

Sri Ramakrishna and the Pilgrimage Mindset

SWAMI CHIDEKANANDA

(Continued from the previous issue...)

Introduction

In the previous two issues, we discussed the importance of cultivating a pre-pilgrimage mindset before embarking on a pilgrimage. The next question is: How should we conduct ourselves during the pilgrimage so as to maximise our spiritual progress?

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences in Varanasi reveal subtle hidden truths about places of pilgrimage—and also how sincere seekers can access them. Sri Ramakrishna says that the “wind of God's grace is always blowing. We only have to unfurl our sails.”¹ This is especially true in places of pilgrimage where the devotion of countless devotees and great souls “has caused a spiritual atmosphere to become palpable in that place, so [that] one can easily become spiritually awakened and have a vision of God there.”²

Swami Vivekananda further explains that such places “become full of good *tanmatras*”³ or spiritual vibrations and become saturated with *sattva*. In order to access this vast reservoir of spiritual vibrations, we simply have to awaken the *sattva vritti* (thought-wave) in our own minds, and tune it to the particular frequency of the place of pilgrimage.

In modern times, the absorption of spiritual vibrations may be compared to flying on an airplane and wishing to connect to the Internet so that one can watch a movie during the flight. To download the movie, one first requires a password. Once passengers get the password, they can then connect with the Internet and download the movie into their

hard drive. In his pilgrimage to Varanasi with Mathur Babu, Sri Ramakrishna gives us the password which will enable us to connect to the holy vibrations of a place of pilgrimage. Once we connect with this spiritual atmosphere, we

can then download these holy vibrations into our mind.

How to access these spiritual vibrations in places of pilgrimage?

Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage mindset—which he applied in his pilgrimage to Varanasi—shows us the way. The pilgrimage mindset consists of four *vidyas* (spiritual practices based on subtle truths). Each of these *vidyas* is supported by the scriptures and affirmed by his own realisations. The four *vidyas* of the pilgrimage mindset practised by Sri Ramakrishna are: (1) Practice of Tuning to the Divine; (2) Practice of Spiritual Association;

Four Vidyas

- 1) *Tuning to the Divine*
- 2) *Spiritual Association*
- 3) *Presence of the Sacred*
- 4) *Poking the Honeycomb*



(3) Practice of the Presence of the Sacred; (4) Practice of 'Poking the Honeycomb'⁴.

Before we discuss how we can apply these vidyas during our pilgrimages, we will have to address a fundamental doubt that arises in the mind of many spiritual seekers: Sri Ramakrishna was an incarnation and we are merely ordinary *jivas*. There is a gulf of difference between his pure mind and ours. So how will his spiritual experiences help us?

More than 1200 years ago, Sri Shankaracharya, the great exponent of Advaita Vedanta, answered this question. In his commentary on chapter 2, verse 55 of the Gita, he explains the relevance and necessity of a realised soul's spiritual experiences and spiritual practices to ordinary souls: स्थितप्रज्ञलक्षणं साधनं च उपदिश्यते । सर्वत्रैव हि अध्यात्मशास्त्रे कृतार्थलक्षणानि यानि तान्येव साधनानि उपदिश्यन्ते ॥ "In all the scriptures, whatever are the characteristics of the man of realisation are themselves presented as the disciplines for an aspirant, because these (characteristics) are the result of effort. And those that are the disciplines requiring effort become the characteristics (of the man of realization)".⁵ In other words, Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practices and his spiritual moods are the means for us to make spiritual progress.

Vidya 1: Practice of tuning in to the Divine

'Tuning in to the divine' means adopting a specific spiritual mood during the pilgrimage which will enable one to access the particular *tanmatra* or spiritual vibration of a holy site. Sri Ramakrishna would often remark that he visited each holy place with a specific spiritual mood⁶ or *vishesa-bhava* (in Bengali).

