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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

Maturity

Children, while facing difficult situations in life, we rarely try to find out the real cause of the difficulties. But unless we do so, we will not be able to find a permanent solution to these problems. For example, if a child starts crying because of hunger, the mother will try to appease him by giving him toys. The child may get distracted for a while. But when his hunger pangs increase, he will start wailing even more loudly. He will stop crying only when his hunger is appeased.

Some people turn to drugs and drink to forget their problems. Not only do these intoxicants not solve any problem, they also ruin one's health and wealth, and rupture family ties.

Once, two friends were talking to each other. One of them asked the other, "I heard that you started drinking. Why?"

His friend replied, "I'm facing many problems now, and am trying to drown my sorrows in drink."

We cannot change the world according to our whims and fancies. Instead, we must learn to adjust to the situation and respond discerningly.

"So, did you succeed in drowning your sorrows?"

"No, my friend. My problems have learnt to swim in the alcohol!"

The root cause of all our problems is our headstrong desire to have everything go our way, according to our likes and dislikes. This wilfulness is the source of all our negativities, including anger, hatred and jealousy. Wilfulness is like a computer virus that wipes out all its data. It undermines our sense of discernment and destroys our peace of mind. We lose control over ourselves.

We cannot change the world according to our whims and fancies. Instead, we must learn to adjust to the situation and respond discerningly. We must learn to accept what we cannot change. A fragrant rose is surrounded by prickly thorns. To insist that a rose bush have no thorns but only flowers is impractical. Night always follows day. If there is joy, there will be sorrow. We must accept both. A tortoise can never behave like an elephant. Similarly, an elephant can never be a tortoise. See each for what it is and accept a tortoise as a tortoise and an elephant as an elephant. Do not leap for the skies in happiness, and do not collapse in sorrow. Remain content and joyful under any situation. The ability to do so is what we mean by maturity.

The mind becomes mature only when one stops being wilful. A mature mind can face problems wisely. It is the ultimate solution to all the problems in life.

Christmas

by swami paramatmananda puri

Two thousand years ago in what is now known as Israel, the Romans ruled the roost. It was an extremely oppressive rule. Things were not so good for Judaism either. The Pharisees or priests had a grip on the people, but there were no *mahatmas* (spiritually illumined souls) guiding them. If there is no one who lives in God, who experiences God, religion becomes just like a body without a soul. The Jews prayed to God to liberate them from Roman rule. Their scriptures said that God would come some day. He would be called

the Messiah, the Saviour or Avatar — the incarnation of God. When Christ says that He did not come to destroy, but to fulfil, He was speaking of Himself as the Messiah.

We are blessed because we live at the same time as a divine being. We are close to Her; we are Her devotees. Amma tells us to do *japa* (repeated chanting of one's mantra), sing *bhajans* (devotional songs), meditate, follow the customs, and obey the rules. But that is only part of it. She also stresses love, kindness, patience, and getting rid of anger and ego. Nobody else tells us these things. The saints not only tell us; they also demonstrate it in their own lives. In Amma's life, we see selflessness, the absence of base passions, and the ardour of divine love. Similarly, Christ did not tell anyone to give up the rules of Judaism, but radiated kindness, love, compassion, renunciation, and faith throughout his short life.

Misconception of Western Prosperity

There is a misconception that the prosperity of the Western world is due to the teachings of Christianity, whereas in India, the economic problems are due to Hinduism, which teaches renunciation. This idea reveals a fundamental ignorance of the teachings of both traditions. Christ did not come to the earth to teach how to accumulate riches or to make society prosperous. He came to teach the lessons that all religions teach. There is no essential difference between religions. They all teach the same thing — how to get rid of mental impurities such as greed, lust, anger, and pride, and how to live in the world but not be of the world, being ready to leave it at any time.

Christ came to uplift society and to make people holy or pure. Above everything else, He taught renunciation. He said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am

The idea that the prosperity of the Western world owes itself to the teachings of Christianity, and that the economic problems in India are caused by the Hindu teachings of renunciation reveals a fundamental ignorance of both traditions.

gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew, 11.29)

Look at the Western world. Where does one find that gentleness that Christ is talking about? Where is the rest that the soul gets by taking refuge in an Avatar?

"Take no thought for your life — what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, nor yet for your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Behold the birds of the air, for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much better than they?" (Matthew, 6.25 – 26) Is this the gospel of health, wealth and prosperity? Not at all!

The prosperity in the Western world is not related to Christ's teachings. It is the outcome of human ambition coupled with discipline. It is the manifestation of the love for comfort, wealth and power. That is all. This prosperity has been gained at the expense of the teachings of mahatmas like Christ. Of course, some of the teachings of both Krishna and Christ are followed, and therefore, there is some peace in the world. The selflessness, kindness and patience that one sees are the result of spiritual teachings. Spirituality is the cure for all problems. Materialism only feeds the body and ego. It never gives peace to the soul!

Necessity of a Role Model

Everyone, whether an angel or a demon, needs a role model. We all have role models; maybe it is our mum or dad, or someone else. Even if we are the worst demon, we will have a demonic role model, but a role model, nonetheless. The more enlightened our role model is, the more enlightened our life will be. There is a great deal that can be learned from the life of Christ.

I wasn't born a Christian. I was born into a Jewish family, but I never read the Old Testament. After going to India, not only did I read the Hindu scriptures, I also read the Old and the New Testament, which is the gospel of Christ. In a way, I was lucky, because I did not have any misconceptions or preconceptions about these teachings. I found that they are all the same, to an astonishing degree, down to the letter. You may be surprised to hear it. They have similar laws regarding purity and impurity, about why one must bathe at certain times, and why one should not eat certain kinds of food. These are ways of purification. All these rules can be found in both Hinduism and Judaism, and orthodox Jews and Hindus follow them even today. All the ancient religions possibly came from the same source.

