

To Labour Is to Pray

Swami Arunachalananda Puri



Sant Jnaneshwar Maharaj

अवघाची संसार सुखाचा करीन ।
आनंदे भरीन तिन्ही लोक ॥

I shall make the entire phenomenal world including all three spheres of existence fully filled of bliss!

THIS IS THE PROCLAMATION of famous 13th-century Indian Marathi saint, poet, philosopher, and yogi of the Nath and Varkari traditions—Sant Jnaneshwar Maharaj. What a tremendous assertion! Especially in the backdrop of every human being's continuous experience, down the ages, of 'life as suffering'; the Buddhists even developed their whole philosophy on 'दुःखं – suffering'. The main principles of this vast religion rest on dictums like 'सर्वं क्षणिकं क्षणिकम्—Everything is certainly momentary', 'सर्वं दुःखं दुःखम्—Everything is full of misery or causes misery', 'सर्वं शून्यं शून्यम्—Everything is certainly void', and so on. So, for Sant Jnaneshwar Maharaj

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to proclaim that 'I shall fill the world with bliss' is indeed extraordinary. What is the source of strength to make such a bold proclamation? Before we investigate the source of this strength, let us look at the words of Sri Ramakrishna which too highlight these two *Weltanschauungs*:

There are two schools of thought: the Vedanta and the Purana. According to the Vedanta this world is a 'framework of illusion', that is to say, it is all illusory, like a dream. But according to the Purana, the books of devotion, God Himself has become the twenty-four cosmic principles. Worship God both within and without. ...

Hence the Bhakti scriptures describe this very world as a 'mansion of mirth'. Ramprasad sang in one of his songs, 'This world is a framework of illusion.' Another devotee gave the reply, 'This very world is a mansion of mirth.' As the saying goes, 'The devotee of Kali, free while living, is full of Eternal Bliss.' The bhakta sees that He who is God has also become maya. Again, He Himself has become the universe and all its living beings. The bhakta sees God, maya, the universe, and the living beings as one.¹

In the above words of Sri Ramakrishna, we not only get the source of these two thought-streams but also the source of strength for Jnaneshwar Maharaj—everything and everyone is God!

Even in Upanishads we get 'सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म—Everything is verily Brahman' (*Chhandogya Upanishad*, 3.14.1) and 'इशावास्यम् इदं सर्वम्—All this (observable world) should be covered with God' (*Isha Upanishad*, 1); other scriptures of Sanatana Dharma too proclaim this comprehensive and broad outlook, but the stress given to it in the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda is unique.

Practical Vedanta

If all is manifestation of God then no step in the evolution of any conscious being or in the evolution of any community, society, country, religion, civilization, and the like, can be looked down upon or condemned; no activity of life is out of reach for practising spirituality. This is famously put by Sister Nivedita in her 'Introduction' to Swami Vivekananda's *Complete Works*:

It was the Swami Vivekananda who, while proclaiming the sovereignty of the Advaita Philosophy, as including that experience in which all is one, without a second, also added to Hinduism the doctrine that Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita are but three phases or stages in a single development, of which the last-named constitutes the goal. This is part and parcel of the still greater and more simple doctrine that the many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the mind at different times and in different attitudes; or as Sri Ramakrishna expressed the same thing, 'God is both with form and without form. And He is that which includes both form and formlessness.' It is this which adds its crowning significance to our Master's (Swami Vivekananda's) life, for here he becomes the meeting-point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future. If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. *To labour is to pray*. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid (emphasis added).²

Thus, when whole life itself is viewed as journey towards the ideal or as progressive manifestation of the infinite Divine, then it gives tremendous scope for everyone to practise spirituality in day-to-day life and thus 'if the fisherman thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the Spirit,

he will be a better student. If the lawyer thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on' (3.245); this in effect gives rise to social virtues and graces which humanity in general lacks and which it is in desperate need to develop.

Practical Vedanta does not make a distinction between sacred and secular, 'Its central principle is to bridge the gulf separating the sacred and the secular by converting work into worship and by stressing the potential divinity of the soul. Advaita Vedanta had for too long been identified with Maya, and became a philosophy of escape. Swamiji played down Maya and stressed the omnipresence, power, and glory of Brahman.'³ If the infinite Pure Consciousness-Bliss is the source of everyone and everything in the universe then there are infinite possibilities in which It will manifest and no manifestation can be looked at with contempt. Based on the immanent Spirit within, we have to develop a new way of looking at ourselves and others; human relationships—whether within family or at workplace, within social, religious communities or between sovereign nations—have to become divinized.

