see only the Holy Mother. He closed his eyes again and once in a while would

open his eyes only to find the statue of the Holy Mother. When he finally got up he saw the image of Thakur and Swamiji felt that he was given the message that Thakur and the Holy Mother are one and the same. He decided to leave for Jayrambati, the birth place of the Holy Mother, the very next day.

At Jayrambhati, Swamiji was to have a memorable experience. On the third day of his stay, early in the morning he prayed before the Mother's shrine, pleading with her to reveal herself and to prove that she is indeed the Divine Mother. As a proof, he said in his mind that if someone were to offer him a *pronami* (donation to a monk), even if it were to be a rupee or two, he would be satisfied. After praying thus when Swamiji came out of the shrine, he met a *brahmachari* who told him that his mother had seen Swamiji the previous day and wanted to give some offering. He would not take no for an answer. The old lady came, prostrated and offered Rs. 11/. But Swamiji inwardly addressed the Holy Mother again and told her that this old lady had decided to give the money yesterday, whereas his covenant with her was only today! He told her that if some eight or ten visitors were to give some offering, he would take it as a proof of the Mother's greatness. That was the last day of his stay at Jayrambati. That day after lunch, Swamiji was asked not to go back to his room but to be seated in one of the benches arranged in a row. Other monks were also seated there. There were some officers from the Defence

Factories at Ichapur, who had come with their families to conduct a *Bhandara* (feast). The visitors gave some *dakshina* to each one of the monks. Swamiji got about Rs. 160 from the visitors. Swamiji could not restrain himself and sobbed bitterly, filled with remorse, for having put the Divine Mother to test. Swamiji has recalled this incident:

“This amount was burning in my pocket as it had been forced out of the Holy Mother due to my pig-headedness. In the entire universe with millions of atheists among them, why should at all the Holy Mother bother or stoop to convince me or give proof of her identity with the Divine Mother in the very manner in which it was demanded by me. Rather, Holy Mother, I deserve to be punished for having had the insolence to doubt your greatness. Is it all because my GuruDev interceded on my behalf that you were prepared to satisfy me on my own conditions? Holy Mother, I am thy slave for ever. Let me never forget you in any birth.” (Fragrant Flowers).

For a few years after taking *Sannyas*, Swamiji wandered around various parts of India. He was moving from place to place without any prior planning. Once he was going to Sagar (in Madhya Pradesh) when he met two engineers from Guna who were working in a Fertilizer factory there. They requested him to come with them. Swamiji accordingly got down at Guna with them and after spending a couple of days with them proceeded to

Sagar. At Sagar he stayed with one Col. Rajendra Singh. Three days later Swamiji was ready to leave. The train was to depart at 6 p.m. But the lady of the house was doing pada puja etc., and it was past 6p.m when they left the house. There were several steps to negotiate to the ticket counter. But when they went to the counter, they got to know that the train was delayed and so Swamiji could not catch the train.

Having heard about Biligiri Ranganna Hills (B.R.Hills) in Karnataka, a vast forest of sandal etc, Swamiji decided to spend some time there. For a long time he had a desire to remain in a forest and live like the *rishis* of yore. This was in the year 1993. B.R. Hills is about 100 kms from Mysore. There is a famous Rangantha temple on a hill top. At that time the head of the Mysore Ramakrishna Mutt was Swami Sureshanandaji Maharaj. He gave permission to Swamiji to remain in his personal villa located inside this forest. This was a rare honour as such permission was seldom given and only occasionally some senior monks of the Ramakrishna Mission were allowed to stay. But Swamiji was readily granted permission, although he was a stranger. This is what Swamiji has said:

“Swamiji not only readily accorded permission to an utter stranger but also informed me that he will be equipping the villa with all provisions needed for four months including provision of a gas stove with a new gas cylinder. Even after all these years, I am amazed while pondering, as to how the Lord was

readily behind me showering His unending mercy and kindness, in fulfilling my desire for doing so me intense sadhana. The Swamiji also invited me to stay at his *ashram* in Mysore for 3-4 days en route to the forest. When I actually reached the villa after staying for 3 days in Mysore, the sheer beauty of the forest took my breath away. My only dilemma was whether it was right to violate the laws prescribed for a monk by cooking my own daily food, as dealing with fire is prohibited. Again the motiveless compassion of the Lord came to my rescue. Swami Swayambodhananda, a young monk who was earlier with the Bihar School of Yoga at Monghyr came there. I had not had the privilege of his acquaintance earlier. He volunteered to cook some *kitchadi* everyday, of potatoes and ghee and spices. No milk or vegetables (other than potato) was available. He used to come all the way from the Adivasis hostel which was 3 kms away, run by Dr. Sudarshan. We rarely used to talk and he would go away the moment lunch was over. There was a big tree of *tulsi* (basil) each of whose leaves were as big as the palm of my hand and several times more pungent than the normal *tulsi* normally seen in India. That Swamiji would prepare black tea with a small portion of these leaves and sugar. It tasted nothing less than the nectar of Gods. The dilemma of meals was solved. I could do excellent meditation for most of the night and day during my 3 months' stay.

I had brought with me a book called "For Seekers of God" by Swami Shivananda of the R.K.

Mission which was so full of bhakti and was a model for guiding as to how to pray from the core of the heart. I have read the book several times since then. I may add that while on the way to B.R. Hills, I went to Kancheepuram and had the special blessings of the pontiff H.H. Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, the world renowned Sankaracharya of Sankara Mutt, Kanchi. This was the last time I had his darshan as he attained Samadhi within 3 or 4 months. This was another reason why I was able to do excellent sadhana with all conceivable conveniences in a beautiful forest”.

An interesting incident took place when Swamiji went to Mangalore. He halted at the house of one Mrs. Sudha Rao on the recommendation given by someone. This was his first meeting with this lady. She was reading a number of books relating to Zen and casually started a conversation with Swamiji about *satori* (equivalent of *Samadhi* in Zen). Swamiji told her to chant the Rajarajeswari mantra given to her earlier, but with an addition of a letter. The lady was astonished. She told Swamiji that she had once seen a *Naadi* (astrological predictions in palmleaves) and was told that a Himalayan Monk would meet her and complete the mantra given to her on her 50th year which was then running. One syllable was missing in the mantra which she had got earlier.

As a part of his *Sadhana*, Swamiji has spent some time in the *moun mandirs* (houses of silence) of Gujarat from time to time. The setting up of cheap

moun mandirs was the contribution of an evolved saint in Gujarat, Pujya Mota, as he was known. Swamiji has given a detailed account of Pujya Mota's life in his book, *Fragrant Flowers*. It was from Dr. Desai, an octogenarian skin specialist who accidentally came to Guha, that Swamiji came to hear about Pujya Mota and the *moun mandirs*. The *moun mandirs* are self-contained rooms, with very little ventilation. The person entering the chamber is locked from inside and outside and a frugal meal is served twice a day through an opening, at a fixed time. The room is opened only after the period of silence is completed. Swamiji has remained for one month each in the *moun mandirs* at Nadiad and Surat in 1994. Later he was to spend five months at the Nadiad *moun mandir*. In Nadiad, while inside the *moun mandir*, Swamiji had an extraordinary experience which made him feel the presence of Pujya Mota. For some years, Swamiji had been having acute pain in his stomach. Although he tried various medicines, it hardly gave any relief and used to recur. While in the *moun mandir* at Nadiad, he had one such attack. But it was of great severity that it seemed as if he will not outlive the pain. He quickly wrote out some instructions for the manager of the *moun mandir* and was lying down. He suddenly felt a hand gently moving over his stomach and very soon he became alright. Swamiji was convinced that it was none other than Pujya Mota himself who came to his succor that day.