Imitation of Christ

There is a beautiful book called the '*Imitation of Christ*.' It is considered the number two best-seller in the Christian world. It was written 500 years ago by a monk named Thomas à Kempis, and the book is a gem. Thomas tells us how to take Christ as a role model. He writes, "'Anyone who follows me shall not walk in darkness.' These are the words of Christ, and by them we are reminded that we must imitate his life and his ways, if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do

then, to reflect on the life of Jesus."

While reflecting on Christ's life, there will be a particular vibration in the room. So many hundreds of millions of people celebrate Shivaratri (festival dedicated to Lord Shiva) on one night, and so there will be a special effect from doing Shiva puja on that night. Similarly, perhaps a billion people celebrate Christmas. That vibration will trickle down to us if we also tune in.

We consider mahatmas instruments of God. Christ was one such divine soul. As Amma's devotees, we can compare the two of them. I find them very similar. Amma gets crucified almost every day of Her life, willingly. Christ knew what was going to happen to Him, yet He let it happen because He knew why He came to earth. He was here to save souls (*jïvas*) and to inspire them with devotion, wake them up, get rid of the evildoers, and impart spiritual principles to the people. This is what Amma is doing — comforting, healing, inspiring, and giving refuge to people.

Like Christ, Amma also has a mission, which is a little longer than Christ's. She has reached out to more people, thanks to modern transportation and communication. It is quite a wonder when one thinks about it, that even without any of those things, a large part of the world are devotees of Christ. He was just one person in an unknown place, yet what an influence He exerted! Hundreds of millions of people have been devoted to Him for the past two thousand years. And how many obstacles his disciples encountered! They did not enjoy a comfortable existence. There were people trying to kill them. In fact, all of Christ's direct disciples were martyred. None of them died a peaceful death in bed. Just imagine the dedication, faith and surrender they had to their Master! They are worthy of emulation.

SATSANG

Importance of the Guru in Spirtual Life

by swami gurupadasritananda puri

It is said that there are three kinds of problems in life. There are the minor problems, which can be overcome through simple solutions. For example, if the ink in our pen runs out while we are writing, we can take another pen and continue writing.

For bigger problems in life, we may need the assistance of other people. For example, if we wish to construct a house, we must hire a good contractor.

Thirdly, life itself can be the problem. Situations can bring our lives to a standstill, making us feel that we cannot move ahead by even an inch. This was Arjuna's predicament in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, when he was, quite literally, unable to sit, stand or lie down.

> *...sidanti mama gatrani*
> *mukham ca parisushyati*
> *vepathusca sarire me*
> *romaharshasca jayate*
> *gandivam sramsate hastat...*
>
> ... My limbs are quivering, my mouth is drying up,
> My whole body is shuddering, my hair is standing on end,
> My bow is slipping from my hand... (1.28 – 29)

Lord Krishna alone could save Arjuna. Similarly, only the Guru can protect us in such crises. In doing so, She gives us a new lease of life. That is why spiritual aspirants are known as *'dvijas'* — twice born, the first birth being the biological one. Amma's children are born again, not from Her womb, but out of Her infinite compassion.

Since early childhood, my biggest desire was to become a *sannyasi* (ordained monk). Back then, whenever anyone wearing ochre clothes came to our house to beg for alms, I would give them everything I could. My sisters had to watch me closely to prevent me from giving everything away! But when they were not paying attention, I would give away clothes, money and food.

My childhood passed without my knowing what poverty or sorrow was. When I was 12, I met my first Guru. He said that one should be able to stand on one's own feet by the age of 14. So, when I turned 14, I started distributing tea

powder to about 600 houses to earn money. In this way, he showed me the nature of the world and opened my eyes to the poverty and suffering that countless people experience.

That Guru also advised me: "Go to Amma. She is perfect and complete. I am not perfect. Leave me and surrender yourself to Amma. When you go to Her, you will become better… Buy a photo of Amma in which She is looking directly into your eyes and smiling at you with compassion. When you sit, place that photo such that Her feet are at eye level and worship Her. Surrender everything, both good and bad, at Her feet… When you surrender to Her, do not worry either about money or your next meal…"

He also shared some of his insights into Amma:

1. Although Amma might use only a few words when She speaks to us, we will feel as if She has spoken a lot.
2. She will turn any obstacle She encounters, no matter how big, into stepping stones to success.
3. Many people all over the world will become Her devotees.

Amma knows all about each one of us — our past, present and future. In Her omniscience, She does not need to test us. Why then does the Guru test disciples? It is for their sake. The test is a blow to their ego and ignorance. It is an intense experience because the disciples still abide in the realm of the body, mind and intellect.

When I first came to Amritapuri, I saw Amma sitting inside a thatched hut. She embraced me and whispered into my ears, "Don't worry, darling son. Amma will look after you." She then kissed both my cheeks, wiped away my tears, and put my head in Her lap. She also blessed me with a mantra during my very first darshan.

That afternoon, Amma came to the Kali Temple, where construction work was going on. I went and stood near Her. While gazing at Her, I thought, "How beautiful She is! I have never seen such a mother in my life... those divine eyes, loving kisses, sari and nose ring... the loving voice with which She called me 'darling son'..." I forgot myself and continued staring at Her.

Suddenly, Amma turned to me and yelled, "What are you staring at? Clean the hall!"

I got a rag and bucket and started to mop the hall. By the time I finished, it was late at night. Bhajans had ended. I was dirty and hungry. I did not have a change of clothes either. I went to bathe, using my shirt to dry myself. After hanging it to dry, I went to the kitchen to get some food. A person there scolded me: "There are timings for everything. Dinner time is over. Go away!"

I left, feeling hurt. I thought to myself: what wrong did I do? All I did was to obey Amma, and now, I am hungry, humiliated and shirtless. Is this what happens when one obeys the Guru?

As I sat all alone in a dark corner of the ashram, I suddenly heard Amma's voice: "Who here did not get any food?"

I leapt up and said, "Amma, I did not get anything."