Sri Ramakrishna's stress on the development of 'ripe ego' over 'unripe ego' becomes the base for all activities in Practical Vedanta. In the words of Swami Ranganathananda, we have to move from 'individuality' to 'personality' by taking into account the 'psycho-social evolution' relevant to the human phase; Mother Nature has equipped human beings with cerebral system, unique in all species, for this purpose. The 'unripe ego', trapped as it is in the organic structure of a human being, can never yield fruitful results beneficial to society and even to oneself, while 'ripe ego', based on the immanent God within all, helps us towards the ideal of '*Shiva Jnane Jiva Sewa*—serving humanity by looking at it as manifestation of the Divine'. The basic guiding principles of Practical Vedanta can be encapsulated in the following words of Swami Vivekananda,

‘Man is not travelling from error to truth, but climbing up from truth to truth, from truth that is lower to truth that is higher.’⁴ Swami Ranganathananda further clarifies Practical Vedanta:

Vedanta presents God as the central thread of unity. He is the *antaryāmin*, the *antarātman* of the theists and the atheists, of the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. He is the divine thread of unity, like the thread that unites all the pearls in a garland, as expressed by Sri Krishna in the Gita (7:7): *Mayi sarvamidam protam sūtre manigānā iva*. ... we failed to treat the millions of our common people as brothers and fellow humans, as demanded by this vision. And this is our special task in the modern age. And Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and Holy Mother Sarada Devi provide us with the necessary inspiration to implement this vision in our political, social, cultural, and educational fields. This is the message of what Swami Vivekananda calls ‘practical Vedanta.’⁵

Practical Vedanta’s relevance to social life, especially in India, cannot be overemphasised; Though Sri Krishna had said in the Bhagavadgita (18.46), ‘यतः प्रवृत्तिर्भूतानां येन सर्वमिदं ततम् । स्वकर्मणा तमभ्यर्च्य सिद्धिं विन्दति मानवः॥—A human being achieves success by adoring, through his own duties, Him, from whom is the origin of creatures, and by whom is all this pervaded’, Indians down the ages mostly succeeded in developing and divinizing relationships only with temple statues! In order to make Advaita practical, inter-human relationships need to be divinized. Swami Ranganathananda says:

Our [Indian] people have been more concerned with their relationship with god, or with an image of god in a temple or other religious places, than with man the next door neighbour, with whom our people would more often collide, than cooperate for general human well-being. Our education today must help us to develop in our people a new type of excellence that would *make for the grihastha, or the house-holder, spiritually growing into the citizen*; a genetically limited individual

growing beyond his or her genetic limitations of outlook and sympathy and response, and growing into a national and human awareness and responsibility (emphasis added) (3,98).

If weak human beings protest that this is too high an ideal to be implemented by our weak minds in this frail life, then Vedanta is ever kind to suggest steps towards it—and as enunciated in the words of Swamiji above, each step is a valid one and not an erroneous delusion. Swami Ranganathananda gives this simple step as:

Don’t demean yourself, while you respect somebody else. That is the first lesson we have to learn. Our self-respect must be maintained. Then only that respect for the other person has some meaning. Now this is the truth we must keep in view. Anything that demeans somebody else should not be done; also, anything that demeans oneself, should not be done. Let everybody be raised in his or her own self-respect. Then only we can have a healthy human society.⁶

In the light of above-mentioned principles of Practical Vedanta, which converts labour into prayer and secular into sacred, let us see how it affects the primary institution of society—family.

