

Sri Ramakrishna and the Pilgrimage Mindset

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(Continued from the previous issue...)

This series which discusses the pre-pilgrimage, during pilgrimage, and post pilgrimage mindset concludes with this article.

After returning from a pilgrimage, pilgrims often have two types of reactions: they either indulge in excessive sense enjoyments, or become depressed because they feel they have not gained anything spiritually from the pilgrimage.

The first type of reaction is seen in pilgrims who soon after returning from the pilgrimage slip into overeating delicacies, binge-watching movies, going out with friends to parties, etc. This type of reaction may be explained by behavioral psychology. They think that they have undergone a great austerity by suppressing worldly tendencies, and so must now relax and reward themselves with some sense pleasures. A professor often visited Swami Brahmananda, who was a direct-disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and a powerful spiritual dynamo. Once this professor told the swami's attendants, "I don't know what kind of boys you are, but if you can live in the rarefied atmosphere of Maharaj day after day, you must be great. I myself cannot stand it for long; I need to breathe a little worldly air."¹

The second type of reaction is seen in pilgrims who take spiritual life more seriously. During their pilgrimage, they would have had a strong motivation to achieve some type of spiritual transformation. Yet, at the end of the pilgrimage, they do not find any change within themselves.

Sister Nivedita is an example of the second type. She was a sincere spiritual aspirant who had properly cultivated the pre-pilgrimage mindset and then successfully applied Sri Ramakrishna's pilgrimage mindset during her trip to Amarnath. Just as Sri Ramakrishna recognised the living Viswanath in Trailanga Swami, Sister Nivedita saw the living Amarnath in Swami Vivekananda immediately after his darshan of Lord Amarnath. Describing Swamiji's darshan in the cave of Amarnath, she writes: "... he had received from Shiva the gift of Amar – not to die, until he himself had willed it. ... The purity and whiteness of the ice-pillar had startled and enwrapped him. The cavern had revealed itself to him as the secret of Kailash."²



However, unlike Sri Ramakrishna who experienced ecstasy during his visit with Trailanga Swami, Nivedita experienced conflicting feelings of joy and sadness. On the one hand, she was “deeply and intensely glad of [Swamiji’s] revelation [of Lord Amarnath].”³ And yet on the other hand, she was dissatisfied with her own inability to go beyond the external and enter into the inner world of spirituality. She writes, “But oh...it is such a terrible pain to come face to face with something which is all *inwardness* to someone you worship, and for yourself to be able to get little further than externals.”⁴

She even goes to the extent of momentarily blaming Swamiji for not imparting to her this deeper spiritual experience: “Swami could have made it live, but he was lost. Even now I can scarcely look back on those hours without dropping once more into their abyss of anguish and disappointment...in some strange way I am nearer to him and to GOD for the pilgrimage. But oh, for the bitterness of a lost chance—that can never come again.”⁵

Consoling her, Swami Vivekananda pointed out: “You do not now understand. But you have made the pilgrimage, and it will go on working. Causes must bring their effects. You will understand better afterwards. The effects will come.”⁶

Here, Swamiji’s statement “you have made the pilgrimage and it will go on working” implies that after completion of the pilgrimage, there is a waiting period, or incubation period, for all spiritual aspirants before they experience the results. Just as a bud needs time to blossom into a full-blown flower, similarly spiritual aspirants need time—after the pilgrimage—to receive the full benefits.

Does this mean that upon completion of the pilgrimage, spiritual aspirants need not do anything further, because the spiritual fruits will automatically come to them? No. Sri

Ramakrishna says that it is not sufficient for spiritual aspirants to merely stay idle during this waiting period. He insists that, for spiritual aspirants to experience a permanent spiritual breakthrough from their pilgrimage, they must create a permanent impression or divine *samskara* in the mind. This is known as the post-pilgrimage mindset.

But how to practice this?

Sri Ramakrishna teaches a two-step process for the post-pilgrimage mindset: 1) Cultivating a divine narrative of the trip, and 2) Practicing constant recollection of the pilgrimage.

Stage 1: Cultivating the divine narrative

First, upon completion of the pilgrimage, we should shape the divine narrative by emphasising the encounters with the local deities and holy people—as opposed to recollecting worldly encounters. Two pilgrims who travel together may have the same experiences: have a nice darshan of the local deity, face some difficulties in food and accommodation, and also perhaps have unpleasant experiences like losing something, or being insulted by someone. But when they return, their memories of the trip may be completely different. The first pilgrim may forever cherish the darshan of the Lord, whereas the second pilgrim may brood over the things he lost or the insults he received.

Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna would particularly ask devotees who had returned from pilgrimage to immediately recount their experiences, and to highlight their divine encounters with the local deities and also talks with holy people—as opposed to their worldly encounters. An example of this, described in the previous issue, is his interaction with Manilal after the latter’s return from a pilgrimage to Varanasi. Sri Ramakrishna asked Manilal to

recount his conversations with Trailanga Swami and Swami Bhaskarananda, then positively affirmed Swami Bhaskarananda's advice to "repeat the name of Rama", and discouraged Manilal's worldly criticism of Trailanga Swami. Sri Ramakrishna thus helped Manilal to reinterpret and mould his divine narrative of his visit to Kashi.