Amma grabbed my left hand firmly. I thought, "What strong hands Amma has!"

She took me to the kitchen, placed a huge plate in front of me, and started serving me personally. I did not tell Her to stop. Amma stopped when the plate was full.

Amma did not just fill my stomach; She also filled my heart. The heart and stomach that Amma filled almost 30 years ago have never gone hungry again. Every time I felt that I was alone in the dark, Amma always shed Her light.

Amma's guidance comes from the inner light of knowledge. She once asked, "How did the *rishis* (ancient seers) discover the medicinal properties of plants and the distance between various planets, for example, before the microscope and telescope were invented?" Clearly, there is no correlation between academic education and spiritual awakening.

Amma does not need to teach; She is Herself the lesson, for the naturally virtuous qualities in Her are ideals for Her children to practise and cultivate. Scriptural texts are nothing but the words of the Guru. They gain authority only when we hear the Guru's voice through them.

There are two aspects to all philosophies: *shruti*, the timeless, and *smriti*, the temporal (i.e. contingent on time and place). What makes Amma's teachings especially beautiful is that they are timeless and yet relevant to the times we live in. Whatever Amma does is practical spirituality.

She once said, "No matter how much or how many scriptures you learn, only the advice of the Guru will be of use in your life." This statement reveals the greatness of a Guru.

Just as we can see the sun only because of its light, we can realize Amma's greatness only when She reveals it to us. The love and concern that She has for each one of us is immeasurable. Let me share an experience that highlights this.

Before joining the ashram, I used to take turns with other volunteers to accompany devotees from Trivandrum to Amritapuri by bus. After ensuring that they had darshan and food, the volunteer would bring them back to their homes. For rendering these services, the volunteer did not have to pay for the trip. The person overseeing these trips bore a grudge against me. So, when it was my turn to escort the

Amma does not need to teach; She is Herself the lesson, for the naturally virtuous qualities in Her are ideals for Her children to practise and cultivate.

devotees to Amritapuri, he announced in front of everyone that, henceforth, no one could travel for free anymore.

I told him, "You may insult me, but you can never defeat me. The Mother you see is not the Mother I see. No matter where we are in the world, She knows what is happening to us; such is my Mother. You spoke that way, knowing that I do not have money. I shall walk to Amma!"

I picked up my bag and left. Many tried to pacify me; they were even willing to pay for my trip. But I politely declined their offers and set off. Usually, in cities, no one offers rides to strangers. Yet, as I walked, many stopped their cars and said, "Please get in. We can give you a lift." I gently turned down all such offers.

After walking quite a distance, I saw a crowd of people standing outside a house. One among them approached me and said, "You look like Amma's son. A monastic from Amma's ashram is coming here. We don't know the proper way to receive him. Can you please lead the reception?"

I later learnt that it was Br. Venu (now Swami Pranavamritananda) who was coming. The function comprised a spiritual discourse, bhajans, meditation and prasad. After the program, I resumed walking to Amritapuri, covering almost 130 kilometres, finally arriving at the backwaters at around 2 a.m. There was no bridge across the backwaters then. There was a high tide with strong currents, I did not know to swim, and did not have

money for a boat ride. I sat in total darkness at the boat jetty.

After a while, a boat rowed by a brahmachari reached me. Staring into the pitch darkness, he called out, unable to see me, "Who has come? Amma is calling you!"

I jumped into the boat and reached the ashram. Amma had just finished Devi Bhava and was standing by the backwaters. I fell at Her feet sobbing. Amma said, "Son, you have finally come..." She kissed me with affection, put my head on Her shoulder, and consoled me. Amma then started telling me stories of the hardship that She and the ashram had undergone. Putting my hand on Her shoulder, Amma started walking. She held on to my hand firmly and did not release it until we had reached Her room. To me, this was a promise that Amma will never let us go in this dark forest of worldliness.

Many years later, while talking to a swami, he said, "Once, at the end of a Devi Bhava, after Amma had finished showering flower petals on devotees, She called me. Though She usually does not talk at that time, on that day, Amma whispered into my ears, 'A son of mine has come. He is waiting across the backwaters. Get someone to bring him here at once.'"

When I heard this, my eyes welled up. The swami asked me, "Why are you crying?" I could not say anything.

Once, during his talk, Swami Amritaswarupananda said, "When it comes to Amma, all Her children have an equal opportunity."

How true! The Guru's guidance is impartial. She does not withhold knowledge from anyone. However, Amma does not impart the receptivity towards knowledge. That depends on how much effort we put in. The more effort we put in, the more we benefit. May we all become befitting of Her infinite grace and compassion.

The Four Crowns

by br. madhavamrita chaitanya

The *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*, or 'Lake of Lord Rama's Feats,' is a stirring biography of Lord Rama, who lived more than 7,000 years ago. Written by Tulsidas, a 16th-century saint and poet from North India, the popularity of his work rivals that of Sage Valmiki's *Ramayana*, on which the *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* is based.

The *Sri Ramacharitamanasa* begins, not with the birth of Sri Rama, but an exchange between Lord Shiva and His consort, Sati. Sati cannot understand why Shiva, the Lord of the Universe, is so taken by Rama, whom She considers a mere mortal. The all-knowing Shiva patiently explains to Her that Rama is God incarnate. Sati is not convinced. Shiva asks Her to judge Rama for Herself.

Sati assumes the form of Sita, Rama's consort, and approaches Rama. Smiling, He pointedly asks Her where Lord Shiva is. Sati realizes with a shock that Rama has seen through Her pretence. Seeing Her distress, Rama compassionately blesses Her with a vision of His divinity.

When She returns, Shiva asks how She had tested Rama. Sati lies: She tells Him that, convinced by His glorification of Rama, She had prostrated before the latter. Her insincerity saddens Shiva, who becomes withdrawn and slips into a state of meditative silence that lasts aeons. In those long years, Sati repents for Her dishonesty.

