



Vedanta Society of Toronto

(Ramakrishna Mission)

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Newsletter December 2009

Words to Inspire

"The sun can give heat and light to the whole world, but it can do nothing when the clouds are in the sky and shut out its rays. Similarly, so long as egoism is in the soul, God cannot shine upon the heart"

- The Life and Sayings of Ramakrishna, p 135

BE YE THEREFORE PERFECT

(From 'The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta')

If we go to the actual founders of the world's great religions we find that one truth expressed: realize God here and now! The great obstacle in the path of God realization is mankind's laziness and lack of enthusiasm. Buddha called procrastination in the struggle for enlightenment the greatest sin. And Christ expressed the same idea when he said, "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God,"

There are several methods by which perfection in God may be reached. When perfection is achieved, every aspect of the aspirant's being is illumined. But it is natural for the methods, or paths to perfection, to focus certain tendencies in human character; for it is obvious that some people are thoughtful, some emotional, some active or contemplative, and that their spiritual practices should reflect their characters. In Vedanta, four main paths to the attainment of union with God are generally recognized. These paths, or yogas, are useful in clarifying the way to perfection as taught by Jesus.

In karma yoga, the path of selfless work, every action is offered to God as a sacrament. By dedicating the fruits of one's work to God, the spiritual aspirant eventually achieves purity of heart and attains union with God.

Jnana yoga is the path of discrimination between the eternal and the non-eternal. When by the process of elimination all transitory phenomena have been analyzed and then rejected, Brahman alone remains, and the spiritual aspirant realizes through meditation his union with the impersonal aspect of the Godhead.

Bhakti yoga is the path of devotion. In this path, the worshipper merges his ego in his chosen ideal of God by cultivating intense love for him as a personal being. The majority of believers in all the great religions of the world follow bhakti yoga.

Raja yoga is the path of formal meditation. It is the method of concentrating the mind one-pointedly on the supreme reality until complete absorption is attained.

This path may be followed exclusively, often by those who lead, predominantly contemplative lives. But, in a sense, raja yoga may be said to combine the other three paths, since meditation may include God-dedicated action, worship, discrimination, and concentration on the Chosen Ideal. Although a balanced spiritual life demands a harmonious combination of all four yogas, one or another usually predominates, depending on the temperament of the aspirant.

Among the teachings of Jesus, there are many which can be classified according to one or another of the yogas. For example, when Jesus said, "In as much as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," he was teaching in the spirit of karma yoga, worship of God through service of man.

Discrimination between the real and the unreal, and renunciation of the unreal constitute the essence of jnana yoga. Jesus often taught discrimination and renunciation. For instance: "...lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." And "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

The Unique Message of the Bhagavad Gita

Swami Ishtananda

There are hundreds of commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita. Of these the shortest is the commentary by Sri Ramakrishna. He says:

What is the significance of the Gita? It is what you find by repeating the word ten times. It is then reversed into 'tagi', which means a person who has renounced everything for God. And the lesson of Gita is: 'O man, renounce everything and seek God alone.' Whether a man is a monk or a householder, he has to shake off all attachment from his mind.

The message of the Gita is universal and eternal. It is not meant to benefit some people limited to a specific race, or a certain faith, no is it limited by time. These teachings are sure to help all sincere spiritual aspirants of all places and in all times. Also, it is one of the most practical books, giving down-to-earth solutions to all problems of life – spiritual or secular. But it is necessary to have a clear understanding of these teachings. Swami Turiyananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, used to say that he meditated on each and every of its verses for the whole day until he realized their purport.

There are 700 verses in the Bhagavad Gita and they are grouped into eighteen chapters. Each chapter is called a specific 'yoga'. From each of those chapters several wonderful messages are to be found. Going by this calculation we could easily end up finding dozens of great messages in the Gita. But for the sake of our convenience let us focus on some of those salient teachings of the Gita that merit special mention.

