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Some articles use the masculine pronoun when referring to God, in keeping with convention and to avoid the clumsiness of constructions such as 'He or She' or 'Him or Her.'

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AMMA'S MESSAGE

Road to Peace

Children, all of us want peace and happiness. Yet, we often face sorrow, frustration and disappointment. Why do we not have peace and happiness?

If we want to enjoy peace and happiness, we must first have a correct understanding of life. No matter how much money a rich man has, it will be of no use if he does not even know about his own wealth. Similarly, as long as we are unaware of our true nature, we will not be able to live in harmony with the world and discharge our *dharma* (duties in life) properly.

A group of travellers were walking to a distant village. After some time, they came to a forest. There was a pond nearby. Putting their belongings down on the bank, they went for a swim. When they returned, they saw that all their belongings were missing. Thieves had stolen everything! The travellers set out at once in hot pursuit of the thieves. On the way, they saw a man resting in

If we want to enjoy peace and happiness, we must first have a correct understanding of life.

the shade of tree; he was a *mahatma* (spiritually illumined soul). The travellers asked him if he had seen the thieves passing that way. The mahatma said, "You're upset that your belongings have been stolen. Reflect for a moment. Are the thieves, who are instrumental in robbing your happiness, inside or outside you? Do you want to recover what you lost, or do you want to gain wealth that you can never lose? Think about it!"

Seeing the wisdom in the mahatma's words, the travellers became his disciples.

There is boundless wealth in each one of us. But because we are not aware of this, we roam around in search of happiness from objects of the world. Some struggle to gain wealth and power whereas others strive for name and fame. Both mistakenly believe that once they attain their ends, they will have peace and happiness. But happiness is not something one gains from objects. In fact, desires stand in the way of true happiness. This happiness will reveal itself only when the mind stops hankering after one thing or the other. This understanding must become clear in our hearts. This is the first step to peace and happiness.

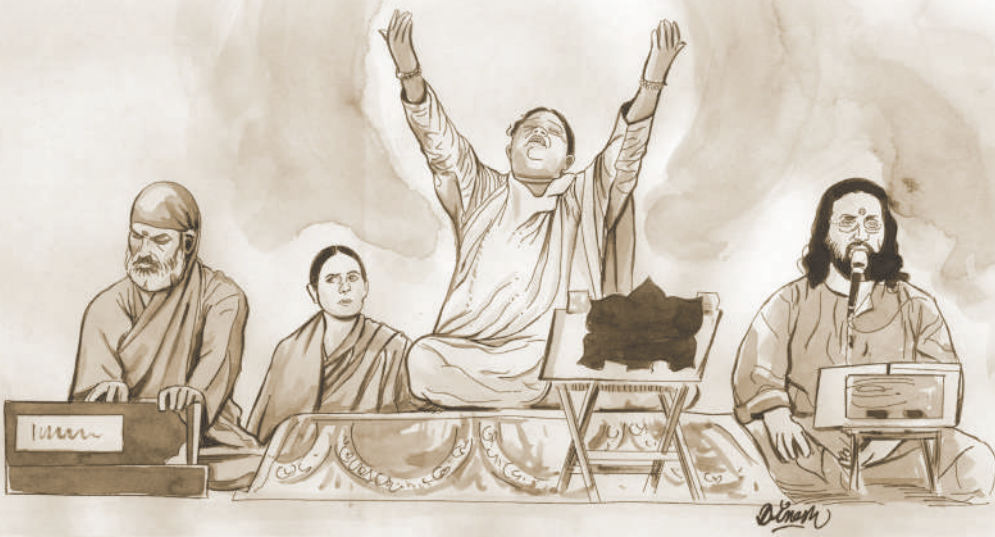
The Self is the source of eternal bliss and peace. Not realizing this, some seek comfort in drink and drugs. By so doing, they not only ruin their own lives, they also hurt their families and society. Spirituality gives us an understanding of who and what we really are. This understanding makes us aware of our responsibilities, and we will then live in such a way as to benefit both ourselves and the world.

Sing Your Way to God

by swami amritageetananda puri

Like Amma, Mirabai's[1] devotion to God was often misunderstood by her family, especially her husband. He gave Her poison, telling her that she had no right to live, as she had flouted social norms, customs and traditions. When she saw the blue colour of the poison in the golden bowl, Mirabai was reminded of her beloved

1 Mirabai was a 16th-century mystic and saint from Rajasthan, who is celebrated for her devotion to Lord Krishna.



Krishna. She fearlessly swallowed the poison. It did not harm her, so complete was her faith in the Lord. She had already merged into him spiritually. The path she took to attain this spiritual union was devotional singing. In her ecstasy, she would also dance. Mirabai is a good role model for musicians and dancers, showing them the highest purpose of music and dance: to merge with God.

From the time I was a child until I came to Amma, I was associated with two spiritual organizations and a local temple. I heard many great musicians and saw many dance performances. But it seemed to me that many of the performers were just showing off their talents. There is nothing wrong with that, but a mere exhibition of talent is vain and a waste of time and energy. Also, there was such a competitive attitude among the performers, who even used to fight for a chance to perform. This was both amusing and painful to see.

There ought to be greater purity of attitude behind music and dance or any other art form, for that matter. I felt that the performers were not using their gifts to gain access to God. Unfortunately, most of those who sing even devotional songs and perform classical dance fail to understand their ultimate purpose.

I heard real devotional singing for the first time when I first came to Amma. After being in Her presence for a short time and seeing Her bhava darshans, I knew that at Her ashram, one could attain the ultimate goal of human life easily.

In the early '80s, the bhajans used to be held in the *kalari*.[2] Remembering my past encounters with competition in the arts scene, and having seen how many of those who

2 The old temple shrine where Amma used to give Devi and Krishna Bhava darshans.

sing bhajans stray from the path to God, I decided not to sit with the bhajan group but with other devotees on the ground outside the kalari. This continued for some time.