There were other *moun mandirs* in Gujarat where Swamiji has remained at different points of time. One was the *moun mandir* in Utkantesvar Mahadev near Kapadanj, about 15 kms from Ahmedabad where he remained for one month. This was probably sometime in 1993/94. Ambaaji, which is about 250 kms from Ahmedabad, is a *shakti peeth* where the heart of Sati Devi is believed to have fallen. Here the Haidikhani *moun mandir* is located. Haidikhani Baba is believed to be an incarnation of Mahavatar Baba or Babaji as he is better known. There are frequent references to Babaji in the “Autobiography of a Yogi” by Swami PARAMAHAMSA Yogananda. It is reported that Haidikhani Baba went to Brindavan and disappeared there. Swamiji remained at the Haidikhani *moun mandir* for two months from December 2003 to January 2004. In a rare coincidence when Swamiji went to Brindavan later, he came to know from a stranger that day was the anniversary of Haidikhani Baba’s disappearance and that there was an ashram at Brindavan where his disappearance took place. While at Ambabji the food served used to be laced with a generous dose of sugar, a typical Gujarati style of cooking. One day in a jocular fashion, Swamiji stood before a photo of Shirdi Sai Baba, probably left behind by a previous occupant, and requested him for some whole brinjal curry just the way his mother used to prepare. He felt that after all Sai Baba is famous for fulfilling the desires of his devotees! Sure enough that day the lunch brought contained the brinjal curry, just the

way Swamiji wanted and sans sugar! Thereafter, sugar was never added in any of the preparations containing salt. Swamiji has mentioned this incident in his book thus.

“Perhaps, it was my Divine Mother who could not withstand seeing the misery of this immature monk and so had to perform this miracle through Shirdi Baba. Has Mother’s compassion any limits? All my adorations at the feet of the Divine Mother (who is also known as Ambaji).” - (Musings of a Himalayan Monk).

Swamiji once had an occasion to go to the Sant Ram Mandir at Nadiad sometime in 1994. The *Mahant* at that time was Shri Narayan Dasji Maharaj, who is now no more. The *Mahants* of Sant Ram Ashram do not come out of the premises. This is a type of austerity to keep the world at arms length and only sincere devotees would come over there. When Swamiji went to the Sant Ram Ashram and enquired about getting accommodation, he was told that this was done by the *Mahant* himself. The *Mahantji* was sitting in an easychair with his legs extended and was surrounded by several devotees. Although Swamiji tried to go near, he could not catch his eye. Suddenly, one *brahmachari* came and told Swamiji that the *Mahant* has ordered that he should be given a room and so the *brahmachari* escorted him there. This was really surprising as Swamiji did not see the *Mahant* talking to this *brahmachari*. He was given a separate room although there was

dormitory accommodation occupied by *sannyasis*. Later in the afternoon another *brahmachari* asked him whether he would like to have a separate cottage for doing his *sadhana*. This was also at the instance of the *Mahant*. As Swamiji had planned to leave the next day he declined. He never got a chance to talk to the *Mahant* although he was sitting in the same hall where the *Mahant* came for *darshan*. When the time for departure came, Swamiji was further surprised to receive some fruits, two *dhotis*, and some money from the Ashram. Swamiji felt that it was due to the grace of Gurudev that he could meet such saints.

While locked inside the *moun mandir* at Nadiad in Gujarat for six months from JAN 1995, with just a month to go for his departure, he heard the voice of the Divine Mother directing him to go to Ramanasramam and do *sadhana* there for one year. Swamiji had been to Tiruvannamalai earlier, where Ramanasramam is situated. At that time he had stayed in another ashram. He felt that it will be difficult to get accommodation at Ramasramam for a non-donor monk like him, and that too for one year. He, therefore, found himself remonstrating with the Divine Mother. But he was told sternly to go, with the assurance that everything will be taken care of. Swamiji then wrote a letter to the President of Ramanasramam about the Divine command but requesting for accommodation for atleast six weeks by which time, he wrote, he would try to find

alternative accommodation. Swamiji's delight found no bounds when he received a reply signed by the President of Ramashramam that as he was coming at the express direction of the Divine Mother he could stay for the entire one year from NOVEMBER 1995. Since then Swamiji has been spending a few months and some times a full year at Ramashramam. Very often the *chaturmasya* was observed at Ramashramam. It was while at Ramashramam only that he got the call to observe silence for a whole year and he, therefore, remained there for that period. Ramashramam was to be not only the *sadhana sthal* for Swamiji but a large number of devotees and disciples were to receive his blessings there in various ways.

At Ramanasramam, 1996 was being celebrated as the centenary year of the advent of Bhagawan Ramana who first came to Tiruvanmalai on 1.9.1896 as a young boy. Ramanasramam was bringing out a souvenir to commemorate this occasion and Swamiji was asked to contribute an article. Swamiji was diffident as he felt that he did not have enough knowledge of Bhagawan's teachings to write about him. But as always the grace of the Lord shone on him. Swamiji has written lucidly about this incident:

“That day one Mr. K. Natesan, an old devotee of Bhagawan suggested that I should try to compose a ‘Suprabhatam’ poem on Ramana (a song sung early in the morning to awaken Bhagawan). He also

narrated briefly the entire life of Bhagawan with an emphasis on the important events. That night I sat down and the Suprabhatam delineating Bhagawan's life, his blessings on certain special devotees like Sri Kavyakanta Ganapathi Muni, Sri Murugannar and others, his teachings and the glory of the Ashram etc. flowed from my pen spontaneously in poetry. About 19 stanzas were over that night and the balance was completed next night. It was on the model of Venkatesa Suprabhatam being sung at Tirupati (Balaji Mandir). When I handed it over to the Management, they were all extremely pleased. This is the first original composition in Sanskrit that I had ever attempted and after writing it once, I never amended, corrected or rewrote a single line. The Ashram got the entire Suprabhatam sung by a lady devotee and brought out cassettes too. I am of the belief that the entire composition was written by Bhagawan Ramana alone, through my hand.”
(Fragrant Flowers)

Tiruvannamalai has become a spiritual hub with a large number of devotees from different parts of India and the world, flocking to this place in large numbers. Most of them are also devotees of Bhagawan Ramana. At Ramanasramam, Swamiji gave a lecture on Bhagawad Gita Saram, comprising the 42 slokas selected by Bhagawan Ramana which the latter considered as the essence of the 700 slokas of the Bhagawad Gita. Besides, he gave a full fledged lecture on the Ashtavakra Gita for nearly 8 months.