Marriage and Family

In human society, marriage and family are vital aspects of life and if the relationships in these basic institutions are divinized, relationships in other spheres of life can also be made harmonious and joyful. Indian spiritual tradition since the Vedic times have understood this importance of divinization of marriage and family. Highlighting this aspect and quoting relevant mantra from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.4.3), Swami Ranganathananda says:

Among the various types of human interactions for the manifestation of this innate human divinity, that between man and woman is most important. Unlike in the Semitic tradition, where

woman is presented as produced from a dispensable rib of man, the Upanishads present man and woman as the equal halves of a divine unity, each the complement of, and incomplete without, the other: *Sa imam eva ātmānam dvedhā apātayat. Tatah patiśca patnī ca abhavatām. Tasmāt idam ardhabṛṅgalam iva sva iti*; He (the divine Person) divided Himself into two halves: thus was the origin of husband and wife. Therefore, this (the body of man) is only like the one half of a split pea.⁷

When the sublimity of the vision is such that the Supreme Reality is manifesting as man and woman, all aspects of human relationships in all institutions of life are bound to be divinized. In this connection the dialogue between sage Yajñavalkya and his wife Maitreyi in *Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* too reveals this profound thought of Vedānta; and we get a glimpse as to how this grand vision was percolating into the very pore of the ancient Indian society. Swami Vivekananda in his lecture ‘Yajñavalkya and Maitreyi’ translates the ideas of the Upanishad as:

It is not for the sake of the husband that the wife loves the husband, but for the sake of the Atman that she loves the husband, because she loves the Self. None loves the wife for the sake of the wife; but it is because one loves the Self that one loves the wife. None loves the children for the children; but because one loves the Self, therefore one loves the children. None loves wealth on account of the wealth; but because one loves the Self, therefore one loves wealth.⁸

When this all-pervading and blissful Self/God is made the central pivot on which all family relationships are based, everything gets harmoniously synthesised. Swami Vivekananda prescribes:

We have to cover everything with the Lord Himself, not by a false sort of optimism, not by blinding our eyes to the evil, but by really seeing God in everything. Thus, we have to give up the world, and when the world is given up, what remains? God. What is meant? You can

have your wife; it does not mean that you are to abandon her, but that you are to see God in the wife. Give up your children; what does that mean? To turn them out of doors, as some human brutes do in every country? Certainly not. That is diabolism; it is not religion. But see God in your children. So, in everything. In life and in death, in happiness and in misery, the Lord is equally present. The whole world is full of the Lord. Open your eyes and see Him. This is what Vedānta teaches (2.146).

Do we have any life which has successfully implemented this in marriage and in family relationships? The emphatic answer is, yes—the life of Sri Sarada Devi. Holy Mother, as she is referred world over, led a life which is a perfect demonstration of this ideal; we find her performing all her actions, in the midst of cacophony of selfish and eccentric relatives, with this divine consciousness and thus making herself the guiding light to not only millions of ordinary souls but also to spiritual giants like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda and others. ‘No one is a stranger my child: this whole world is your own!’—this last utterance from her summarises the concept of Practical Vedānta and gives us the key to divinizing all relationships in all spheres of life.

Religious Community

The basis of relationship between any community, especially religious community, should be unselfish love and spirit of sacrifice for the service of others; this can be accomplished only when the heart is filled with pure spiritual bliss. We find an example of this sort of pure love between inmates of an institution in the life of founders of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. The following incident, which happened during Swami Adbhutananda’s time and in connection to which he narrated another incident involving the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, gives us an exact picture of divinized relationships in a religious institution:

Once, there was a talk of asking a sadhu of a Calcutta branch of our (Ramakrishna) Math to leave the organization. He [who was to be expelled] heard it and came to Latu Maharaj (Swami Adbhutananda) and went on speaking against the head of that branch. Latu Maharaj was annoyed and scolded him, and narrated the following incident to him:


One day brother Baburam [Swami Premananda] could not get up in time. When it was reported to Swamiji (Swami Vivekananda), he asked someone, 'Go and ring the bell near his ears.' He did as he was ordered to do. Still brother Baburam did not stir. Then Swamiji himself went and woke him up. At tea time Swamiji told brother Baburam, 'Look here, you are all organizers of the Math. If you do not observe a rule how would others do it? You will have to follow the rules more strictly than others. You must scrupulously observe them; this will encourage others to do the same.' Brother Baburam heard it quietly and said, 'Today I would not get up in time, and this has caused inconvenience to others. I understand it. So, brother, do one thing; set a punishment for breaking any rule.' Hearing this Swamiji became grave and said, 'Baburam, could you think of it? I to punish you!' Seeing tears in Swamiji's eyes brother Baburam's eyes also glistened with tears. The news reached Rakhhal Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda). He became anxious and immediately reached the place and intervened: 'Why all this fuss—shedding tears, etc.? Do we not have it that anyone who would fail to get up in time will not get his meals that day at the Math, he will have to do *madbhukari* [begging of food by sadhus]?' Brother Baburam was very glad and said: 'Raja [Rakhhal Maharaj] is perfectly right. Today I will beg my food from outside.' Just see the depth of their love for one another. One broke a rule and asked for punishment; another burst into tears at the thought that anyone could think of being punished by another; a third meted out a punishment, and, the breaker of the law was glad to receive the punishment. If such love were not there no Math could be run.