One day, the brahmacharis started singing, as Amma had not arrived yet. Suddenly, I felt somebody pulling me up by my collar. When I turned around, I saw that it was Amma! She hauled me into the kalari. That day, I sat in the kalari and sang with Amma.

The next day, I went back to sitting on the ground, having decided not to get too involved in any kind of singing. But the same thing happened again: Amma lifted me up by my collar and led me into the kalari. From that day onwards, I continued sitting in the kalari for bhajans.

In an ideal song, the singer becomes one with the song, and only the song remains. When a consummate dancer moves, there is only dance; the dancer ceases to be. The best artistes become so absorbed in their art that they forget the audience. This inner absorption helps them transcend their physical and mental planes and to merge in God. We are all blessed to have seen Amma demonstrate this total absorption every time She sings.

Let us not forget that music, dance and even martial art forms are all divine gifts to help us use our body, mind and speech to turn to God and finally merge into the Supreme. India has been uniquely blessed with a lineage of saints who were also musicians. No doubt, this is why India is known as *ratna garba*, one who has given birth to many gems. These jewels include Mirabai, Kabir, Tukaram, Tyagaraja, Purandaradasa and, of course, Amma. These mystics elevated music to the realm of divine communion. May they all inspire us to purify our attitude towards the arts, and use it to turn Godward.

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EXPERIENCE

Befriending Kali

by bari anupama roberts, u.s.a.

About 12 years ago, I received my first hug from Amma at the San Ramon Ashram in California, during Her Summer Tour. I began chanting the *Lalita Sahasranama* (1,000 names of the Divine Mother)

daily, practising IAM (Integrated Amrita Meditation), and repeating my mantra. Photos of Amma slowly filled my house. All the photos were of Her smiling and looking straight into the camera. My favourite was one of Her looking proudly at me. It gave me much strength and confidence. My love for and faith in Amma grew. I became inspired to start a Mother's Kitchen and the Monterey Satsang. I also become a writer with the Circle of Love Letters.[1] Slowly my relationship with Amma began blossoming deeply in my heart.

At one point, I purchased a small Kali doll and asked Amma to bless it during darshan. It was not until several years later that I lifted the doll's hair and saw that Amma had placed a big line of sandalwood paste on the base of its neck.

In the summer of 2019, during Amma's visit to the San Ramon Ashram, while sitting near Her, I saw Her talking to two men. As I watched Her, Her face suddenly changed and took on an unfamiliar and terrifying expression. Not only that, when She laughed, I found that Her laughter sounded blood curdling! In shock, I thought, "This is not the same, loving Amma I have been looking at daily during my spiritual practices." As I continued watching Her, Amma glanced at me several times, suddenly looking like the familiar and sweet Mother, but on returning to Her conversation with the two men, again resumed an unfamiliar and terrifying form.

For the remaining days of the program, I avoided looking at Amma's face. My seva

1 Mother's Kitchen is a soup kitchen run by Amma's devotees. There are now more than 50 such soup kitchens throughout North America. The Circle of Love Letters is a project in which volunteers write uplifting letters to people in need of reassurance.

involved maintaining the line of devotees handing over prasad to Amma. I was grateful for the overhead lighting, which was too bright to allow me to look in Amma's direction. Before leaving the program, on the morning of Devi Bhava, She threw an unusually large handful of moist rose petals on my face, as if She knew about the inner turmoil I was experiencing.

When I returned home, I realized that my faith in Amma had been shaken. For the next few months, I cried a lot, frightened by the prospect of becoming an atheist.

I had previously planned my first trip to Amma's ashram in India. I decided I would go, talk to Amma, and face my fears.

I arrived in Amritapuri five days before Amma arrived. I had a Vedic astrological reading scheduled at the time She was expected to arrive. During the reading, I was told that Kali ruled my birth planet. I was told to ask a brahmacharini to place a white cloth bundle of 38 almonds at the feet of the Kali idol in the Kali Temple, and to pick up the bundle some time later. I was also instructed to keep the almond bundle in a tin, never to be opened again, in my home for the rest of my life, and that this would protect my home forever.

Although my reading went on for 15 minutes longer than planned, I was delighted when I found that Amma arrived 15 minutes after my reading ended. Thus I was able to greet Her and watch as She waved to us from Her room, and asked the crowd if we were hungry!

The next morning, I woke up to the three loud gongs of the 4 a.m. ashram bell. I went to the Kali Temple. A brahmacharini opened the doors to the shrine and placed my bundle on the floor next to Kali's right foot, amongst sweet smelling white flowers.

Later that morning, I was one of the first people in the darshan queue in the Kali Temple. When I drew near Amma, I asked the brahmacharini next to Her to tell Amma, "Amma, when I last saw You in San Ramon, I became afraid of You. Please help me to feel close to You again."

When She heard this, Amma began to roar with laughter. She repeated what I had said, and the people around had a good laugh, too. Then, in a motherly way, Amma put Her hand on my right knee, and explained that in the past, the Guru was always Kali, and that it was only more recently that the Guru became the loving Divine Mother. Amma said that She could change forms whenever She wanted to, that She is just having fun, and that She has no anger or malice towards anyone in Her heart. She explained that Her actions were like those of a mother cat picking up her kitten by the scruff of its neck, or a farmer picking up a stick and waving it threateningly at a cow to make it move away from his crops. Amma then gave me a compassionate hug.

After that darshan, I sobbed for a long time, feeling deeply understood and loved. Amma had read my heart and relieved me of an enormous burden of fear.

Later that day, I tried thrice to retrieve my bundle of almonds, with no luck. I returned again to the Kali Temple at 8 p.m. At that time, everyone was in the big hall with Amma for the arati after bhajans. At the same time, a brahmacharini was going to perform arati to Kali in the Kali Temple.

All the lights in the temple were off; the only source of light were the oil lamps flickering around Kali, creating a mysteriously dark atmosphere. I slowly inched my way towards the shrine.

When one worships Kali with love, Her fierce aspect ceases to cause fear.

As I gazed at Kali, whose face was illumined by the lamps, I noticed that She looked just like Amma!