Gurustuthi, Hastamalaikiyam, Devi Kalotaram were subjects on which he gave discourses. His discourses were highly popular. We have mentioned in an earlier chapter that Swamiji had rendered a Bhagawat Saptaha at Tiruvannamali in the Athithi Ashram. His recitation and intonation of Sanskrit slokas has a magical quality which is hard to describe. His voice resonates like the chiming of temple bells and one is transported to an entirely different plane. When Swamiji would give his discourse, it would be a spiritually elevating experience, be it on bhakti or on the formless *Brahman*. Fortunate indeed are those who have heard him speak. His room in Ramanasramam is always overflowing with visitors who ply him with questions. Swamiji would reply to every query tirelessly regardless of his health concerns.

Swamiji has been to the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry many times. The first time Swamiji came there as a monk was sometime in 1996. He had only Rs. 10 with him. Meals ticket for the whole day would cost Rs. 32. He came to know that a token can be obtained the next day for entering the room where Sri Aurobindo lived. Swamiji had no place to stay for the night. He met a journalist who took him to a *mutt* nearby. It was in a dilapidated condition even the floor was broken. The person-in-charge there could offer nothing to eat. He himself was eating some non-vegetarian food. There was no mat to spread on the floor. Swamiji spread his upper garment on the floor

and laid himself down. Next morning, he was going towards the Aurobindo Ashram, near it is the Mannakula Vinayagar temple. There was a small restaurant run by a brahmin. The Brahmin owner beckoned to Swamiji and invited him for breakfast. Swamiji declined saying he had no money. The Brahmin said' "I never asked for money. Just come and have your breakfast." Swamiji had been practically starving since the previous day. Now he had a hearty south Indian breakfast with coffee! Some years later, Swamiji was to come into contact with the Trustee of the Matru Mandir, Shri Madan Lal Himmatsingka, who had a tremendous regard and respect for Swamiji and would spread the red carpet for him. Sometime in November 2003, when Swamiji was observing silence for one year at Ramanasramam, he heard a melodious feminine voice. "A number of devotees including people from abroad will be coming tomorrow to have my darshan on Samadhi day. Being so near (2 ½ hours' journey by car) won't you come and see me?" Swamiji quickly realized that it was the call of the Mother of Pondicherry. He was surprised to be selected for this special favour although he felt he never had any connection with the Mother in her life time. On enquiry, Swamiji came to know that no accommodation was available at Pondicherry either inside the Ashram or outside, in any hotels. Nonetheless, heeding to Mother's call, he went to Pondichery along with Shri Venkatraman, a friend of Swamiji who lives in Tiruvananmalai. A friend of a

friend of the Swamiji came to the Bus stand to receive him. He had been thrice to the International Guest House and covered all hotels but no rooms were available. Swamiji went to the International Guest House and as he was in *silence* requested for accommodation in writing emphasizing that he had a call from the Mother. The manager informed that just five minutes back one room was suddenly vacated and so Swamiji could get that room. Even though the booths for issue of tokens for darshan were to open at 7 am only, next morning when Swamiji went to Aurobindo Ashram at one of the entrance gates a special queue of employees of the Ashram was formed. Swamiji and his friend joined the queue and within 15 minutes found themselves in the Mother's room opened only on one day each year. The attendant allowed Swamiji to remain inside the room for sometime and Swamiji could meditate inside Mother's chamber a rare privilege indeed. Swamiji could only thank the Mother for her infinite compassion.

Swamiji has written several books. The first book was on "Srimad Bhagavatam: Its message for the Modern Man." This book was not written with the intention of publishing it. Yielding to the request of some devotees and disciples, to put in writing the essence of his *Saptaha* lectures, Swamiji wrote it down for a limited private circulation. He sent the manuscript to his friend, Late Shri Padmanabha Aiyer, at Madras, to get some computer copies

made. While Shri Padmanabha Aiyer was perusing these papers, Shri D.N. Anand of Bangalore, who had met Swamiji earlier at Ananda Ashram in Kanhangad, happened to come there. When he took a look at the manuscript, he was greatly impressed. He took the papers with him to Bangalore where he showed it to one Shri Sakala Narasimhalu Chetty, who was a reputed jeweller and a scholar, besides an active organizer of spiritual events. The jeweller at a glance could fathom that the manuscript was too precious a gem and should not be hidden away. He gave the first cheque to cover its printing expenses. An excellent printer, Omkar Offset Printers, run by Shri Venkatesh Babu was located, who undertook the printing on 'no profit/no loss basis. Not only that, the printers undertook to send by post, copies of the book to devotees and disciples all over the country. All the books are distributed free of cost. Since then a large number of books have been brought out written by Swamiji, from time to time. Voluntary contributions for publication of Swamiji's books come unsolicited from many strangers. Some of the publications include, "Sadhanas in Bhagavad Gita", "The Quantum leap into the Absolute", "Sadhanas according to Yoga Vasishtha", "Guidelines to Who Am I", "Adhyatma Ramayana", "Jivanmukti", "Sri Lalita Sahasranama Stotram- An Insight", etc. Besides, "Fragrant Flowers (Soul-elevating reminiscences of a Himalayan Monk)" and "Musings of a Himalayan Monk" are twin compositions containing nuggets from Swamiji's life, which have to be read by every

spiritual aspirant. Two more books, which are a collection of stories re-told by Swamiji in his inimitable style are “Stories for Meditation” and “Stories for Inspiration”, which have an eternal appeal, to both the young and the old. In fact, the book, “Stories for Meditation” has been prescribed as a text book in the prestigious Delhi Public School (DPS) at Vasant Vihar, New Delhi. Three stories from this collection have been selected for making a short film at the Sathya Sai Baba Trust, Puttapurthi, and video copies are to be made for wider circulation. A condensed edition of some of the books like the “Quantum Leap into the Absolute” and “Stories for Meditation” were brought out by Tattvaloka, a spiritual magazine published from Chennai under the patronage of the Sringeri Peetha.

Most of us are battling with various types of problems in our daily lives. It may concern one’s health, family especially children, debts, success in examinations/interviews, delays in fulfillment of desires, fears of various sorts, and in extreme cases even imprisonment. The list of woes is endless. Swamiji’s book, “Infallible Vedic Remedies” is a great boon to suffering humanity. Two editions of this book have been brought out. A condensed version has been brought out by Tattvaloka as well. Innumerable are the instances where the *mantras* contained in this wonderful book have brought relief to hundreds of people. The *Vana Durga Mantra*, which Swamiji had learnt from his father is one of the most potent

mantras as is the *Kshipra Prasad Ganapthi Mantra* (found in the second edition). There was a family known to Swamiji in Chennai. The head of this family met with a serious accident and was bed ridden. He had two young daughters. One of them was being perpetually harassed by a young rowdie, a total stranger, whenever she stepped out of the house. The entire family rushed to Swamiji at Ramanasramam and were chanting the mantra known as Digbandhana Mahamantra on the advice of Swamiji during all the 5 days of stay there. When they returned to Chennai, to their wonder, the man simply vanished and was not to be seen again. A servant maid was troubled with a dream every night. In her dream she was being pushed into a large pit, full of snakes. As she was not able to pronounce the mantra properly, her son was asked to chant it on her behalf. Very soon, that dream no longer troubled her. Near Kurukshetra, a person who was an authorized agent for foreign exchange was imprisoned, under the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA). He was advised to chant the mantra as indicated by Swamiji in his book (*Sri Ganesa Kavacham*). The man was freed from this danger.