Alas, Her atonement proves insufficient. Upon emerging from His meditation, Shiva advises Sati not to attend the *yajna* (fire ceremony) that Daksha, Sati's father, is going to conduct. Sati disobeys. During the yajna, Daksha casts aspersions on Shiva. Sati takes offence and immolates Herself in the ritual fire. After some time, Sati is reborn as Parvati, who undergoes years of austerities before She reclaims Shiva as Her consort.

Dharmic Negotiation

Resolving conflict maturely begins with dialogue. Both sides strive sincerely to understand each other's perspective and who is right. The 'right' side offers incentives to placate and win over the other. If that fails, it sows seeds of discord in the erring party in order to weaken their stand. And if even that fails, war is declared as a last resort.

This is the time-honoured paradigm of conflict resolution. In Hindu literature, these four stages are called *sama* (gentle dissuasion), *dana* (persuasion), *bheda* (disagreement) and *danda* (punishment) respectively.

In the episode mentioned earlier, sama took the form of Shiva's insightful words, which Sati is unable to accept. The

freedom that Shiva gives Her to see for Herself was dana, as was the vision Rama vouchsafed Her of His divinity. When Sati still does not realize Her wrongdoing, Shiva gives Her ample time to repent and realize the mistake of not being open to the Guru (bheda). When She still cannot surrender to divine wisdom, Sati pays a heavy price: the danda of self-immolation, which symbolizes the burning of the ego.

Conflict arises when *dharma* is violated. Dharma is a law that upholds the harmony of the universe. Though impalpable, it is an intuitive sense of what is right or wrong. The more refined one's moral sensitivity, the stronger this intuition.

And yet, dharma is not always clear-cut. Perhaps, no other conflict showcases the complexity of dharma as much as the crisis created by Kaikeyi's demands that her son, Bharata, be crowned king of Ayodhya, and that Rama be exiled to the forest for 14 years. Conforming to the paradigm of conflict resolution, Dasharatha strives to cajole Kaikeyi with sweet words and even concedes to her demand that Bharata be crowned king. He assures her that Rama will not contest this decision. He asks only that she reconsider her wish to banish Rama from the kingdom. When Kaikeyi does not yield, Dasharatha tells her that he would not survive Rama's banishment. Kaikeyi threatens suicide. The mighty monarch falls at her feet and begs for mercy. When Kaikeyi remains adamant, Dasharatha is ready to forswear dharma: "Let worldwide disrepute be my lot and let my good name perish; I would fain be damned to perdition and forgo heaven. Subject me to all severe hardships; but let not Rama be screened from my view."

Rama's calm intercession saves Dasharatha from disgrace: "In the forest I shall get more frequent opportunities of meeting hermits, which will be

beneficial to me in every way. On top of it I have my father's command and your approval to boot, mother. Again, Bharata who is dear to me as life, will get the sovereignty: God is propitious to me in every respect today."

Rama's response reveals His filial pieties, His unfeigned love for His brother, His wholehearted love for holy company, and His complete surrender to Providence, for Rama discerns the hand of God in the vicissitudes of fate. His unconditional acceptance of Kaikeyi's demands paves the way for the routing of demons in the Dandaka Forest, the ending of Vali's unrighteous rule in Kishkindha, and the toppling of Ravana's regime in Lanka. He was thus able to reinstate dharma in the country and redeem His father from accusations of abjuring dharma.

In the Dandaka Forest, Rama and Lakshmana meet Shurpanakha, a demoness who tries to court them. Her name means 'one whose nails (*nakha*) are as large as a winnowing fan (*shurpa*).' She represents the rapacious nature of desire. Assuming the guise of a comely damsel, she tries to woo the brothers. Even when told that they are spoken for, Shurpanakha persists. Eventually, her frustration becomes so brazen that she drops the demure act and reveals her true, hideous form. It is a graphic display of the ugliness of grasping, which wears the mask of decency but does not recognize its boundaries. To drive home this point, Lakshmana mutilates Shurpanakha by lopping off her nose and ears and sends her packing.

What follows is a series of skirmishes, which eventually culminates in the epic clash with Ravana. This is an all-out war against unlawful desire, which Shurpanakha and her brother Ravana embody. For a spiritual aspirant, the *Ramayana* teaches that there is no reasoning with lust. It is best

to see it for what it is — the naked aggression of desire — and to nip the problem in the bud. Unless one has perfect control over one's senses as Rama did, one cannot apply the principles of sama, dana or bheda, which collectively represent *viveka* (discernment), when dealing with unlawful desire. It is best to clobber it with the danda of denial.

Not that it is easy to deny desire. Insisting on gratifying Her desire was the undoing of Sita, who yearns for the golden deer. Like his sister, Ravana also assumes a guise. Donning the 'holy' mask of a hermit, Ravana approaches Sita when Her guard is down (i.e. when Rama and Lakshmana are away), abducts Her and carries Her away to Lanka. For the seeker, the only holy desire is to be one with the Supreme, here represented by Rama.

When Wrongdoing Persists

What follows are numerous petitions to Ravana to release Sita: from Jatayu, Hanuman, Vibhishana, Prahasta, Malyavan, Mandodari and Angada, i.e. from family, friends and foes. Through these petitions, the expedients of sama, dana and bheda are exhausted, leaving Rama no choice but to resort to war.

The encounter Ravana had with the last emissary Rama sent is worth examining. Angada was no humble supplicant. He had come to warn Ravana bluntly that if he did not capitulate, Rama would kill him. When Ravana ignores the threat and insults Rama, Angada angrily pounds the ground with his stout arms. Such was the impact that Ravana's crowns (he had 10 heads) were knocked off, and four of them went flying to Rama. When the Lord asks Angada about these four crowns, he said, "…they were no crowns but the four virtues of a king, viz. sama, dana, danda and bheda, which abide in the heart of a king — so

declare the Vedas, my lord. They are the beautiful pedestals of statesmanship: remembering this, they themselves came to my lord."