After a while, a brahmacharini came into the temple, unlocked the door to the shrine, and retrieved the bundle, saying that she had not recognized the bundle as it had looked like a lotus to her!

I returned to the hall, and as Amma was walking back to Her room, She gave me a beaming smile, and touched my hand and the bundle of almonds.

On the morning I left Amritapuri, a Kali bhajan was being sung as I approached Amma for darshan. I purchased a large Kali doll from the doll shop and She now sits at the foot of my altar. The following text was printed on a sheet of paper pinned to the doll:

> Kali represents the fierce aspects of Devi… Her eyes see past, present and future… She severs the thread of bondage… When one worships Kali with love, Her fierce aspect ceases to cause fear… To the curious, the wrath of Kali seems frightening and destructive, but to the beloved devotee, She brings freedom, protecting him from his own destructive self… She destroys that which keeps man separate from his divine source… People call Her Kali, the black one.

I have welcomed Kali into my life as my guide and friend, the destroyer of all that stands in the way on my journey to enlightenment.

REMINISCENCE

Poet-Devotee:
Ottoor Unni Namboodirippad

by dr. mattakkara ramachandran, india

It has now been three decades since Ottoor Unni Namboodiripad attained *maha-samadhi* (physical death and spiritual liberation). He passed away in Amritapuri Ashram. I spent time with him towards the end of his life, and would like to share some of my experiences from those days.

In 1989, Ottoor underwent medical treatment for his illness. That year, as Amma was preparing to leave for Her World Tour, She asked me to treat Ottoor in my home in Kottayam (70 km northeast of Amritapuri). Ottoor, fearing that he would pass away in Amma's physical absence, expressed his anxiety to Her and fervently begged Her to bestow spiritual liberation on him. Amma consoled him, assuring him that nothing would happen to him in Her absence, and that, in the meantime, I would take good care of him.

The day Amma left for the Tour, Ottoor reached my home with one of his devotees and my friend, Olassa Chirattaman Narayanan Moossad, a prominent Ayurveda physician. Through medication, nursing and, above all, Amma's resolve and grace, Ottoor regained his health in about 10 days. He became well enough to do his daily mantra chanting, meditation and other spiritual practices.

I could be with him only before 8 am and after 8 pm, as I was serving in an Ayurveda hospital. One of Ottoor's cousins, Sri Narayanan, or, in his absence, a brahmachari that Amma sent from the ashram, would always be there to look after him.

Ottoor had many visitors. Some were relatives but most were Amma's devotees, Ottoor's admirers who were associated with the Guruvayur Temple, and volunteers from the Kottayam Sri Krishna Swami temple. He was quite keen to receive and entertain them.

Ottoor was blessed with the unique honour of composing Amma's *Ashtottara-shatanamavali* (108 attributes of Amma), which Her children all over the world chant daily. The *dhyana sloka* (benedictory verse) is a distillation in words of Amma's quintessential nature, a perfect word-portrait

to be cherished and contemplated. Similarly, the first mantra, *'Om purna-brahma-svarupinyai namah'* ('Adorations to Amma, who is the complete manifestation of *Brahman*, the Supreme'), is not only an aphorism on Amma's spiritual stature, it also reveals the poet's deep spiritual insight into Amma's divinity. There cannot be another name, greater or lesser, that describes Amma so perfectly. Amma's *lila-dhyana-slokas* (verses on Her divine play) also deserve special mention. They reveal the poet's profound understanding of and empathy for Amma.

During our association, I asked Ottoor about how he had composed the *Ashtottaram*. He said that he not deliberated on it at all; all the mantras had emerged spontaneously on their own.

Though neither very long nor very short, living with Ottoor for 99 days was a memorable experience. He used to receive letters from Amma; I also received a few. The letters for him were consoling whereas those I received were instructions. Ottoor was joyful and enthusiastic during the first two-and-a-half months of his stay with me.

One day, while washing his hands after breakfast, Ottoor fell to the ground and cried loudly. He was staying on the first floor. I had been sitting on the sofa on the ground floor and dozing then. When I rushed upstairs, I saw him resisting Narayanan, who was trying to help him get up. Despite his opposition, I lifted Ottoor from the floor and made him lie down on the bed. He was still crying. I asked him if he was in pain. He said he was not and that he had been frightened. I gave him some medicine and calmed him down. After my bath and breakfast, I left for the hospital.

Until then, he had been relatively healthy. But from that day onwards, his condition

I asked Ottoor about how he had composed the *Ashtottaram*. He said that he not deliberated on it at all; all the mantras had emerged spontaneously on their own.

started declining. Nevertheless, his frailty and ill health did not deter him visiting the Sri Krishna Swami Temple and delivering a spiritual discourse there, as planned earlier. There was a big turnout for his talk. Ottoor was placed in an easy chair, which was borne aloft like a palanquin by temple volunteers, who carried him to the temple.

The very next day, we returned to Amritapuri. Ottoor was quite weak and I was feeling bad about it. I told Amma all that had happened. She said, "Amma is happy you brought Unni-*mon* (what She called Ottoor) back in the same condition you took him from here."

Feeling slightly guilty, I said, "Amma, he became weak and fell sick again suddenly."

Amma consoled me. "Never mind, son, don't feel bad. *Onam varan oru mulam vende*? (After all, *Onam* can come only after *Mulam*)" It was a play of words. Onam, one of the 27 stars in Indian astrology, comes after Mulam; mulam also means 'cause.' Amma was implying that all that happened was predestined.