A family at Chennai, was known to Swamiji from his pre-monk days. The daughter was living in France after her marriage. The mother was concerned that her daughter had no issues. Swamiji gave the Santana Gopala Mantra to the mother about 78 years old as a carrier with instructions to

give the Mantra to her daughter when the mother would be visiting France next month. After one year the daughter had a child. In another case, the marriage of a girl, whose father is a disciple of Swamiji was fixed. Unfortunately, after the engagement ceremony and after the wedding cards were printed and distributed, the marriage was called off by the other party. This occasioned no small distress, especially as the girl was from a traditional family and getting another alliance would be very difficult. Swamiji advised the girl to chant the *Kshipra Prasad Ganapathi Mantra*. Within three months the girl got married. The *Dhavantri Mantra*, is yet another powerful mantra which has given relief to many ill and chronically ill persons. Dr. Tribhuvan Sharma, a doctor at Haridwar, who is also a disciple of Swamiji, has tried this *mantra* successfully on nearly 50 patients. In one case a patient who was almost declared dead, revived after three hours. The *Hayagriva mantra* meant for success in written examinations and interviews have benefitted quite a few.

All the books of Swamiji have been translated from English into Kannada and some in Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and French. The Bhagavatam is available in Tamil also. There are translations of some books like the *Ashtavakra Gita* in French as well. Swamiji does not claim any copyright for what he has written and everybody is free to utilize his writings. Recently, Shri Sanjay Singh, of Haridwar, has

put several of Swamiji's books on the website, www.scribd.com/group/79503-swamishantanandapuri.

At the time of the release of the book on "Ashtavakara Gita", after placing a set of the book before Bhagawan's shrine at Ramasramam, Swamiji along with some disciples and devotees went to the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. While returning he also went to the famous temple of Lord Ganesa known as the Mannakula Vinayagar temple near the Ashram. While emerging from the shrine, a disciple took a photo of Swamiji. When the picture was developed it was seen that there was a huge aura behind Swamiji on the left-side. In the photograph the aura is visible only as a semi-circle. Swamiji's eyes are half-closed as if in a trance, and he is holding a lotus in his right hand. If one looks carefully inside the huge aura, at the base, a *shivalinga* would be visible. This remarkable picture was enlarged and framed and given to a number of persons by an ardent devotee, Shri.M.L.Kohli of Faridabad. Shortly afterwards, at the time of Guru Purnima, a snapshot of Swamiji was taken along with some of his disciples and devotees at Tiruvannamalai which included Swamiji's *sannyasi* disciple, who lives in Kanyakumari, the Tripathi brothers of Kanpur and Shri Natarajan of Tiruvannamalai. There is also a mother and daughter duo, who were strangers and had just come to have the *darshan* of Swamiji. When this photo was developed, it was seen that there was a huge white

arc of light which covered almost everyone in the photograph. This snap was taken just outside Swamiji's room in Ramanasramam. Swamiji was kneeling on the ground and he is not visible as the white light had completely covered him. After sometime, Swamiji went to Mayawati in U.P., where the Advaita Ashram of the Ramakrishna Mission is located. This *Ashram* owes its existence to Swami Vivekananda. The *Ashram* nestles amidst the range of snowy Himalayan mountains, surrounded by tall pine trees. One evening, while going for a stroll near the Ashram, Swamiji reached the place where one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Turiyananda did penance. It was twilight by the time Swamiji decided to return to the *Ashram*. A disciple who was with him took a photograph of Swamiji at that spot. It was a veritable hat trick! Once again, this photograph displayed in the background, a vivid, multi-coloured ray like a rainbow, emanating from the sky and touching the ground. This was unlike any rainbow which is normally seen only in the sky. Also, there were no rains at Mayawati, which is a precursor for the occurrence of a rainbow. Later, Swamiji was to go to Ladhwa, a town in Haryana, where he stayed in a *yogashram*. A photograph of Swamiji was taken in the garden of the *yogashram*. In this photograph a circular aura of white light, very much like the one seen in the photograph taken at Pondicherry, is seen above Swamiji. All these events took place in 2001.

When Swamiji was shown these photographs, he brushed them aside as of no particular consequence.

He said that they could be some tricky reflections of light. However, the repeated occurrences of such aura is not without significance. We have seen pictures of saints and yogis depicted with a halo. The photographs of Swamiji show that such representations with a halo is not an artist's imagination. Very evolved souls who have done great austerities shine because of their inner divinity, which at some stage gets manifested outwardly as a halo.

The life of a wandering Monk is not a bed of roses. No doubt a large number of devotees benefited but it took a toll of Swamiji's health. Swamiji used to suffer from acute pain in his stomach. He was moving around with this problem, talking to innumerable visitors who thronged to see him at all times of day and night, and even delivering talks. He had consulted many qualified doctors with foreign degree (like FRCS) but somehow the pain did not subside. At one stage, it was diagnosed that he had stones in the gall bladder. He decided to undergo a surgery at Delhi. At that time, an interesting episode took place. Swamiji was staying at the house of Shri S.S.Srivastava in Moti Bagh in New Delhi. A senior surgeon at Safdarjung Hospital, Dr. N.D. Deshpande came to see Swamiji. He had not met Swamiji before. He had read Swamiji's book, "Srimad Bhagavatam- Message for Modern Man" and wanted to meet the author. He felt he had never read a book like that. He somehow managed to

locate Swamiji and had come to have his *darshan*. On hearing about Swamiji's problem, he immediately offered to get the surgery done at Safdarjung Hospital under the latest laproscopic technique. The surgery was done by a team headed by Dr. Arya who was on the panel of doctors for the Top V.I.Ps. Dr. Arya and his team showed great devotion and care. When the time came for removing the sutures, Dr. Arya said that he would do so only if Swamiji came to his house and spent a night there. And this was from a person who did not particularly care for the likes of *Sannyasis*-as per reports. For Post-surgery when Swamiji had to remain in the hospital, Dr. Deshpande made special arrangements for a room, as the Safdarjung Hospital was not equipped in this regard. As Swamiji had to be in bed for 3 or 4 days, all his personal needs were attended to by Shri S. S. Srivastav. Swamiji said that even a son would not have taken such care of his father. Very soon, Swamiji was to have a surgery done for glaucoma. Dr. Saha, who did the surgery, was in private practice, but waived a substantial portion of the charges. This time the family of Dr. Bhattacharya at Delhi, housed Swamiji and looked after his needs. Some years later, Swamiji had to get a cataract operation done. This time the devotees at Lucknow took care of him. At Lucknow Swamiji would stay with Shri D.P.Singh, who took early retirement as a banker, to concentrate on his *sadhana*.