1. Life is a battlefield.

The background of the Gita teaching is very meaningful. Arjuna is a specimen of a lion among men. He is the greatest and the best

of his time. But even he is found overwhelmed by the circumstances. The background is a battlefield. A man is tested of his worth during difficult times. Also, the greatest lessons of life are learned then. This gives rise to the first message of the Gita. Life is not a bed of roses but a battlefield. No one can escape suffering. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that, caught in the net of five elements, Brahman weeps. Incarnations of God are also seen to undergo much suffering. Hence it is useless to try escaping from the inevitable. Heat and cold, loss and profit, pleasure and pain – dualities of life – always come together. A devotee must accept this fact fully and remain calm. He should turn his mind towards God alone under all circumstances and face the battle of life.

Life is not a mere battlefield; it is both, a *dharma-kshetra* and also a *kuru-kshetra*, a field of righteousness and a field of action. We are here to fight a battle of righteous actions. This field of life yields the faithful result of whatever we do. No one can cheat the divine Lord. We reap what we sow.

2. Our battle is with the enemy within.

Our battle is not with an external enemy. We find out excuses for our sufferings in the external elements and circumstances. But it is the inner state of our own mind that is the cause of all problems. Arjuna was about to run away from the battlefield. But he was not frightened of the Kauravas. He had defeated them many times in the past. He was overcome by '*moha*' or delusion. At the end of his teachings, Sri Krishna asks Arjuna if he has rid himself of his delusion (*moha*). He replies emphatically, 'Yes, by your grace I am rid of this delusion and my *smriti* or memory of my real nature, is obtained.' That is, 'Now I know that I am not the body or mind, but I am the Atman'.

Our enemy is ignorance of our real nature. This ignorance deludes us all. We continue to suffer the forgetfulness of our own real self. Though we are the ever-blissful Atman, we identify ourselves with the matter. That causes the suffering. This identification is called ignorance and is expressed in the thought of 'I' and 'mine'. We mistake the unreal for the real. That is how we perceive the world and undergo all its relative experiences. Many harmful tendencies are created from that. Sri Krishna specifically mentions about 'lust', 'anger' and 'greed'. Sri Ramakrishna summed up worldliness as 'lust and gold'. There are other negativities too. These are the enemies from which a man is tormented endlessly. Only a hero can conquer these powerful enemies.

3. The Goal of life.

We are all potentially divine. Nothing can alter this fact. We come from God, live in God, and go back to God. However much this divinity might be obscured, it manifests itself in the end. Gita states this truth in clear-cut language:

*Nasato vidyate bhavo, nabhavo vidyate satah;
Ubhayaorapi drishtonta-stanayo tatva darsibhih*
The unreal never existed, nor does the real ever cease to exist. Men of knowledge fully know of both of these.

If we are all divine then the goal of life is clear. Sri Ramakrishna said that 'the goal of life is God-realization, to see God in everything, and in everyone, at all times.' It may seem to take a long time, but in the end all of us are going to reach God. Our life and the nature are gradually but inevitably leading us back to where we came from – the God.

4. Don't be afraid; My devotee will not perish.

'Life is full of sufferings'; that is what Gautama Buddha explained 2500 years ago. And we all know that very well. No one can escape suffering. Nothing in life can ever be achieved without facing difficulties. So, how to cross this ocean of life that is full of sufferings?

One of the certainties in the list of sufferings is the consequences of our not so righteous acts. The effects of our evil thoughts and deeds would continue to haunt us till they have born painful fruits on us. When we say that life is full of suffering in fact we anticipate that we are sure to receive many more of them in the time yet to come. If that is the fate of an ordinary man, then what is going to happen to an out right sinner? Is there no more hope for such a person? Is he going to perish? "Yes, of course", was the answer from the strict followers of Mimamsakas. "He shall suffer most severely. You may call it a hell fire or by any name, but consequences of sinful deeds is inevitable."

But Gita says, 'No! Not so. He has a way to escape.' It is the assurance of the Lord that He will safeguard his sincere devotees under all circumstances. So, don't worry; don't be afraid. That is a very clear assurance from the Lord that we find in Gita.