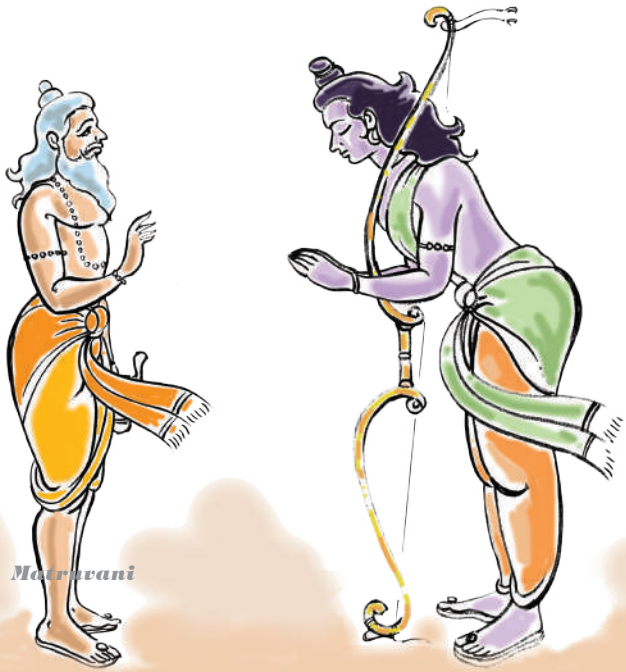
Early the next morning, Ottoor passed away in Amma's arms, just as he had desired and as Amma had resolved. It was the first ever maha-samadhi in Amritapuri.

RAMAYANA

Rama's Reverence for the Eldery

by br. chandrasekhar, india

Old age, like death, does not discriminate between rich and poor, king and peasant, scholar and illiterate, or male and female. All over the world, the elderly face problems that attend old age: illness, loneliness,



neglect... Having struggled throughout life, many continue to struggle as they await impending death. Not everyone finds the promise of peaceful retirement fulfilled in their lives. Increasingly more old people end up in old-age or retirement homes. Some are consigned there by their children, who do not want to bear the burden of looking after their ageing and ailing parents. Some families, struggling to provide adequate care for their elders, find that they have no choice but place them in elder care, and they do so with great anguish.

Is this a recent phenomenon or age-old? How did our forebears deal with this problem? Who is to be blamed for it: the elders themselves or the younger generation? Are there lessons that one can learn from ancient Indian culture?

The story of Sri Rama gives us wonderful insights into how we can improve our relationship with the elderly.

Rama: Eternal Inspiration

Rama lived for *dharma* (righteousness). He struggled all his life to establish dharma among family, friends, subjects, enemies and even among animals and demons. Rama was the very personification of dharma.

Rama's every word and deed was vibrant with righteousness. His unimpeachable conduct has inspired generations of Indians and will surely continue inspiring many more.

Rama loved Dasharatha, his ageing father. He also had a special affection for the elderly from all walks of life. Almost every page of the *Ramayana* testifies to this.

In the prime of His youth, Rama left the kingdom of Ayodhya and went into forests to honour his father's promise. How many today would be ready to sacrifice their careers and luxuries for the sake of their parents? How many are mindful of their duties towards their parents?

Even as a young boy, Rama craved the association of elders. He sought their company and guidance, and thus learned many things from them.

Sage Valmiki, author of the *Ramayana*, wonderfully portrays this aspect:

> *shila vrddhaih jnana*
> *vrddhaih vayo vrddhaishca*
> *sajjanaih*
> *kathayanasta vainityam*
> *astra yogyanantaresha api*
> Even during intervals when he was not practising the use of weapons, Rama would talk to the elderly who were knowledgeable or saintly. (Ayodhya Kanda, 1. 12)

The verse above indicates Rama's veneration for elders from his student days. The elderly have a wealth of life experience, and there is much that youth can learn from them. Students would do well to emulate Rama's art of interacting with and learning from elders. They could approach those with years of experience in a particular domain. Those interested in science could, for example, seek mentors in retired scientists. Those aspiring to athletic excellence can interact with senior sportspeople. Through such relationships, youth can quench their thirst for knowledge and cultivate respect for seniors.

Elders: Mould Youth

The venerable sage, Vishvamitra, sought Rama's help in killing the demons terrorizing the forest hermits performing their spiritual practices. He took Rama and Lakshmana into the jungle, and initiated them into mantras that helped them overcome hunger, thirst and fatigue. By this training, the brothers were able to defeat the demons.

In a similar way, the onus of training the youth of today lies with their seniors: parents, grandparents, teachers and others. The good examples set by these mentors is the most

effective way of transmitting values, such as respecting elders, to the younger generation.

Every morning, millions of Hindus chant the verse that Sage Vishvamitra would chant every dawn to wake Rama up:

> *kausalya supraja rama*
> *purva sandhya pravartate*
> *uttishtha narashardula*
> *kartavyam daivam ahnikam*
> O Rama, excellent son of Kausalya, dawn is fast approaching the east as night turns to day. Wake up, O best of men. The divine daily rituals must be performed.

It is not just a wakeup call. Sage Vishvamitra was rousing young Rama's hidden talents for the good of the world. Can the seniors today emulate Sage Vishvamitra and rouse the noble spirit of the younger generation? The creed of seniors could well be 'Moulding the Younger Generation.' After his retirement, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, a former president of India, would visit schools, interact the students, and inspire them with noble ideals.

Rulers: Respect Elders

King Dasharatha sought opinions from a diverse range of representatives from villages and towns on crowning Rama. Sage Valmiki records the responses of a few of them. One hearty response is given here:

> Rama worships elders who are well versed in various sciences. By that, His name, fame and brilliance are becoming more well known and celebrated. (Ayodhya Kanda, 2.33)

When Bharata, Rama's brother, approached Him in the forest, Rama asked Bharata how he was ruling the kingdom. Rama's questions were like a checklist on the principles of good governance. The memorable dialogue between the two brothers continues for a few hundred verses, and they

centre around administrative skills and righteousness. The first few questions Rama asked pertain to the welfare of elders. This shows the importance given to elders in Ayodhya, and affirms the priority Rama gave to their welfare.