Understanding that each *teerthasthan* has its own particular spiritual current, he would choose a spiritual mood accordingly. For example, in Varanasi (also known as Kashi), due

to the preponderance of *sattva* caused "by the priceless love and faith of innumerable monastics and devotees throughout the ages"⁷, Lord Shiva's name, form, and qualities have become condensed⁸ and can be easily accessed by spiritual aspirants in a particular manner. On the other hand, in Vrindavan, where countless devotees have chanted and danced to Sri Krishna's name, his name, form, and qualities have become condensed. For this reason, Sri Ramakrishna says, "I expected to find everyone in Varanasi absorbed in samadhi, meditating on Shiva twenty-four hours a day, and everyone in Vrindavan wild with ecstatic joy in the company of Krishna. But when I went to those places, I found them to be different."⁹

In choosing a specific mood, Sri Ramakrishna also hints that externals—like the type of food one eats and the clothes one wears—may be helpful in fostering a particular mood, but this must also be done with the right motivation. Sometimes we may assume a spiritual attitude and wear certain clothes or have a specific diet (like vegetarianism) for the sake of posing or projecting a holier-than-thou attitude. The goal is to imitate the holy man rather than just mimic him.

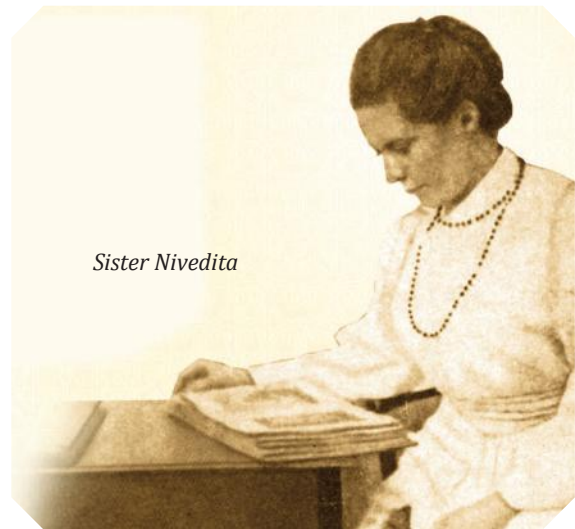
For this reason, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasised in the *Kathamrita* that a spiritual mood must be combined with virtues like sincerity, broad-mindedness, humility, and self-efficacy. When visiting Kashi—in spite of being an incarnation—Sri Ramakrishna assumed the spiritual identity of a humble seeker of the knowledge of Oneness. This attitude gets especially reflected when he meets Trailanga Swami (an incident that we shall discuss later).

Similarly, Sister Nivedita, before her pilgrimage to Amarnath, describes her mindset, which is ideal for a *mumukshu* (seeker of liberation). She writes: "I am learning a great deal...That there is a *certain definite quality*

which may be called spirituality; that it is worth having; that the soul may long for GOD as the heart for human love; that nothing that I have ever called nobility or unselfishness was anything but the feeblest and most sordid of qualities compared to the fierce white light of real selflessness...At present, it is of course just groping in the dark—asking an opinion here and there, and sifting evidence. Someday I hope to have first-hand knowledge and to give it to others with full security of truth.”¹⁰

Here, Nivedita’s mindset strikes the right balance between self-efficacy and humility, which is ideal for a spiritual seeker. She understands that “there is a certain quality which may be called spirituality,” and at the same time, she understands that she is merely “groping in the dark.” Nonetheless, she is clear about her goal to “someday...have first-hand knowledge and give it to others with full security of truth.”

Nivedita’s mindset also indicates a clear focus, inwardness, and determination to have some type of spiritual experience during her pilgrimage to Amarnath. This determination is especially helpful to spiritual aspirants, who must have the strength to withstand the inevitable difficulties and even insults which they will encounter in places of pilgrimage. For example, Sister Nivedita, after her arduous journey to Badrinath near the end of her life, was prevented from entering the inner sanctum of the temple by the priest. Though initially taken aback, she soon “overcame her disappointment, and losing herself in prayers, she joined the pilgrims circumambulating the temple, telling their beads.”¹¹ How could she do this? In addition to her determination, she also possessed a broad-mindedness which allowed her to transcend the local customs and connect with the deity at a deeper level. Similarly, if we want to achieve something during our pilgrimage, we must also possess a



Sister Nivedita

determination, endurance, and broad-mindedness like Sister Nivedita.