Stage 2: Practicing constant recollection of the pilgrimage

Once divine incidents are selected and worldly encounters excluded, Sri Ramakrishna advice to pilgrims is to frequently re-visit interactions with the divine. He says, "As cows eat their fill of fodder mixed with oil-cake and water, then sit and happily chew the cud, likewise, after visiting temples and holy places, one should sit in a secluded spot to ruminate and become absorbed in the godly thoughts that arose in the mind there. After visiting sacred places, one shouldn't immediately put one's mind on worldly things and drive holy thoughts away. If that happens, those godly thoughts cannot leave permanent impressions on the mind."⁷ Neuroscientists would refer to this as depositing an event into our long term episodic memories.

In fact, modern studies show that rather than remembering an actual event, people are more likely to recollect their subjective verbal or written descriptions after the fact. Daniel Gilbert, in his best-selling book *Stumbling on Happiness*, explains that when we are asked to recall a trip or any event, we do not "replay the entire episode to find out" If the pilgrimage was pleasant or unpleasant. Rather we reduce our experiences to words such as "happy" or "sad" to describe the trip.⁸ And in the future, when we recall the trip, we first refer to our earlier

verbal or written description of the excursion and a few incidents from the pilgrimage—as opposed to replaying the entire trip in our minds.

Once a devotee accompanied Sri Ramakrishna to the Kalighat temple. From there he went to his father-in-law's house for the night's stay. When he learnt of this, Sri Ramakrishna rebuked the devotee: "What! You saw the Divine Mother. You were supposed to ruminate on thoughts of Her and of your visit to Her, but instead you passed the night at your father-in-law's like a worldly man! After visiting a temple or a sacred place, one should be absorbed in holy thoughts and contemplation. Otherwise how can divine feeling settle in the heart?"⁹

After visiting a temple or sacred place, one should be absorbed in holy thoughts and contemplation. Otherwise how can divine feeling settle in the heart?

A modern example of this principle can be seen in Swami

Sridharananda, a senior monk of our Order, who had the opportunity to serve two spiritual luminaries, Swami Virajanananda and Swami Shantananda. Although he is now 95 and served them more than seventy years ago, even today these reminiscences remain ever fresh in his mind.¹⁰ He once revealed his secret: "Every day for the past seventy years, I have been constantly revisiting and cultivating them. This is why they stay fresh in my mind."¹¹ As with anything holy, these auspicious memories will continue to help us to evolve as we gain spiritual maturity.

Similarly, after her trip to Amarnath, Sister Nivedita recorded her experiences in her letters and books: *Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda* and *The Master as I Saw Him*. Months after her Amarnath pilgrimage, she experienced a permanent transformation and understood the power of her trip to Amarnath. She wrote to Ms. Hammond: "I am so glad to have been there with him. That must be

a memory forever, and he did dedicate me to Siva too. As I look back on this wonderful summer, I wonder how I have come to heights so rare. We have been living and breathing in the sunshine of the great religious ideals, all these months, and GOD has been more real to us than the common men.”¹²

Here, Nivedita’s reflections on her trip—as a “memory forever” and also her wonder at how she could “come to heights so rare...living and breathing in the sunshine of the great religious ideals”—indicate the degree to which her Amarnath pilgrimage had permanently taken a deep root in her mind.

But Nivedita’s recollections were not limited only to her pilgrimages. She also cherished and practiced constant recollection of her meetings with the Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Recollecting her first meeting with the Holy Mother she writes: “Six years ago this very day—and on a Thursday

too—I saw the Holy Mother for the first time... Do you remember?” She also remembered the day Swamiji gave her the name Nivedita and regarded it as her birthday: “Friday next, March 25th, will be my birthday, when I was first called ‘Nivedita.’”¹³

The point to note is Nivedita’s capacity not merely to mechanically recollect her encounters, but also to constantly cultivate them with intimacy and emotion. As a result, her deep affection for both Holy Mother and Swamiji can be tangibly felt. These constant intimate recollections resulted in her transformation from Margaret Noble into Sister Nivedita—and ultimately from Sister Nivedita into *Loka Mata*.

In conclusion, as sincere spiritual aspirants, let us practice these principles of the pilgrimage mindset and experience a spiritual breakthrough in our lives! ✨

(Concluded.)

References: 1) *The Eternal Companion*, p. 69 2) *The Master as I Saw Him*, pg. 103-104 3) *Letters of Sister Nivedita* 1: 18. 4) *Ibid.* 5) *Ibid.* 6) *Some Notes of Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda*, pp. 95-96 7) *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, p. 605 8) *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert, p. 45 9) *Ibid.*, pp. 605-606 10) See YouTube link for Swami Sridharananda’s reminiscences at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iec8LPmLT5U> 11) The author recorded this interview with Swami Sridharananda back in the year 2000 at Lake Tahoe, California, USA. 12) *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1: 81 13) *Ibid.*, pp. 575-576

Sri Ramakrishna’s family shrine in Kamarpukur.

Goddess Shitala was the original family deity of Sri Ramakrishna. His father Kshudiram Chattopadhyay, daily worshipped goddess Shitala by invoking Her presence in a consecrated water-vessel. When Kshudiram would pluck flowers early in the morning, goddess Shitala would appear before him as an eight-year-old girl dressed in red and wearing many ornaments. She would accompany him smiling and help him pluck flowers by bending the branches in blossom.

At Jayarambati, the native place of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, her family worshipped at the temple of goddess Shitala. In 1909 when Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi contracted chicken pox, the Brahmin priest of the Shitala temple in Baghbazar treated her with naturopathy every day.