Rama asked, "Are you serving your father? How is our family adviser Sage Vasishtha? He then inquired,

> *kacciddevan putrun bhrtvan gurun pitr saman api vrddhamshca tata vaidyamshca brahmanashcabhimanyase*
>
> My darling! I hope you are respecting the gods, your ancestors, dependents and teachers of your father's age, doctors and the learned ones. (Ayodhya Kanda, 100.13)

Indeed, rulers ought to have special concern for senior citizens. It is not enough to grant them income tax exemptions, interest rate deductions, travel concessions and the like. Like Rama, leaders must set an example by respecting senior citizens, visiting them, motivating the younger generation to communicate with elders, and inspiring youth to learn from them. Like Rama, they, too, ought to seek advice from senior citizens. Whatever rulers do, people follow.

Rama's Message to Seniors

When Rama visited the hermitage of an old saintly woman, Shabari, He tactfully inquired about her welfare. The questions Rama asked are not relevant only to Shabari; they contain sage counsel to all the elderly people pursuing a spiritual life.

> *kaccit te nirjita vighnah*
> *kaccit te vardhate tapah*
> *kaccit te niyatah kopa*
> *aharah ca tapodhane*
>
> O lady, endowed with the wealth of penance, I trust there are no obstacles to your spiritual practices. I hope you are gaining the benefits of

> your penance. I presume you have controlled your anger. I believe you are practising self-restraint in eating. (Aranya Kanda, 74.8)

Rama's words are pregnant with suggestion. One may be advanced in years, but age does not necessarily confer spiritual maturity. How many elders are in control of their temper? Are they able to exercise dietary control? Are they sincere in their spiritual practices?

An ideal *vanaprastha*[1] like Shabari is always waiting for the Lord's arrival. As soon as Rama arrived at her hermitage, she reverentially served Him the choicest picks from her garden, and then sought His permission to leave her body. Not that she was waiting idly until Rama's arrival. Shabari served various sages and maintained the 'Matanga Vana,' literally, 'Matanga's Garden.' Matanga was a sage whom Shabari had been drawn towards and who mentored her. Though she was not well versed in the scriptures, she had tremendous faith in Matanga, who encouraged her to keep up with her humble efforts to keep his hermitage neat and tidy. Before he passed away, Matanga advised Shabari to continue her work in the ashram and to wait for the arrival of Rama and Lakshmana. So unshakeable was her faith in her mentor's words that she kept up her service until she grew old herself. As a result of her sincere homage to the sage, Shabari was blessed with the darshan of the Lord.

Shabari's story also illustrates the glory of the vanaprastha ashrama. Unlike most elderly people, who become increasingly conscious of the body's debilities, Shabari's

1 One who has given up worldly life and retired to the forest to pursue spiritual practices. One of the four ashramas (stages of life) of traditional Hindu life.

attitude was informed first and foremost by obedience to her mentor's words, and she was thus able to rise above body consciousness. By tending indefatigably to the Matanga Vana, Shabari was undoubtedly able to maintain both her physical and spiritual health.

Being a spiritual seeker means rising above body and mind. As one becomes spiritually advanced, one becomes less conscious of the body and less attached to it. Such a person is ever waiting for the divine. The moment she hears the divine call, she is ready to leave the body.

Thus Shabari waited for Rama. When He came, she served Him joyfully. With the Lord's permission, she shuffled off her mortal coil in Rama's divine presence.

* * *

As a child, Rama listened to the elders. As a student, He learnt from them. As a prince, He honoured them. While wandering in forests, He helped and advised them. Finally, as king, He served and paid homage to them. May the *Ramayana* inspire us all to emulate Lord Rama and serve our elders.

(continued from page 30)

continuity of India's cultural unity, she also made arrangements to distribute waters from the Ganges once every year to more than 30 temples all over India.

Considering how India's cultural roots were constantly being systematically undermined at one stage in her history, Ahilyabai's efforts were not negligible.

Indians today are deeply indebted to this great queen who, besides teaching us magnificent lessons in statecraft, was a model of renunciation, devoting all her personal wealth for the uplift of India's culture and traditions.

Queen Ahilyabai

by roopesh kaleshan, india

A group of highway robbers stood with hands and legs bound, in the middle of the palace court, awaiting punishment. Yashwantrao, the brave young man who had caught the robbers, was also present. As he stood looking

expectantly at the queen, her chief advisor approached her and whispered, "Pardon me for saying this: though this young man is brave, he looks like a poor man. It will not do to give our princess in marriage to him. Instead, let us give him gold and other gifts, and thus make him happy."

The queen turned to him and replied, also in a whisper, "Thank you for your advice, but you know that I am Queen Ahilyabai Holkar. I honour my word!"

Without waiting to hear any response, she got up from the throne and addressed the court: "Some time ago, I had declared that I would give my darling daughter, Muktabai, in marriage to the man who apprehends these robbers, who made life for travellers in my kingdom a nightmare. I stand by that declaration. This brave young man is most suitable for my beautiful daughter. Let us make preparations for their marriage at once!"

The queen's words were received with immense joy. Those present in the royal court started speaking excitedly among themselves. The royal messengers set out to spread the good news.

The dacoits, however, were trembling in fear, wondering when the order for their execution was going to be passed. Queen Ahilyabai gazed at them and said, "It is true that these men robbed travellers without qualms and created a reign of terror throughout my kingdom. Yet, even criminals ought to be given at least one opportunity to repent their wrongdoing. Therefore, I pardon all the crimes that they have committed. Further, I appoint them as tax collectors for our newly built highway."

The prisoners were astonished! In a loving tone, the queen advised them, "For the rest of your lives, try to be exemplars of upright behaviour for others."

With these words, the queen left the court. This is one of the many stories about Ahilyabai's rule that the Maratha people hold close to their hearts even now.

Ahilyabai was born in 1725 in the village of Chondi in Maharashtra. In those days, the Maratha Empire was ruled by Peshwa Bajirao I. One of the most trusted leaders in his army was Malharrao Holkar, who ruled the princely state of Malwa. Once, while travelling through Chondi, he saw an eight-year-old girl and felt drawn to her. He closely observed her upright conduct and devotion to God. Perhaps, that farsighted leader intuited her greatness. This girl was Ahilyabai, the daughter of the village chief. In time, Malharrao's son, Khanderao, and Ahilyabai were married.