Vidya 2: Practice of Spiritual Association

The practice of spiritual association is powerful, practical and easy. It is the practice of utilising our knowledge of holy places to awaken the *sattvika* quality within our own mind.

In the first article, we discussed the importance of acquiring and then meditating upon spiritual, historical, and Puranic knowledge about a *teerthasthan* beforehand. In his visit to Kashi, Sri Ramakrishna shows how a spiritual aspirant—with such knowledge of places of pilgrimage—can access the deep reservoir of “condensed spirituality”.

From his early boyhood days, Sri Ramakrishna had absorbed the essence of scriptures by listening to sadhus and scholars. In this manner, he became very familiar with texts like the Kashi Khanda. He also had a vast knowledge of the different Puranic incidents which had taken place in Kashi. As a result, when he visited temples like Viswanath or Kedarnath, his knowledge enabled him to quickly connect with the spiritual vibration in

that temple and thereby experience “ecstasy in all temples”.¹²

In addition, Kashi is particularly famous because it is believed that *Kashyam Maranam Muktihi* or “Death in Kashi is liberation”. But how does this take place? The Kashi Khanda describes that at the time of one’s passing, Lord Shiva comes and whispers the *Taraka mantra* into the ear of the departed soul. While travelling by a boat in front of the Manikarnika Ghat cremation ground, Sri Ramakrishna literally experienced the truth of this statement. He describes his vision of Kashi as the abode of mukti: “I saw a tall white figure with tawny matted hair steadily approach each funeral pyre in turn, carefully raise each individual soul from its cast-off body, and whisper into its ear the [mantra] that liberated a soul. Seated on the opposite side of the pyre, the Divine Mother untied the gross, subtle and causal knots of bondage created by each individual soul, thus sending the soul to the Absolute by opening the gate of liberation. Lord Viswanath was blessing those souls by bestowing in an instant the experience of non-dual, infinite bliss that

people can attain only after ages of concentration and austerity.”¹³

Another well known Puranic incident—described in the *Kashi Khanda*—is when a pillar of light appeared in Kashi and neither Vishnu nor Brahma was able to trace the beginning or the end of the light. After learning that the pillar of light was none other than Viswanath himself, Vishnu named the area Kashi because it is “that light where the unspeakable Shiva shines (*kashate*).”¹⁴ Other scriptures state that, “Kashi transforms the inert into *Rudramaya* or made of the substance of Rudra himself.”¹⁵

In his visit to Kashi, Sri Ramakrishna literally experienced the “light of Shiva” in the form of a “golden colour” and also the “inert as *Rudramaya*”. He saw in a vision that “the city of Shiva was truly made of gold: There was no clay or stone in Varanasi.” Swami Saradananda further explains that the “subtle form of the city had been made golden by the priceless love and faith of innumerable monastics and devotees throughout the ages. The real Varanasi is luminous and full of spirituality while the external one is but its shadow.”¹⁶ (*To be continued*)

References

- 1) *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 181 2) See *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* [hereafter *Divine Play*], p. 605
- 3) *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volume 1, p. 248 4) *The Eternal Companion*, p. 90 (2016)
- 5) Translation by Swami Gambhirananda 6) *Divine Play*, p. 607 7) *Ibid* 8) *Ibid* 9) *Divine Play*, p. 607
- 10) *Letters of Sister Nivedita*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1:15 11) *Sister Nivedita*. Kolkata: Sister Nivedita Girls’ School, p.282 12) *Divine Play*, p. 331 13) *Divine Play*, p. 610 14) Banaras: City of Light. Diana L.Eck, p. 380, note 35 quoting *Kashi Khanda*, 26.67 15) *Ibid*, p. 381, note 50, quoting *Kashi Rahasya*, 7.21 16) *Divine Play*, p. 609