Despite the removal of the gall bladder, Swamiji's pain did not subside. This was to be later diagnosed as a double hernia with some intestinal problem. Swamiji has given a detailed account of this in the introduction to his book "Infallible Vedic remedies". The surgery which was long overdue was performed by Dr. Rangabhashyam, a world renowned surgeon at Chennai. He not only refused to accept any fee, but had also paid for the mandatory tests to be undergone prior to surgery.

In Swamiji's own words :-

"Again and again God has given me ample proof of His existence. Even if I were to use my entire body as Lord's doormat in every life of mine I could never be free from the debt of gratitude I owe to such a loving God." (Musings)

Swamiji had to be hospitalized for 17 days in the clinic and just when he was coming in a taxi for the operation from Tiruvannamalai on 28.12.04 Swami Sadashivananda, a hefty Swamiji (a monk since 1974) of American origin and of scarce acquaintance volunteered to accompany him and served him in innumerable ways in the Hospital. It was a great devotee of Bhagavan Ramana - Mrs Malu who voluntarily fixed up the appointment with the surgeon who and his wife were intimately close to her. It was her introduction which made the surgeon treat Swamiji free, which otherwise would have cost about Rs.3,00,000. "How can such favours after

favours, a series of them could be conferred by even strangers on their Swamiji, it is all arranged by the Loving Lord? Can one ever repay this debt of boundless love?

This is the Grace in abundance which flows from the Lord even when unsought. God did not simply fulfil my emergency needs but kept me in a royal luxury. A devotee of the Lord introducing me to a reputed Surgeon with free treatments, another voluntarily coming to serve me in my post-surgery days especially when I was unable to take care of my evacuation of urine with increased frequency at night, another set of devotees voluntarily serving us with a royal food for 17 days, a surgeon waiving his fees amounting to Rs.3,00,000/- these events are amazing and strengthen one's faith in and love for God. Lord, I do not want liberation but allow me to love you in all future births intensely.

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Chapter Six

The Teachings

The most important part of a biography of a spiritual master should be the teachings he has imparted to the people who came to him. He is actually the Recruiting Officer for the forces of the Supreme Lord.

Swamiji's main emphasis in all his talks has been "Satata Smaranam" (constant remembrance of the lord). One of the easiest ways for constantly remembering God is to take the Lord's name like Hari, Govinda, Mahadev, Madhava, Rajeshwari etc... Even the recent saints like Vimala Thakar who is an ardent disciple of J. Krishna Murthy who is profusely quoted in all her books, used to take Lord's name frequently and loudly during her last days. Swamiji, even though uncompromisingly established in Adwaita had all the reverence for all the Lord's forms and various deities. It is quite becoming as he hails from the lineage of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa who, though steeped in Adwaita, used to take Divine Mother's names loudly every day. Swamiji used to say that this remembrance can be done in many ways. One may chant the japa or read any scriptures, purnanas or

biographies of saints and bhaktas. Whenever one gets some leisure, one may take the Lord's names, visualizing Him in the spiritual heart and keep the attention fixed on Him. Those who are accustomed to Formless meditation may keep their attention fixed on the Atman or Self. What is this Atman or Self? All the functions like seeing, hearing, talking etc are not done by the senses like eyes, ears, mouth etc. which form the main part of our body. If they were capable of these activities why should they cease to function when a man falls dead? It is actually a living and loving energy which sees through the eyes, hears through the ears, and walks through the legs etc... So when we say "I" we mean this energy which is not separate for each body. This energy comes from the Totality i.e., the Universal being into all the bodies of men like the same electricity that goes into all the bulbs (bodies). So we can fix our attention on this Atman as many times as possible in the midst of all our activities. Another most effective method of remembrance is to chant the guru mantras given at the time of initiation, if any or to chant any of the Lord's names which are to our liking. As per the Patanjali's Yogasutra the japa or repetition of 'OM' alone can lead one to Samadhi state or Superconscious state - and finally to liberation (moksha)

These teachings of Swamiji are never dry and they are always interspersed with stories or anecdotes of wit and humour, which make them spicy.

A number of educated young men including doctors and chartered accountants, visit Swamiji from far away outstations frequently as they are attracted by his spiritual talks.

Swamiji says “what is the use of talking philosophy to old men beset with physical ailments, financial problems etc... who are left with no energy for doing any sadhana and some of whom come to Swamiji in order to pass time. It is the young men who have to be encouraged and nurtured carefully. Ramakrishna Paramahansa says “The lions should be caught young and trained”

Even in ordinary conversation, the Swamiji has a trick of introducing a spiritual flavor. For instance, he will ask people “what is Hari Om?” He would himself reply ‘HURRY HOME’ where ‘H’ is lightly pronounced and Home is Lord’s residence. What are we doing here? Let us do Sadhana and make haste to go to our real home. When commerce students came to him, he used to ask in an innocent manner “what is taught in your B.Com?”. The reply from the students would usually be “preparation of balance sheets, profit and loss A/c etc...” Swamiji used to quip “No, it teaches you ‘Be Calm’ “.

When people used to explain “Swamiji, you have a lot of followers”, then Swamiji used to retort

‘The one who has a follower would only fall lower’

When people used to approach for their various day to day problems like non-marriage of girls, real afflictions, childlessness and ailments, Swamiji used to tell them some mantras, with sympathy and compassion writ large on his face. He used to say “I dislike to be reduced to the level of a necromancer or a thaumaturgist. But when once their problems are solved by means of these mantras, a day may come when they begin to love God whose mantras benefitted them”.

When people were worried about the supremacy of their vasanas, Swamiji would advise them “why are you bothered about vasanas (latent tendencies of past actions)? If you go on trying to leave off even one vasana like the smoking habit or drinking alcoholic drinks or drugs, several births would not be enough to eliminate them all. Try with all your might and intense love to grasp and hug the feet of the Lord, despite all your defects and imperfections. Then all the vasanas will drop away by themselves as and when the sadhana becomes intense.

“If your child has taken away the teddy bear of some other child and the latter begins to wail loudly, snatching away the teddy bear leaving this child to weep and wail cannot be a solution to the problem. You should bring the child Robot which has been brought by the child’s uncle from USA and

show it. Fascinated by the child Robot walking towards him with jingling bells and saying 'Good Morning' in a sweet voice the child would throw the teddy bear and run to grasp and play with the Robot. Do not bother about eliminating or renouncing the vasanas but grasp the Lord's feet first.

“Secondarily, there is no use in bothering about the elimination of the past vasanas, while continuing with the input of fresh vasanas everyday like seeing T.V. serials, reading news papers and going to pubs for a drink. One should first try to stop the input while simultaneously tackling the past accumulation”.

One of Swamiji's favourite classical texts from which he normally quotes profusely is Ashtavakra Samhita. He calls those verses as Instant Moksha Capsules. For instance, “If only one has a deep conviction that I am not this body bound by maya but I am free from all bondages he really becomes liberated”. But this conviction should not be intellectual one but should come from the core of his heart where every cell in his body has voted for this belief. This is really using the mind's power which is amazingly fantastic (ya matih sa gatih – as you think so you become)

The crux of Ashtavakra's message as propounded by Swamiji is given below:

Let go of action and inaction

Let go sex and abstinence

Let go being and non-being

Let go mukti and bondage

Let go everything, nothing

Let you be as you ever are

Thus spake the sage Ashtavakra.