Ahilya's father-in-law gave her an all-round grounding in spirituality, political strategy, statecraft and warfare. Khanderao and Ahilyabai had two children, a son named Malerao, and a daughter named Muktabai. Khanderao was killed in the 1754 Kumher Battle. A few years later, Malharrao was martyred in another war. After the death of her husband and father-in-law, Ahilyabai lost her son, Malerao, to an illness. He was only 22. Thereafter, Ahilyabai took over the reins of Malwa.

The Diwan (Prime Minister) of the kingdom felt that it would be difficult for a woman to manage the complex affairs of a state, especially one lacking the support of a husband or son. He sent a secret message to Raghoba, uncle of the Maratha Empire's ruler, requesting that the ruler seize control of Malwa.

In response, Raghoba moved towards Malwa with a 50,000-strong military contingent. Ahilyabai, a master strategist, sent appeals for help to all those Maratha princes whom the Holkar Kingdom had helped in the past. She then

prepared for the impending war. Among the preparations was a huge elephant with arrow-filled quivers on all four sides of the howdah (a seat or covered pavilion on the back of an elephant). The queen sat in the howdah, commanding an army of 500 women soldiers. Before the war, Ahilyabai sent a message to Raghoba: "Even if you win the war, you will earn a bad name for killing women in order to capture the state. If you lose, you will earn a bad name for having been defeated by women."

This message made Raghoba indecisive, and he abandoned his plan to capture Malwa.

For the next 30 years, Ahilyabai ruled her state peacefully. She proved to be both a benevolent and efficient ruler. By implementing sound financial policies, she managed to increase Indore's revenue from ₹*74 lakhs* (7.4 million) to ₹1 *crore* (10 million) within a short time.

And yet, it was not these things that made Ahilyabai a luminous character in India's history. She is also remembered for her vision of Bharat, a vision that went far beyond the borders of the Maratha Empire, and for her invaluable contribution to the Indian culture.

For many centuries before her time, the Mughals had destroyed innumerable Hindu temples throughout India. Ahilyabai used her enormous family wealth to rebuild temples in more than 100 places. The Kasi Viswanath Temple that still stands today was reconstructed under her supervision 118 years after the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb demolished it.

Besides temples, Ahilyabai also built *dharma-shalas* (free inns), bathing *ghats* (steps leading to and from a river) for pilgrims, canteens for the poor and hungry, wells, and highways. In order to ensure the

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Chapter 5: Yoga of Renouncing Action

by Prof. V. Muraleedhara Menon, India

Dreadful indeed is *saṁsara*, the cycle of birth and death characterized by attachment. The affliction of attachment will not leave us whether we stay at home and follow our *svadharma* (duty suited to

one's nature) or renounce the world and go into a forest. We cannot gain detachment either by following svadharma or cutting back on our actions.

How then can one become detached? This is where disciplining of the mind comes in. One can follow svadharma properly only if the mind cooperates. In other words, our gross physical actions must be in harmony with our subtle mental movements. We must not abandon outward deeds, for we can examine our mind only through the prism of action. Some people desist from karma, when they see how continuing to perform action causes mental impurities to surface. But will not doing anything bring about inner purity? Engaging in action makes one aware of how karma stirs the inner muck and how one can then eliminate them. The efforts to purify the mind must never abate or cease. Such is *vikarma* ('special' action).

Thus, when karma becomes vikarma, action becomes harmless, pure and natural. How blissful such actions are! It is not with any special courage or effort that the self-effulgent sun illumines and energizes the world. It does even have the awareness that it is doing anything, so spontaneous has its actions become. Isn't light the sun's very nature?

Jnanis (knowers of the Truth) are also like this. Virtuous action comes naturally to them. The ease and spontaneity of their noble deeds exemplify *akarma* (desireless action). The honorific *'sanyasa'* denotes this attainment. Sanyasa is nothing but *karma yoga*. In this state, even if one acts, one will not be attached to the action, and this is karma yoga. The sense of not having done anything even after doing something is known as *akarttrkrtasanyasa* (inaction in action).

Sanyasa is defined as *sarva-karma-parityaga* (renunciation of all action). Does this mean

not doing anything? No, for isn't refraining from action a kind of action? Sanyasa is the attitude of not doing anything even while engaged in action. In other words, sanyasa is the art of transforming karma into akarma. This is one aspect of sanyasa, the other being the understanding that akarma is imbued with the infinite power of action. Both aspects are extraordinary. They indicate both the extensive and intensive nature of a jnani's actions. Moreover, his actions embolden and inspire others to do innumerable good deeds. Even then, he does not feel that he is doing anything. This is akarma.

(to be continued)

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radiating a sort of Amma-ness. As we sang, I thought of all the devotees around the planet who regularly sing to or with Amma. I thought about others, who focus their minds on their preferred forms of the divine, which may be the evening sky or a sunset. There's that beautiful Advaitic line from J.D. Salinger's short story, 'Teddy,' where he says, watching his tiny sister pour a glass of milk, he saw God pouring God into God. I was getting hungry and thought of our food prayer, which the sages of India had composed thousands of years ago: Brahman, the Supreme, offering food (also Brahman) to Brahman. And so, for a blissful moment, my awareness relaxed into that state where our singing was an emanation of Amma: God singing God to God.

It was beautiful. Sure, when I can, I will probably go back to the hall for bhajans, but in the meantime, I am happy just to sing in Amma's physical presence from not very far away. And I am very grateful for having been in Amritapuri for that historic first set of masked bhajans.

DIARY

Masked Bhajans

by kamala joy, u.s.a.

It could have been an eerie sight: several dozen masked people sitting quietly in the courtyard on benches and plastic chairs, three metres apart. A precaution against the coronavirus, the masks were to be worn at all times in the ashram, covering both the nose and mouth. They came in different colours: green, blue, peach and white. Some of the swaminis even had orange ones to match their robes.