*Api chet suduracharo bhajate mam ananya bhak,
Sadhureva sa mantavya samyak vyava sito hi sah;
Kshipram bhavati dharmatma saswat-shantim nigachhati,
Kaunteya prati janihi na me bhaktah pranaswati.*

"Even if an extremely wicked man starts worshipping me with one-pointed devotion, then he becomes a pious man, a holy man; he should be considered as such. His progress to righteousness is rapid. He shall attain ever lasting peace". Then there comes that wonderful assurance from Sri Krishna, "Arjuna, know it for sure that My devotee will not perish." Does that sound like a human father blinded by his paternal affection shielding his problematic son from troubling consequences of his own creation? But that is exactly what we find in Sri Krishna's assurance. His shelter is open to even the

‘extremely wicked’. He won’t let His child perish. Just one thing that is needed is *bhajate mam ananya bhak* – ‘worship me with one pointed devotion’. The child has to seek the Lord’s protection – that is all that is needed.

There have been instances in the history of mankind when most notorious people were transformed into saintly figures within a short time. Characters have changed as dramatically as a piece of ordinary metal turning into gold by touching a philosopher’s stone. The murderous dacoit Ratnakar was transformed into the saint Valmiki who authored the immortal Sanskrit classic ‘Ramayana’, the original biography of Lord Rama. During the time of Sri Ramakrishna the transformation of a lowly poor servant boy ‘Latu’ into a formidable towering saintly figure was so amazing that Swami Vivekananda gave his monastic name ‘Adbhutananda’ – ‘Adbhuta’ means amazing. But Latu was not a sinner. To satisfy the conditions of this assurance by Sri Krishna in the Gita came in Girish Chandra Ghosh. His story of change after coming in touch with Sri Ramakrishna and becoming his ardent devotee is that of a ‘sinner turned saint’. The change in him was so unbelievable to Girish that he used to say, ‘Whatever sinful life I have lived in past is nothing. Had I known that Lord himself is going to save me, I would have committed much more sins.’ This statement of the Gita is a very unique message in the history of religion.

But how to explain this? Those who are following the path of devotion need no explanation. They call it ‘Grace’. But what about the doctrine of *karma*? And is there any explanation from the path of Jnana, or knowledge? The possible answer is that both sin and virtue belong to the domain of ignorance or *Maya*. The ‘doctrine of *karma*’ also belongs there. Any one who has been successful in achieving ‘one-pointed devotion’ to the Lord reaches the same goal of spiritual height that is known to the *Jnanis* as illumination. With the disappearance of *Maya* both the virtues and the sins are dissolved. Such

a devotee need not fear any more about the consequences of his past deeds. And the Gita shows an easier way – take my refuge completely, I shall save you.

5. Introduction of Karma Yoga as a spiritual path.

The Bhagavad Gita is the greatest scripture of the world because it gave many different choices to Self-realization, and also it taught the ‘harmony’ of all the different spiritual paths. But its greatest contribution and its uniqueness lie in its introduction of the ‘concept of Karma Yoga’. For the first time in the history of world religion, this idea of karma yoga occurs in the Gita. There is a very brief mention of karma yoga, almost like a hint, in Upanishads in a rudimentary form. That is found in *Ishavasya Upanishad*. But not much elaboration or further mention of karma yoga is to be found anywhere before Gita was authored.

There was a general belief in India during the medieval period that all actions are obstacles to spiritual progress. Many followed the teachings of Mimamsa philosophy. They believed that the goal of life was to go to heaven and that could be made possible by doing proper actions such as ritualistic worship. Non performance of Vedic rites was considered harmful. And all work must bear its fruits invariably.

But the question was raised, ‘Can work be done without the bondage it brings? If yes, then how?’ This was the question that was answered for the first time in the Gita. Sri Krishna emphatically said in the Gita that yes, it is possible to do so. He said that avoidance of bondage is possible by doing one’s duty skillfully. And, that in itself is ‘Yoga’ or a path to Self-realization. He elaborated in the Gita how to live a day-to-day life and work incessantly without being shackled by the chains of Karma. This can be considered as the greatest and the most extraordinary message of the Gita.

SUMMARY OF PAST EVENTS

The Annual General Meeting was held on 22 November 2009 at 11:00 am.

Members contributed constructive suggestions for the growth of the society.