* * *

Chapter Seven

Swamiji - the Kalpataru

Swamiji's visits to various parts of the country brought him into contact with a large number of devotees, many of whom in turn became his disciples as well. Every one of them has received his blessings in abundance. They would turn to him for his guidance and blessings at every stage of their lives. Like the Divine Mother whom Swamiji adores and worships, the devotees and disciples regard Swamiji as their own *devata* and look upon him for his guidance and benediction. Swamiji is verily the Messenger of the Lord, who intercedes on behalf of his numerous devotees and disciples to obliterate their miseries. Irrespective of their station in life, Swamiji, showers his grace on all those who approach him. *Satsang* with Swamiji is an unforgettable experience. His repertoire of anecdotes is unlimited and his wit loaded with wisdom is both charming and original. In his presence all problems melt away and happiness pervades all over. In the Ramakrishna Mission, the first day of January is celebrated as the kalpataru day. We have heard of the Kalpataru, which is the wish-yielding tree. When Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa was seriously ill before his *mahasamadhi*, he suddenly got up one day and ran

into the garden. He told all those present to ask for a boon. It was the first of January and is celebrated as the Kalpataru day. Our Swamiji is an eternal Kalpataru fulfilling the desires of all his devotees.

One of the devotees to get *mantra diksha* from Swamiji even during his pre-monkhood days was Shri. R.C. Mishra, a lecturer in the Government inter-college in Uttarkhand. He and his family are closely connected to the Guha. Once Mishraji was standing near a mango tree in Vasishtha Guha, talking to Swamiji. Suddenly, Swamiji pushed him aside forcibly saying “Move, Move”. Just then a heavy branch of the tree fell with a loud thud at the very spot where Mishraji was standing. On Swamiji’s advice, Mishraji started reading the Lalitha Sahasranama daily. Swamiji would say that the Divine Mother would take care of all our temporal and spiritual needs. Mishraji has been able to get four of his daughters married off with ease which was remarkable considering the fact that Indian weddings entail considerable expenditure.

Swamiji would advise everyone to write *Ram Nam* everyday at least 108 times. This was an insurance against any disaster. Swamiji has seen in his own life how powerful this mantra is, which was suggested to him by none other than Gurudev himself after his *Samadhi*

There was a lady disciple, Shyamalaji, at Tiruvannamalai who was a disciple of Swamiji and highly devoted to him. The lady was detected as

having brain tumour sometime in 2007. The cancer was in an advanced stage and it was also in its severest form. She had to undergo surgery at Chennai. She had such tremendous faith in Swamiji that she bore it cheerfully. She said that in the operation theatre she had a vision of Swamiji standing besides her and blessing her. She passed away peacefully about a year later although she was not expected to survive beyond a month or two.

When Swamiji remained in silence for one year at Ramanasramam, one lady Mrs. Rohini, whose husband was working in a Gulf country, came to see Swamiji, along with her 10 year old daughter, Reshma. She had read Swamiji's book, "Fragrant Flowers" and had inwardly accepted him as her Guru. She now wanted *mantra diksha* from him. Swamiji initially declined as he was on *moun(silence)* and he had stopped giving initiation. But as she was persistent in her request, he had to agree finally. The day Swamiji was to give *mantra diksha*, the daughter also joined her and insisted that she too should be given *mantra diksha*. Swamiji was pleasantly surprised and obliged her. Thereafter, the mother and daughter were returning home to Kerala. They were not able to go to the Gulf country due to problem in getting visa. But very soon after getting *diksha* from Swamiji, the husband got a job in Dubai and was able to take the family.

A memorable incident took place while returning to Kerala. The mother and daughter were

in a bus when she was pondering whether it was indeed true that the Guru is always by the side of a sincere disciple. Just then, the driver raised an alarm announcing an impending accident. The driver had lost control and the bus was hurtling fast and a collision was imminent. In panic Mrs. Rohini called out loudly, "Gurudev". Miraculously, the driver regained control and a major accident was averted. She was to later say that she saw her Guru standing near the driver and smiling. On checking, the driver could discern no fault in the braking system.

The son of a devotee of Swamiji was passing through trying times. The various business ventures he had tried his hand failed and his financial position had deteriorated considerably. At that time Swamiji had visited their house. Swamiji was not aware of these developments. He happened to give a hundred rupee note given by someone who had come to see him, to the son. (This is the usual practice of Swamiji. Whatever offering is received is immediately distributed amongst those present). Swamiji had signed the hundred rupee note before giving it. In a dramatic turn of events, the son got an offer from a builder. The builder had some flats which he wanted to sell. He made an offer denoting a certain sum. If the flats could be sold above that price, the difference could be retained by the mediator. The son was able to sell all the flats and got a handsome profit. Thereafter there were other ventures all of which were profitable. With Swamiji's blessings, it never rains but pours!

A similar incident took place while Swamiji was in Haridwar. A man who was once very rich but had lost all his possessions, used to come and meet Swamiji often. He would talk only on spiritual subjects and had never even mentioned his financial difficulties. The frequent meetings with Swamiji had apparently removed all his bad karmas. In an unexpected development he regained all his lost possessions.

A couple in Lucknow were having no children. Even though they got some medical treatment, the children were either still-born or died soon after birth. The specialists saw little hope of their having a child again. They came to Swamiji to get a *mantra* so that they may have a child. They were given the *Santana Gopala Mantra*, which they said everyday, with devotion and fervor, although they were not Hindus. Within a year the couple had a child. The grateful couple came to Vasishtha Guha along with the child when Swamiji was there and took his blessings.

A lady living in Tiruvannamalai wanted *mantra diksha* from Swamiji. With her proximity to Arunachala (Lord Shiva) for several years Swamiji presumed that she must be a devotee of Lord Shiva. But when he went to her house, he heard a command to give her *Krishna Mantra*. Swamiji was having some misgivings whether he had acted correctly. But after the *diksha*, the lady informed him that ever since she had been to Pandarpur, which was a few months ago, her mind was occupied with Lord Krishna and that she was praying to get Krishna *mantra*.

Late Shri Padmanabha Aiyer was a close and a dear friend of Swamiji. Swamiji used to stay in his house whenever he was in Chennai. Their friendship pre-dated Swamiji's *sannyas*. It was Shri Padmanabha Aiyer who had translated Gurudev's Autobiography into English. He also used to do the proof reading of all Swamiji's books. He was doing this despite his very poor eyesight. He was a good scholar in Sanskrit and proficient in the homeopath system of medicine as well. After retirement as a Senior Executive in the Minerals and Metals Corporation (MMTC), he was living in Chennai with his bachelor brother Shri Mani. Shri Padmanabha Aiyer's health had been deteriorating slowly. Once, sometime in 2003, when Swamiji was staying in his house, Shri Mani woke up Swamiji past midnight saying that he was afraid that his brother had passed away. There was no pulse and the breathing had stopped. Swamiji took Shri Padmanabha Aiyer's hand and called out to him, "Padmanabha Aiyer ! You are only sleeping. Get up." After a while Shri Padmanabha Aiyer slowly opened his eyes. His brother Shri Mani claims that it was a clear case of bringing a dead man back alive. This was repeated a second time also a week later and Swamiji similarly revived him. But at that time he told his brother, Shri Mani, that there will be no third occasion of revival. This incident is reminiscent of the reviving of Lazrus by Jesus Christ.