The evening light coaxed countless shades of gold from the leaves of trees, creating a beautiful contrast with the deep-red benches and the blue sky. Apart from the raucous calling of the crows, it was almost completely silent. This was the scene from the courtyard behind the main darshan hall in Amritapuri on March 26th, 2020.

For some time, I had been curious about the people who sit in the courtyard during bhajans. Emerging from the hall to get water or stretch my legs for a moment, I had often thought it would be interesting to sit there, enjoying the cool breeze. But I could never resist being as close to Amma as possible, surrounded by all that full-throated devotion, with Amma sending swelling waves of love and longing, joy and wonderment, into the hall and well beyond. But that night, I had no choice but to sit outside and

ended up loving it! It is so easy to forget how transformative it can be to do something differently, especially when Amma's grace is involved.

Because of the efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus, the Indian Government had ordered that people do not gather in large groups and that people should sit at least two metres away from each another. Those of us in the ashram were not supposed to leave the ashram grounds, and no new visitors were allowed for the time being. The ashram administration had already instituted safety measures over the previous weeks, but the nightly bhajans and meditations continued until March 23rd or 24th.

After three sad days without any time with our beloved Amma, suddenly the bell rang! I ran the 'wrong' way: seeing a group of brahmacharis head quickly for the hall, I followed, though my intuition was to run to the Kali temple. The projection screen showed Amma in the Kali temple but I stayed put. Amma was talking in

Malayalam and gesturing strongly, and even before Swamiji translated, I could see that this would be no normal gathering in the hall. We were already sitting quite far apart but soon learned that there could not be more than 50 people in any of the halls. I left the hall, feeling a sharp wave of regret and self-pity, accompanied by an egoistic hope that Amma would somehow notice me leaving from the video feed of the hall (even though there were many others who also left!).

I found a spot on a partially broken red bench near the banyan tree outside the Indian canteen. Amma had planted it using sacred water from 191 countries on Her 50th birthday celebration. I could see only a corner of the screen. Another wave of self-pity and regret: if only I had listened to my intuition, I might have been sitting in the Kali temple with Amma!

But as Amma began to talk, another reality began to reveal itself. Having all my ashram brothers and sisters sitting so far apart from each other broadened my sense of connection with them in an unexpected way. The small distances separating us made me tune in to this group of people from diverse cultures, backgrounds and walks of life. Although so different on the surface, we shared a connection: we were all choosing to sit and imbibe Amma's presence together from wherever it was possible. We were giving our attention and love to our Guru instead of giving in to fear or other negative emotions.

A few days later, there was a live streaming of Amma's bhajans on YouTube. That evening alone, tens of thousands of people tuned in from all over the world to see Amma and to listen to Her uplifting singing. So many people are tuning into Amma's divine presence these days. I imagined millions of devotees

holding parts of a global net and infusing it with a shimmer of liquid light and love that travelled and connected across the net.

Instead of white flowers, that night I imagined the light and love from the net permeating the entire planet. While doing the white flower meditation, I often think of the oceans as planetary organs, and the rivers and lakes as the world's veins. The forests, connected and communicating across hundreds and hundreds of miles through their root systems, make an underground nervous system. That night, it seemed that the love and light were simply penetrating the body of the entire planet.

As I sat by the tree, the soft breeze carried smells from the sea, from the earth still wet from the downpour of the night before. It also wafted subtle flower fragrances, the scents of hand sanitizers, waves of citronella, and the occasional smells from the restrooms! Earlier in the evening, the air had been marked by the wild sounds of crows and egrets as they began roosting. Later, quieter birds sang. One I had never noticed before voiced notes that sounded like a cross between an emphatic kiss and a sweet chirp. A few feet behind me was a man who knew the words to all the bhajans and who sang with a beautiful and well-trained voice. Hearing Amma sing from a distance allowed me to tune into Her presence in new ways. I felt Her deep love and concern, and Her indomitable intention for us to grow more courageous and focused in response to the pandemic.

Before bhajans that night, Amma reminded us that God is everywhere, pervading everything. When She said that, I imagined every face around me, every tree, bench, chair, bird, and the sky as an emanation of Amma, each exuding or

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Lilas Around Amma

Omniscient and Omnipresent

For most of the month of December 2019, Gurusharan volunteered his services at the ashram's bookstall in Sabarimala Temple, the mountaintop shrine dedicated to Lord Ayyappa. Every day, after his *seva* (selfless service) at the bookstall ended, Gurusharan would go to the adjacent shrine of Malikappurattamma, a goddess, and pray to Her, "I know You are Amma in a different form. I know that You are the all-pervading divine.

We may not always realize this, but God hears all our prayers. If our call is sincere and if we are tuned to the Divine, we will somehow receive answers to our prayers.

Nevertheless, I would like You to show me clear proof of this."

After he had finished his month-long seva, Gurusharan headed to Amritapuri. When he went for darshan, Amma scolded him: "Why do you come for darshan daily?"

Gurusharan was taken aback. He told Amma, "No, I haven't been coming daily. In fact, I just got here today. I have been doing seva in Sabarimala for the last 28 days."

"You keep coming for darshan every single day!" responded Amma, as if She had not heard anything he said.

Gurusharan sat down some distance away from Amma. Though baffled by Amma's words, he still felt the unmistakeable surge of joy he always experienced when Amma spoke to or looked at him. While reflecting on Her words, he suddenly recalled his prayers at the shrine of Malikappurattamma. He realized that what Amma meant was that he had been going to the shrine daily for darshan of the Goddess, and that She was no different from Amma. As soon as that thought struck him, Amma turned to look at him. Her smile was mischievous and all-knowing. Tears welled up in Gurusharan's eyes as he realized how Amma had responded to his prayers.

We may not always realize this, but God hears all our prayers. He takes on different forms in different places of worship and in different cultures. If our call or prayer is sincere and if we are tuned to the Divine, we will somehow receive answers to our prayers.