Angada's insightful comment illustrates how highly the paradigm of conflict resolution was regarded. Ironically, Ravana co-opts this very scheme to win Sita over. He "tried every kind of threat and endearment but failed miserably." Finally, he threatens to kill Her with the Chandrahasa — ironically, the sword that once belonged to Lord Shiva, ever devoted to Rama — but is stopped by Mandodari, Ravana's noble wife.

When a wrongdoer does not relent no matter what, the opposing side must stand firm by dharma. As an expression of defiance, Angada challenges Ravana or members of his court to move his leg. The most celebrated warriors from Lanka try but fail. Finally, Ravana gets down from his throne and is about to try and dislodge Angada's foot, when the latter tells Ravana, "You cannot be saved by clinging to my feet. Fool, why do you not go and clasp Sri Rama's feet?" When dharma is threatened, one must dig one's heel in and not give in.

When Varuna, the Sea God, refuses to help Rama cross the ocean to Lanka, even though the latter had sat on the shores for three days, fasting and praying to appease him, Rama prepares to fire a missile to dry up the ocean. Realizing his mistake, Varuna contritely appears before the Lord and promises to help. Rama compassionately allays Varuna's anxiety and fear. In Sri Rama, we see a mingling of might and mercy. Justice must always be tempered by compassion.

Might and Mercy

Danda is meant to deter one from doing wrong or the wrongdoer from repeating his or her mistake. Once punishment has been meted out, it has served its purpose. This point

is made clearly in the encounter between the two Ramas: Parashurama, Himself a divine incarnation, and Rama. The former had been on a crusade to end the tyranny of the *kshatriyas*, members of the warrior caste, who had vindictively killed his father. Thus, Parashurama's crusade itself was an exercise in conflict resolution, a years-long merciless bludgeoning with the danda of killing. When the crusade threatens to become a senseless rampage, Rama checks Parashurama's reign of terror, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the kshatriya race. Rama's humility and tact quite literally disarm Parashurama, who hands over His bow to Rama, thus fulfilling divine prophecy.[1]

God, the ultimate dispenser of justice, is not vindictive. In His dispensation, even punishment is redeeming. Rama bestows spiritual liberation on Ravana when He kills him. Though the embodiment of dharma, Rama is anything but self-righteous. He is not quick to judge or condemn. His patience is superhuman and is borne out of empathy for human weaknesses.

In an ideal world, wherein dharma prevails, there is no need for the rod of chastisement. While Rama ruled Ayodhya, "danda was never seen except in the hands of the recluse, and bheda too had ceased to exist except among the dancers in a dancing party." There is a play of words here. The poet is referring to the staff (danda) that monks traditionally carry, and to the variety (bheda) of notes and

(continued on page 33)

1 Parashurama had obtained His bow from Lord Vishnu, who told Him that when God descended on earth in the form of Sri Rama, His own life's work would have ended and the bow would pass into the hands of Sri Rama.

Chapter 11: Yoga of the Divine Cosmic Form

by Prof. V. Muraleedhara Menon, India

The third chapter taught us how to realize the Supreme, pulsating in all creatures. In chapter 11, in response to Arjuna's plea, the Lord expresses His love for the devotee by revealing His cosmic form. The universe is God's cosmic form.

This world in which we live, though enormous for us, is just a minuscule part of the infinitely vast cosmos. What then about

this cosmos, which has neither beginning nor end? Where are we? Like space, time is also infinite, and we are ignorant of its origins. How transient and fleeting is the present moment in which we live.

In this chapter, we see the Lord's cosmic form, which pervades past, present and future (the three times) as well as the sky, earth and the netherworld (the three worlds). I am not particularly drawn to this form. I see Him in all that is manifest. He is perfectly present in both the subtle and the gross. The Lord, who pervades the whole universe, is wholly present even in a grain of sand. The sweetness of the ocean of nectar can be found even in its tiniest droplets. I am content, knowing that all that I see are manifest forms of God. That is why I said that I was not particularly keen to see His gross, cosmic form. What difference is there between a small and a big picture, other than size?

This is the idea behind idol worship. Many people, including scholars, ridicule idol worship, but for me, it is tremendously uplifting. Realizing the microcosm in the macrocosm is a blissful experience. This same spirit urges us to see the world in the village into which we were born.

Similes and idol worship share the same basis. Order, freedom, simplicity, beauty and restraint are all divine qualities. When we perceive God delineated through these principles, we feel joyful because of our spiritual bond with these principles, for there is a rapport between our soul and the divinity of these principles. However, to gain this equal vision, our senses, which are inclined towards pleasure, must be refined and purified. Divinity enlivens all things. Let our connection with them be spiritual. Then we will not feel like seeing the Lord's cosmic form.

Not only that, we will not feel towards the cosmic form

the same love and connection we feel towards objects of beauty and endowed with attributes. Such was Arjuna's state also. Trembling with fear, he pleaded, "O Lord, please revert to Your previous form." Arjuna's plea was perfectly understandable. God, who pervades the three times and three worlds, is majestic. But if the all-encompassing and blazing cosmic sphere comes before me, I will be reduced to ash. So, let the cosmos remain where it is. I need only the God who manifests Himself through the creation. Just like our obliviousness of the vast universe, it is better if we cannot fathom the infinitude of time. Our ignorance of past and future is such a blessing! If we could access the bygone past and dredge up the impurities of past mistakes, how mentally agitated we would become! The pains of this birth are already unbearable. Why then should I suffer the pains of my previous births? We ought to apply this logic when it comes to the history of nations: forget all mistakes and wrongs done in the past; think only about the good.

We must constantly recite the verses glorifying the Lord's cosmic form, contemplate on their meaning, and thus purify ourselves. The Lord revealed the entire cosmos within Him and said, "O Arjuna, all these creations will perish. You are only a tool. I am the one making you act."