Shri Amarjeet Singh, currently, Chief GM of SEBI at New Delhi, is a devoted disciple of Swamiji. In the

year 2000 he went to USA for higher studies. When he went to take Swamiji's blessings, before leaving India he was advised to do a Mrityunjaya *havan* at Vasishtha Guha before going. Swamiji himself did not know what prompted him to say this. This *havan* is done to protect / prolong one's life. This advice was to prove to be prophetic. At the time of September 11 attack of the World Trade Centre's twin towers at USA in 2001, Shri Amarjeet Singh (A) was very much in an office below the tower. He was unhurt though there was death and devastation all around him. Later, in 2004 he was being transferred to Bombay on promotion. This incident has been mentioned by Swamiji in the Musings:

“As his second child was just born, he managed to postpone his trip to Bombay till about the end of September '94 or so. Later on, he again applied for a further postponement upto 1st December '04. He followed up his application by flying to Bombay to meet personally his boss who bluntly refused to accede to his request which was in the latter's opinion thoroughly unreasonable. Mr. A was disappointed and lamented to me over the phone. I only told him, “Leave it to the Lord who has so long been favourable to you. You have not quarreled with Him since.” A week later, as his boss perhaps relented on second thought, 'A' got a letter sanctioning his.

After joining at Bombay, Mr. A continued to be unhappy with the unfavourable environment at Bombay but early in April '06 began to think of shifting

his family from Delhi to Bombay. I was then at Vasishtha Guha in the Himalayas and 'A' was often in contact with me on phone and used to unburden himself. My only reply to all such people was "Leave it all to GOD who will certainly do what is good for us." By about 2nd May'05, Mr. A rang me up and informed me with jubilation that his boss had posted him back to Delhi with immediate effect in an equivalent newly created post. Such series of favourable events to the same man can never be attributed to chance. Surely they were all due to the compassion of the Supreme Lord, (at least in my opinion) and the deep faith, sincerity and devotion of the devotee."

Way back in 1995 when Swamiji was at Ramanasramam, a devotee of Bhagawan Ramana along with his sister and two of her children, met Swamiji. This lady's husband had deserted her about two years back and his whereabouts were not known. The family wanted him back and enquired as to what *japa*, prayers etc., they should do to fulfill this desire. Swamiji gave her some prayers and told the aggrieved family that he will come back in December 1997. The man actually turned up as predicted.

There are innumerable such instances of the grace of Swamiji permeating through the lives of his devotees and disciples. Only a few illustrative examples have been given. All glory to the Guru!

* * *

Epilogue

Swamiji has been approximately dividing his time between the north and south of India. Invariably, during Gurudev's birthdays which would fall anytime from mid November or mid December, according to the Indian calendar, Swamiji would be at Vasishtha Guha in the Himalayas. Lucknow has been an important centre of the devotees of Vasishtha Guha from Gurudev's time. There are a number of people at Lucknow at whose insistence, Swamiji travels to Lucknow also. From Lucknow, Swamiji has often been to Ghazipur, the place where Swami Nirvedanandaji, a senior Gurubhai, spent his last days. At Ghazipur, Swamiji would stay at the Manav Sewa Sangh, which is managed by Dr.K.N.Singh. The headquarters of the Manav Sewa Sangh is at Brindavan. Manav Sewa Sangh is closely associated with Swami Sarananandaji Maharaj, a highly evolved saint who was blind.. Swamiji has remained at the Manav Sewa Sangh under the loving care of Dr. K.N. Singh on some occasions. Swamiji would normally return to Guha in April each year as Swami Chaitanyanandaji has to go to Lucknow for some administrative work connected with the

ashram. By the end of April or early May Swamiji would leave for Tiruvannamalai.

In December 2008, after the celebration of Gurudev's birthday, Swamiji had gone to Lucknow and was returning to Vasishtha Guha. He would normally halt at Haridwar, en route to the Guha. In March 2009, Swamiji was halting at the Aurobindo Yogashram at Haridwar, a private Trust. Swamiji had an open invitation to stay there whenever and for whatever length of time he wanted. During the stay at the Aurobindo Yogashram on this occasion, Swamiji had agreed to take classes on 'Viveka Choodamani' for some lady disciples. One of them desired to see the meditation hall in the Centre. Swamiji and the disciples bent down to prostrate before the picture of the Mother. When Swamiji got up and turned to go, he tripped on a disciple who was also prostrating close by. This was indeed a very sad moment as it resulted in a fracture of his left hip joint, and he was bed ridden for three months. Even in this moment of adversity, Swamiji only saw the grace of the Lord. He would say that had it happened elsewhere he would not have got the care and attention he got here. Dr. Tribhuvan Sharma, his doctor disciple, had just returned to Haridwar and was very near the Aurobindo Yogashram, when he was summoned. Swamiji was admitted in a local hospital and his condition was critical for a few days. A number of friends and disciples including ladies remained with Swamiji at

the hospital, taking turns. Dr. Sharma spared no efforts to improve Swamiji's condition. His service and devotion is peerless. For the next three months he was constantly in attendance.

After a couple of days Mr. Santosh, a trustee of Aurobindo Ashram persuaded Swamiji that the hospital was not conducive for Swamiji's recovery and that Swamiji should be moved to the Ashram itself so that he could be looked after with due care. Dr. Sharma arranged for a suitable bed and appointed an attendant also. Shri Santosh and other trustees ensured that Swamiji was made as comfortable as possible. They ensured that nourishing vegetable soups and fresh fruit juices were supplied to him twice a day. Not only that, visitors who came to see Swamiji were also entertained and were provided with meals. Swamiji developed some bed sores lying on the hospital bed. Dr. Sharma would come everyday and spend nearly three hours cleaning and dressing the sores for nearly two months. He would even give Swamiji his bath. The memorable service done by Dr. Tribhuvan Sharma cannot be lauded enough. If Swamiji was in a position to move out of Haridwar after four months, it was due to the constant and loving care of this wonderful doctor and an orthopaedic physician. He was not only a doctor, but more like a son. Swamiji's birthday on 6th May 2009 was celebrated at Aurobindo Ashram at the initiative of his disciple Mr. P. Krishnamurthy.

Swamiji was barely able to sit up, but a number of devotees and disciples came and took his blessings. He engaged them all for the major part of the day in chanting of stotras (prayers) and reading of scriptures like Ramayana.