NEWS

List of newly-initiated brahmacharinis (continued from previous issue:

Pre-monastic Name	Brahmacharya Name
Sarayu	Bri. Viraktamrita Chaitanya
Shanta	Bri. Prashantamrita Chaitanya
Ambika	Bri. Sukanyamrita Chaitanya
Sudha	Bri. Gurukripamrita Chaitanya
Baby	Bri. Gurusmaranamrita Chaitanya
Divya	Bri. Varapradamrita Chaitanya
Premalatha	Bri. Nayanamrita Chaitanya
Latha	Bri. Deekshitamrita Chaitanya
Sindhu	Bri. Shyamapriyamrita Chaitanya
Lakshmi	Bri. Guruprabhamrita Chaitanya
Sangeetha	Bri. Sangeethamrita Chaitanya
Sheela	Bri. Anugrahamrita Chaitanya
Shubha	Bri. Shubhapriyamrita Chaitanya
Ambika	Bri. Vedapriyamrita Chaitanya
Bindu	Bri. Vishwapriyamrita Chaitanya
Ramya	Bri. Apurvamrita Chaitanya
Preetha	Bri. Punyamrita Chaitanya
Krishna	Bri. Krishnapriyamrita Chaitanya
Sunitha	Bri. Niragamrita Chaitanya
Chithra	Bri. Hridayamrita Chaitanya
Nalini	Bri. Guruniveditamrita Chaitanya
Saumya	Bri. Akhandamrita Chaitanya
Rasika	Bri. Rasikamrita Chaitanya
Remadevi	Bri. Haripriyamrita Chaitanya
Yamuna	Bri. Gurukavyamrita Chaitanya
Srilatha	Bri. Shantidamrita Chaitanya
Prasanna	Bri. Deeptamrita Chaitanya

Amritapriya	Bri. Amritapriya Chaitanya
Karthikadevi	Bri. Vishnupriyamrita Chaitanya
Jayashree	Bri. Medhamrita Chaitanya
Madhuri	Bri. Madhuryamrita Chaitanya
Viji	Bri. Arpitamrita Chaitanya
Biju	Bri. Namratamrita Chaitanya
Sarasamma	Bri. Shreepradamrita Chaitanya
Kripa	Bri. Kripapriyamrita Chaitanya
Lekha	Bri. Atmajamrita Chaitanya
Seethalakshmi	Bri. Nirmuktamrita Chaitanya
Sumangala	Bri. Gurupadamrita Chaitanya
Geethadevi	Bri. Sadhanamrita Chaitanya
Rani	Bri. Gurupreetamrita Chaitanya
Arathi	Bri. Saswatamrita Chaitanya
Shreeja	Bri. Shantipurnamrita Chaitanya
Sajitha	Bri. Shreshthamrita Chaitanya
Rema	Bri. Triptamrita Chaitanya
Bindu	Bri. Nirlepamrita Chaitanya
Sheela	Bri. Samaradhyamrita Chaitanya
Anu	Bri. Smaranamrita Chaitanya
Sheeja	Bri. Karunyamrita Chaitanya
Renuka	Bri. Shreepriyamrita Chaitanya
Vaishnavi	Bri. Vaishnavi Chaitanya
Kripa	Bri. Devikripamrita Chaitanya
Janaki	Bri. Sayujyamrita Chaitanya
Vandya	Bri. Anarghyamrita Chaitanya
Shankuntala	Bri. Satvikamrita Chaitanya
Shanta	Bri. Jneyamrita Chaitanya
Kamalam	Bri. Shankarapriyamrita Chaitanya
Manju	Bri. Sanmayamrita Chaitanya
Bindu	Bri. Viditamrita Chaitanya
Rekha	Bri. Tanmayamrita Chaitanya
Malini	Bri. Nishcalamrita Chaitanya
Rashmi	Bri. Niravadyamrita Chaitanya
Rashmi	Bri. Naivedyamrita Chaitanya
Lathika	Bri. Arshamrita Chaitanya

Usha	Bri. Aksharamrita Chaitanya
Abhirami	Bri. Anamayamrita Chaitanya
Latha	Bri. Anupamamrita Chaitanya
Shobha	Bri. Kripapurnamrita Chaitanya
Ambika	Bri. Ardramrita Chaitanya
Sujatha	Bri. Dheeramrita Chaitanya
Seetha	Bri. Samageetamrita Chaitanya
Pushpa	Bri. Niramayamrita Chaitanya
Anjana	Bri. Lakshyamrita Chaitanya
Usha	Bri. Punitamrita Chaitanya
Rekha	Bri. Sharanyamrita Chaitanya
Reena	Bri. Ateetamrita Chaitanya
Reeja	Bri. Abhivandyamrita Chaitanya
Kavita	Bri. Satyapriyamrita Chaitanya
Sethu	Bri. Suryamrita Chaitanya
Gayatri	Bri. Gunateetamrita Chaitanya
Swarna	Bri. Gurudeepamrita Chaitanya
Juju	Bri. Atmamrita Chaitanya
Anjali	Bri. Aradhanamrita Chaitanya
Anjana	Bri. Sampurnamrita Chaitanya
Tanjuna	Bri. Abhijnanamrita Chaitanya
Smitha	Bri. Sarvamrita Chaitanya
Samapika	Bri. Chinmayamrita Chaitanya
Sheena	Bri. Amritasmita Chaitanya
Jisha	Bri. Vageeshamrita Chaitanya
Varshini	Bri. Prabhavamrita Chaitanya
Praveena	Bri. Amritatmika Chaitanya
Shalini	Bri. Shreepujitamrita Chaitanya
Sini	Bri. Ameyamrita Chaitanya
Prasanna	Bri. Lalitamrita Chaitanya
Vani	Bri. Amrita Chaitanya
Sabitha	Bri. Adyamrita Chaitanya
Sujitha	Bri. Aryamrita Chaitanya
Sreekala	Bri. Viragamrita Chaitanya
Jasna	Bri. Chidrupamrita Chaitanya
Amritapriya	Bri. Sandramrita Chaitanya