May these words ever echo in our heart. All our efforts must be directed towards becoming an instrument in the hands of the divine. The last verse of this chapter explains how we may do so:

mat karmakrnmat paramo
mad bhaktah sangavarjitah
nirvairah sarvabhuteshu
yah samameti pandava

O Pandava, he who works for Me, regards Me as the Supreme, is

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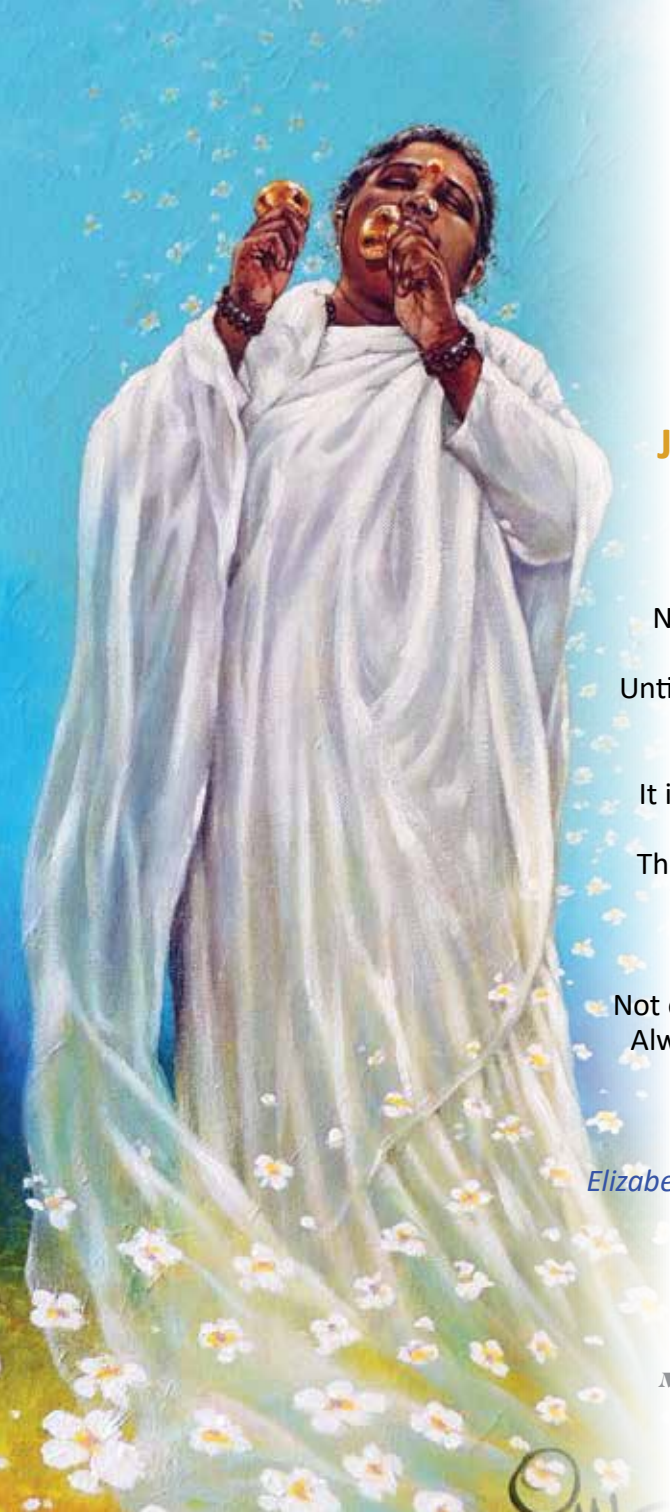

Journey O-M

Not other
but Mother
Not to see an other
only see Mother
Until there is no other
only Mother.

It is so much simpler
to remember this.
Then efforts to fix or
improve the other
fall away.

Not other, but Mother.
Always. Only Mother.

Elizabeth McCarthy, USA

MalpensaFiere

by Rajani Menon, India

Those who have never met Amma…" the token distributor repeatedly asked the huge crowd assembled inside one of the many halls in the MalpensaFiere Congress Centre, Milan, Italy. My son and I looked at each other. I said, "We've never seen Amma in Italy before." We joined the long and winding queue for tokens. An Irish man who had flown in from Dublin stood beside us. "She comes to Ireland only once in two years," he said. "I saw Her in London. Now I've come to Milan. She is the most powerful incarnation ever!" It was 5 p.m. The waiting hall was full of young families with children happily

running around, crawling under chairs and chasing each other. They had their parents' names and mobile numbers written on their forearms or pinned to their clothes so that the parents could be contacted if necessary. Videos of Amma's charitable activities were being played on the screen.

After receiving tokens, we went down a staircase into the big darshan hall. Many had to wait upstairs or sit in outer halls where screens showing activities on the stage had been placed, until space opened up in the main hall. Fortunately, we found two seats in the last row of the darshan hall.

There was a hush as Amma slowly climbed down the stairs. She had been giving darshan since morning and had barely rested. Dignitaries waiting on the stage welcomed Her to their hometown and country.

During Her talk, Amma spoke about how a still mind is necessary to realize our true nature, which is that of bliss and peace. She told a story about time being the greatest treasure, which can never be regained, if lost. She said that most people fritter their time away on petty pleasures, forgoing the greater goal of life.

Then the bhajans started and the audience sang along, turning the convention centre into a prayer hall. The devotees clapped enthusiastically after each bhajan. After the *arati*, Amma started another round of darshan.

We went to the dining hall, where there was a delicious assortment of food, from Italian pizzas to Indian *masala dosas* (pancake with stuffed potatoes). We sat with a German devotee who recounted his first darshan many years ago. He had only come to drop a friend off as he was "not interested in spiritual people." Curiosity made him enter the hall. Suddenly, feeling the divine energy in the atmosphere, his heart started pounding!

He went for darshan and, as Amma embraced him, he lost all sense of self. He was dragged away, as he himself laughingly recalls, "like a sack of potatoes" and left on the side to slowly regain himself. Now he tells Amma, "Never, ever let me leave you!"