With the approval of the doctors, Swamiji decided to leave for Tiruvannamalai by the end of June 2009. He wanted to be there during the *chaturmasya* period. He was able to move only with the aid of a stick and the pain had not fully abated. Nobody could even imagine at that time what lay in store for Swamiji. Swamiji reached Ramanasramam by end of June 2009. Those who have seen Swamiji know that he would walk very swiftly and even those much younger to him, could not keep pace with him. But now he had to walk slowly to avoid any further mishaps. Yet, everyday in the morning Swamiji would go the shrine of Bhagawan Ramana and attend the worship there. He would also go around the *Samadhi* many times. Swamiji was having hordes of visitors at Ramanasramam everyday and in spite of the great discomfort he was suffering from, Swamiji never stopped anyone from coming.

July 24th, 2009, was an ominous day. That day, late in the night, Swamiji developed very severe chest pain (angina). In fact Swamiji was having some symptoms on the previous day also, but he did not take it seriously. He was rushed to Bangalore by Swami Sadashivananda a very loving

and senior monk of American origin and admitted in the Wockhardt Hospital. The rest of the anecdote in Swamiji's own words is given below :-

“The Lord's hands of succour could be seen in every facet of this cosmic drama played on me. One Dr. Sandhya of Bangalore, a close friend of mine, arranged to send an ambulance equipped with all emergency equipments along with one Dr. Santosh upto Krishnagiri half-way from Bangalore. I was treated with tender care and concern by Dr. Santosh - a young Doctor who had been visiting me from time to time at Sri Ramanasraman for the last 2 years or so. He transferred me from the taxi to the ambulance and took me straight to Wockhardt Hospital Bangalore. A number of my Karnataka friends (my salute to Karnataka) headed by Mr. D. N. Anand (retired I.A.&.A.S officer and a very close friend) were waiting already with anxiety writ large on their faces as if I was a close relative of theirs. I was a non-descript wayside fakir of little merit but see the Lord's compassion. He has inspired so many friends of Karnataka (while I hailed from Tamil Nadu) to rally for my support – the one whose only support was God and Pujya Guru Dev. On my arrival, they found in the I.C.U of Wockhardt Hospital that I have had three silent heart attacks since the previous night. Angiography and other investigations were carried out with a sense of promptness, urgency, dedication and loving care by the Doctors of the

Hospital. About four doctors from outside who were friends of mine were allowed to be the guest audience in the operation theatre. Even the most famous Swamijis of the past, it seems never had more than one or two Doctors in personal attendance. What had I done to deserve such cushioned royal treatment? The only reason I can think of is that I love God dearly to distraction and rest all was his sport.”

It came to be known that Swamiji has had a series of three heart attacks in 24 hours. An angioplasty was done on 27th July. The news of Swamiji’s illness had reached many of his devotees and disciples in different parts of the country and abroad and quite a few came to Bangalore, even from distant places like Delhi and Mumbai. In the ICU, Swamiji’s condition was critical. He was put on the ventilator. Reports from the Doctors to the people outside were trickling, which gave an indication of multiple organ failure. His kidneys were not functioning properly and so too his liver and intestines. There was internal bleeding in the stomach and blood was oozing from the nose. Three dialyses were done but in vain. The heart condition was also reported to be not sound despite the angioplasty that was done. There was intense anguish and agony all round. The news was given to Swami Chaitanyanandaji at Vasishta Guha who immediately arranged for an *akhand* Ramayan reading (non - stop reading of the Tulasi Ramayan).

Prayers were being offered and *Ram Nam* was being written continuously by many devotees and disciples. At Anand Ashram, Kanhangad, Swami Muktananda, dedicated a day's *Ram Nam* chanting for the speedy recovery of Swamiji. Besides, a number of devotees / disciples were offering special prayers, *havan* etc., in their homes. Dr. Sandhya of Bangalore, a devotee of Swamiji was co-ordinating with the doctors at Wockhardt hospital. Shri. D. N. Anandji was responsible for all logistic, personal and moral support. Funds were pouring in from Swamiji's disciples/friends to defray the hospital expenses on hearing about Swamiji's hospitalization to that extent that nearly 50% of the cheques/DDs considered as surplus to the needs were returned to the Donors unencashed.

Swamiji's condition was reported to be continuously critical. The liver was degenerated. Blood was flowing in from the intestines and transfusion of blood was done three times with the help of Dr. Santosh who brought donors for blood. The heart stopped and the pulse stopped. Swamiji was considered as clinically dead, though his brain was found to be active. At no time Swamiji spoke about his body, discussed about it or wept for his condition. The Doctors kept him under observation for some time. The heart etc had failed but he was found to exclaim- "Oh, here comes Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh. Bring a seat (*Asan*) for him please. Oh here comes Bhagavan Ramana. If you offer him seat or any thing special he will go away. Where is Mr. Anand? Call him quickly."

He was put on the ventilator and both his hands were fastened. But something strange happened on July 31st. When the doctors were observing Swamiji they found that suddenly one of his hands was free and he was holding the ventilator in that hand. The ventilator is an equipment which cannot be and should not be removed except in stages. Any sudden removal of the ventilator results in imminent death. The doctors gasped in disbelief but Swamiji became fully alive and his heart, kidney, liver, pulse etc began to function normally. What a come back from the jaws of death! From then on Swamiji was on the road to recovery. This was nothing but a miracle, a masterpiece in the cosmic drama considering the highly critical condition of Swamiji. As always His Gurudev was nearby to protect and shower his grace. The Divine Mother had never left his side. There was all round joy and excitement hearing about Swamiji's recovery. At Vasishtha Guha, the *akhand* Ramayan reading for 24 hours was completed and the aarti was over, when they got the news. Swamiji, after discharge remained at the Aurobindo Complex in Bangalore for convalescence. Dr. R.S. Singh, a retired professor of Botany at Ghazipur, came all the way to Bangalore, to look after Swamiji. Such devotion is indeed very rare and all devotees of Swamiji would always be grateful to him for the great service he had rendered.

Swamiji returned to Tiruvannamalai to resume his *sadhana*. There was hardly any change in his daily routine despite all the infirmities he was suffering from. Swamiji was up by 3 A.M. everyday and after bath would sit for his meditation. By 6 A.M. he would go to the shrine of Bhagawan Ramana and do his daily *parikrama* (*circumambulation*). He would later go for the morning puja around 7 A.M. At Ramanasramam, Swamiji has to go to the dining room for his meals. It is some distance from his room. To give some relief, a lady devotee living in Tiruvannamalai, Sandhyaji, was bringing the evening meals. She would also bring some soup, coconut water, fruit juices and some nutritious food during the day. Swamiji was having visitors throughout the day. Some of them were devotees/disciples from different parts of the country, who came to Ramanasramam to be with Swamiji.

Swamiji has touched the lives of all his devotees/ disciples in the most memorable way. Having come to sit at his feet, one forgets all his worries, sorrow and pain. He exudes grace and his warmth engulfs us all. Ordinary mortals like us, with all our frailties and foibles, cannot thank the Lord enough for sending his chosen son to lead our way.

Lead Kindly Light —

Books by Sri Swami Shantanandapuri Maharaj

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- ❖ Sadhanas from Adhyatma Ramayanam
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