UPCOMING EVENTS

New Year Kalpataru Utsav will be celebrated on Friday 1st Jan 2010 at 5:00 PM. The programme will consist of bhajans, puja, and flower offering followed by prasad distribution.

Swami Vivekananda Birth Anniversary Puja will be celebrated on Sunday 10th Jan 2010 at 11.00 am. The programme will consist of bhajans, puja, homa

and flower offering followed by prasad distribution.

Sri Ramakrishna Birth Anniversary Celebrations will be held on Sunday 21st February 2010 at 11.00 am. The programme will consist of bhajans, puja, homa and flower offering followed by prasad distribution.

REGULAR PROGRAMMES

SCRIPTURE CLASS: Friday Scripture Classes begin at 7:30 pm, following the regular evening prayer at 6:00 pm. The class, held at the centre, is open to all interested persons.

VIGIL: On Saturday, December 12, 2009, a vigil consisting of japa and meditation will be observed, from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. To participate, please call the centre at 416-240-7262.

RAM NAM: Sunday, December 20, 2009 at 5:00 pm.

INTERVIEWS/INSTRUCTION:

Swami Kripamayananda will be happy to give interviews to those interested in knowing more about Vedanta and meditation. Individual interviews are also given for spiritual instruction. Appointments for interviews should be made in advance with the Swami at 416-240-7262.

DAILY MEDITATION: Meditation is observed at the Centre every morning from

6:00 am to 7:00 am. Devotional singing and meditation is held in the evenings from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm.

DAILY BREAD FOOD BANK: Many less fortunate families are dependent on the food bank for their daily nutrition. Please help us by contributing non-perishable food items that we may pass along to the Daily Bread Food Bank.

SOUP KITCHEN: The Soup is cooked at the Vedanta Society and now served five days a month at Syme Woolner Neighbourhood & Family Centre, 2468 Eglinton Ave W, Unit 3, Toronto, ON, M6M 5E2. Please contact the Centre, if you are interested in participating. *Donations for the Soup Kitchen will be highly appreciated.*

BOOK STORE: The Book Store is open after Sunday Services and special programmes, and arrangements can be made by phone for weekday and Saturday visits. We carry selected titles from the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, as well as other Vedantic materials.

Vedanta Society of Toronto

Minister and Teacher- Swami Kripamayananda,
Ramakrishna Order of India

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

December 2009

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wed	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		<u>1</u> 9:30 am Soup Kitchen	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u> 7:30pm Scripture class: 'Vivekachudamani'	<u>5</u> 9:30 am Soup Kitchen
<u>6</u> 11am Talk: 'HOLY MOTHER: Power of Management' Part I VVM 1:30 pm	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>10</u> 9:30 am Soup Kitchen	<u>11</u> 7:30pm Scripture class: 'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'	<u>12</u> VIGIL 6am to 6pm
<u>13</u> 11 am HOLY MOTHER BIRTH ANNIVERSARY	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u> 9:30 am Soup Kitchen	<u>16</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>18</u> 7:30pm Scripture class: 'Vivekachudamani'	<u>19</u> 9:30 am Soup Kitchen
<u>20</u> 11am Talk: 'HOLY MOTHER: Power of Management' Part II RAM NAM: 5pm	<u>21</u>	<u>22</u> 9:30 am Soup Kitchen	<u>23</u>	<u>24</u> 6:30pm CHRISTMAS EVE	<u>25</u> Winter Recess begins	<u>26</u>
<u>27</u> NO TALK Winter Recess	<u>28</u>	<u>29</u> 9:30 am Soup Kitchen	<u>30</u>	<u>31</u>		

Copies of the Vedanta Society's 2008-2009 Annual Report, Financial Report, and the 2008 AGM Minutes (distributed to attendees at the Vedanta Society's 2009 Annual General Meeting on November 22) are available to any member of the Society. Interested members are requested to contact the Vedanta Society.

The Vedanta Society of Toronto would be observing Winter Recess from December 25, 2009 to January 9, 2010. There will be no Sunday Service and Scripture class during this period. The Society wishes all its members and friends

Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year!