We noticed Ramakrishnananda Swami entering the hall with volunteers. Amma had sent him to distribute tokens to those who did not have them. Swami and the volunteers went from table to table, asking each person, "Did you get a darshan token?" Those who had not been eligible for tokens earlier because they did not fit into the 'never seen Amma' or 'never seen Her this year' category received them, and soon, there were many delighted people in the dining hall, clutching precious tokens.

We went back to the darshan hall, crossing the freezing outer corridor. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning and there were still many people waiting for darshan. Amma asked everyone to get into the line. We went for darshan. When Amma saw my son, She laughed and said, "Ah! Your beard has grown. Son, you look good with a beard!" This was a continuation of our last darshan in Munich, where Amma had scolded me for making him shave. Needless to say, I have not dared to ask him to shave again, and now when Amma saw him, She remembered and beamed with pleasure.

We sat beside Her. A Japanese girl was complaining to Amma, "Our bus always comes last. I can never sit near you for prasad." Amma looked at Her compassionately and said, "Daughter, the last bus was late only by three minutes." She added, "You can always sit next to Amma when we go back to Amritapuri."

Then She narrated a story. "There was a bad smell coming from one of the rooms. One

son complained about it to Amma. But no one discovered the source of the smell. One day, the guy who complained visited his wife, who said, 'Oh, your socks are so smelly!' Thus, the guy who complained about the smell was himself the source of the smell!"

Amma's point was surely that, often, we think others are a problem but never ourselves. If we try to improve ourselves instead of finding fault with others, the world will become a much better place.

Finally, darshan ended. Amma stood up, and throwing Her hands into the air, called out *"Mata rani ki jai!"* ("Victory to the Queen Mother!"). She walked swiftly up the stairs and into Her room, preparing for yet another day of darshan, including Devi Bhava in the evening.

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cadences in music and dancing. A dharmic utopia embraces life in all its variety, including both the soul-uplifting joys of music and dance, and the monastic life of austerity and sense control. It is not that conflict is absent in an ideal world. There will always be differences between people, but where dharma prevails, mere expostulation (sama) is enough to drive reason or good sense home.

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SERVICE

Hands that Heal

by Anushree (Rondine Twist), Belize

Goddess Kanyakumari is depicted as a young virgin. At the same time, she is hailed as Jaganmata, Mother of all creation; in other words, a mother who has never given birth. The same can be said about our beloved Amma, who was born to play the role of universal mother.

Like any loving mother, She cares for all of Her children and looks after their every need. Destitute widows receive monthly pensions from Amma's charity. The unemployed receive vocational training so that they can earn a livelihood with dignity. Amma's feeding programs satiate the hunger of entire communities. Her scholarship schemes enable poor students to pursue their studies. The sick and ailing get the medical care they need but would not have been able to afford otherwise.

In 1998, Amma founded the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences (AIMS), a state-of-the-art, super-speciality, teaching hospital in Kochi, Kerala. Sprawling over more than 125 acres, the hospital can accommodate a daily patient volume of about 3,500 outpatients. It is now ranked as one of the best hospitals in South Asia. Through AIMS, Amma is fulfilling Her desire to provide free or highly subsidized advanced medical care to Her poor and disadvantaged children. In addition, the M.A. Math also provides routine medical care to people in their own communities.

AIMS operates several satellite hospitals. The Amrita Kripa Charitable Hospital in Kalpetta (AKCHK) is one of five satellite charitable hospitals that AIMS runs. Situated in the Wayanad district of Northern Kerala, on India's Western Ghats, it provides free medical care to the indigenous population in the remote tribal hamlets and villages of Wayanad. Kalpetta, the capital of Wayanad, is accessible only by steep roads running through dense forests and mountains, making travel difficult, especially for the sick and elderly who need medical attention. There are no government medical colleges in Wayanad, and access to medical care is limited. Their villages have few amenities. The health indicators of these

tribal people are poor compared with the general health indicators in Kerala.

Wayanad is home to more than half of the four *lakh* (400,000) indigenous tribal people in Kerala. Most of the patients at AKCHK are from these tribal communities. Most of them, especially the women and girls, are severely malnourished and vulnerable to conditions such as anaemia. They suffer from repeated infections and are prone to diseases like hypertension, heart disease and diabetes. Social ills like alcohol abuse and illiteracy also plague their communities.

Amma asked the doctors in charge of AKCHK, Dr. Sanjeev Vasudevan and his wife Dr. Ajitha, to focus on the tribal communities. The doctors were instrumental in setting up the satellite hospital in 2005, and in developing it to its present capacity. In the early days, they saw few patients, maybe 20 a day, but they worked hard to build trust in the community by initiating outreach services. Today, they see an average of 200 outpatients a day. On busy days and during the monsoon, they see up to 400 patients daily.

The doctors noticed that some patients and those accompanying them would come to the hospital without breakfast. By the time they leave the hospital, they would be tired and hungry. This was how the hospital started the scheme of providing free lunch to all those visiting AKCHK.

During visits to the tribal villages, AKCHK staff realized that the root cause of the villagers' ailments was their poor diet. Dr. Ajitha observed that people often consumed

rice gruel alone without vegetables or curries, a meal utterly lacking in nutritional value. Such meals became prevalent after the tribal communities transitioned from their traditionally nutritious harvests of *ragi* (finger millet), other millets and other super grains. They now have access only to subsidized rice. This discovery prompted the hospital to distribute mung beans, peanuts, chickpeas and other proteins to the villagers regularly.

AKCHK also initiated other humanitarian activities. It built toilets in some tribal colonies in a bid to end open defecation and to alleviate associated health risks. Noticing that many tribal people did not have access to potable water, the hospital facilitated the construction of approximately 28 wells that provide clean drinking water to the communities. It has distributed tarpaulin sheets to cover the roofs of homes during the monsoon season. It also provides umbrellas during the rainy season and blankets in winter. The hospital also built a home for a needy family.

Through their outreach efforts, hospital personnel began to understood better the needs of their patients, and found other ways to assist them. Regular medical camps are conducted twice a week at Modakkara and Edaguni. Additional camps are organized weekly in association with other NGOs involved in tribal work.

AKCHK provides a number of specialist services. Provided by doctors from AIMS and other neighboring areas, the specialist services now include General Surgery,

Dermatology, Endocrinology, ENT, Gastroenterology, Gynecology, Internal Medicine, Orthopedics, Pediatrics, Psychiatry and Community Dentistry, and are offered on a purely voluntary basis. To date, more than ₹68 lakh (6.8 million) worth of free medicines have been distributed to the tribal patients. For more details, visit www.amritakripa.org.

The tribal patients are Amma's children, and so are the doctors who care for them. Dr. Sanjeev and Dr. Ajitha are instruments in Her hands, healing and helping those in need in Wayanad.

The word 'darshan,' which refers to Amma's hug, has a broader meaning in Sanskrit. It means vision. One is blessed by seeing and being seen by someone or something auspicious. But there is another context to the word vision. Amma's vision of universal motherhood makes Her reach out Her helping hands to more and more of Her children. She is the very embodiment of the universal mother.

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> devoted to Me, is free from attachment, and is devoid of hatred for any being, comes to Me. (11.55)

In his commentary, Sri Shankara hailed this verse as the heart of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In essence, this verse means that a devotee who serves the world properly and selflessly, who surrenders all his efforts to God, who sings the glories of the Lord, and who is peaceful, detached, dispassionate and filled with love for all, is worthy of being an instrument in the hands of God.

(to be continued)

Lilas Around Amma

Her Grace

In January 2007, I was in Delhi for an official meeting. On the day of my departure, the friend I was staying with handed me a copy of *Matruvani*, saying, "Enjoy reading!" Before that, I had never even heard about Amma. Soon after boarding the flight, I felt a magnetic pull towards the magazine and finished reading the entire issue in one go.

When I reached home in Kolkata, I started thinking about Amma

continuously. My desire to meet Her and to be in Her presence grew, day by day. One morning in March, to my utter astonishment, I saw a full-page advertisement in the newspaper announcing Amma's visit to Kolkata. Elated, I immediately made inquiries to find out more about the program.

On the morning of the first program, my mother and I went to Amma's ashram on Budge Budge Road. As both my father and my husband were busy with work, they could not join us. While my mother and I were looking around the ashram, a brahmacharini announced Amma's arrival to inaugurate the Brahmasthanam Temple. It was the first time I was physically in Amma's presence. Watching Her consecrate the temple was truly memorable. I still remember the way Amma showered rose petals as blessings from the temple's dome.

By that evening, a huge crowd had gathered. Fortunately, as we had reached the ashram that morning, we could get seats in the second row from the dais. At about 6:30 p.m. Amma arrived on stage. Her impeccable white sari and mesmerizing smile reminded me of Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge and the Arts. Amma enthralled the audience with Her melodious singing and words. Finally, Her darshan started. We had been eagerly awaiting it since morning, and seated in the second row, we were sure that we would receive darshan early.

Suddenly, a huge group of people arrived from nowhere and pushed us far behind. By then, it was nearly 9 p.m. I started to worry about when I could get back to my diabetic father. My mother, too, was feeling uneasy because of her back pain. I broke down in tears and fervently prayed to Amma to help us.

To my utter surprise, amidst all the chaos, a brahmacharini came to me, handed over two tokens, and helped us through the crowd to the front. When I reached Amma, I felt overwhelmed by gratitude and devotion. After receiving Her loving hug, Amma affectionately asked my mother and me to sit beside Her for some time.

In those days, my husband and I, who were both professional painters and teachers, were enjoying successful careers. We travelled internationally, had our own exhibitions, and frequented art museums. Little did we know that dark clouds were hovering over life's horizon.

In November 2008, my husband was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. We sought all possible medical treatment with the best of Indian doctors. While the doctors worried over his deterioration, my husband continued painting until the last day of his life without any pain, purely by Amma's divine grace. He also received Amma's loving hug at the end of his life. He passed away in July 2010.

In hindsight, I feel so blessed because despite the intense grief I felt, I was able to regain my mental strength and positive attitude towards life through Amma's blessings. May Her blessings and grace illumine all of our lives.

— Sohini Dhar, India

Indian Food

Years ago, I used to be scared of taking Indian food to school. All the children would ridicule me for the 'strange' way in which I ate, and they would look at my food with disgust. A boy sitting behind me would constantly pull my hair whenever I took a bite, and it would make me feel ashamed while eating. I thought Europeans and people who did not live in India hated our food. Eventually,

despite my parents' reassurances, I stopped taking Indian food to school. I was much too young to explain to my parents the struggle I was going through.

One day, my parents took me to Amma's program in the Netherlands. It was like a big festival. Indian food was being served everywhere, and thousands of Europeans, who came to see Amma and have Her darshan, ate the food with relish.

That was when my dad told me how much these people loved Amma, and that I should not worry about eating Indian food at school. From then on, I did not hesitate to take Indian food to school. I told my classmates that this was the food I ate and that they should not judge me for it. My struggles still continued, but I found a new confidence.

Though it might be a small thing, the sight of so many Europeans eating Indian food at Amma's program changed my life. Of course, Amma has done so much more. She is so selfless: always giving and helping countless people in one way or another. My parents tell me many stories about how Amma travels to many places to help people all over the world. Her dedication is marvellous. I used to be wonderstruck hearing how much time Amma dedicated to loving and serving others. I can never even imagine doing a fraction of what She does.

Though She works tirelessly, Amma is always happy, as She spreads positive vibes and hugs people with love and compassion. Whenever I listen to Her devotional songs, tears come to my eyes.

Amma initiated me into education. Her blessings continue to guide me and my family. We can never forget Her kindness and compassion towards us.

— AmritaSai Elango (10 years old), Belgium