Hearing the story the person understood his own fault, went back to the person-in-charge of that branch, begged pardon of him, and asked for punishment. Needless to say they were happily reconciled.⁹

The direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were filled with God-consciousness and hence their unselfish love for each other created a strong foundation for the monastic institution built by Swami Vivekananda. In order that any social or religious institution develop such relationships, the same principles of Practical Vedanta mentioned earlier needs to be replicated.

Conclusion

'To Labour is To Pray' encapsulates the Practical Vedanta perspective of treating entire life as a spiritual process. With this broad outlook naturally all the relationships that will come up during the course of life, be they of family related or outer social life related, can be divinized. Vedanta says that the 'world and other sentient beings' experienced by a human being are not separate from the Self of the human being; Swami Vivekananda said in a lecture at Hartford, Connecticut: 'Love and charity for the whole human race, that is the test of true religiousness. I do not mean the sentimental statement that all men are brothers, but that one must feel the oneness of human life.'¹⁰ And this is possible because, 'All are our fellow passengers, our fellow travellers—all life, plants, animals; not only my brother man, but my brother brute, my brother plant; not only my brother the good, but my brother the evil, my brother the spiritual and my brother the wicked. They are all going to the same goal' (1.4.22).

Let all of humanity follow this Practical Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda and divinize all human relationships across all institutions and thus make this earth itself as heaven. 

(References at the end)

examines human cost of war', by Clare Mulroy, in *USA Today*, May 24, 2024. 'Humanity' is a good word, but Swamiji might put it as 'Love for Love's sake', for this implies something more active and effective.

8. Though this is called the Prayer of St. Francis, it seems there is no proof that he wrote it, as there is with his other writings. But it is so in line with stories of his life, we can very well imagine that he did write it—or he was the inspiration for it.
9. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer_of_Saint_Francis>.
10. *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 1812: John 14:27.
11. *Ibid.*, John 15:4–5.
12. <<https://holyrosarychurch.tripod.com/oracao.gif>>.
13. *In Search of God*, 44–45.

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3. *Prabuddha Bharata* (March 1981), Editorial.
4. *Complete Works*, I.xii.
5. <<https://vk.rkmm.org/s/vkm/m/vedantakesari-1976/a/05-sri-ramakrishna-and-mans-spiritual-heritage-nov-1976>>, accessed on 21 November 2024.
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Friendship and the Spiritual Life

Father Cassian DiRocco

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2. Sunday, 9th April 1882.
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5. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV, 39.2, in O Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2013), 87.
6. C S Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Collins, 1960), 70.
7. Peace, servanthood, friendship, parental, and erotic love (between a man and a woman).
8. *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q. 23, a.1, 'Charity is the friendship of man for God' (citing Jn. 15, 'I have called you friends').
9. *Raja Yoga*, 161 (on Patanjali's Sutra 1:12, on the control of the vrittis through non-attachment; emphasis added).
10. Victoria Hall, Madras, India (*Complete Works*, vol. 3; no date is given).
11. Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia*, #20.
12. *Ibid.*, #22.
13. *Ibid.*, #80.
14. *Ibid.*, #31–32.
15. *Idem velle atque idem nolle, ea demum firma amicitia est* ('Agreement in likes and dislikes—this, and this only, is what constitutes true friendship'). LUCIUS SERGIUS CATALINA (Roman Senator, +62 B.C.).
16. Oratio 43, in laudem Basilii Magni, 15.16–17, 19–21; PG 36, 514–423.
17. Confessions V.19; Sermon 385.3.
18. *Letter* 73: 3.10.
19. *Confessions*, IV.8.13.
20. *Confessions*, IV.6.11 (N.B. this deceased friend of whom Augustine is speaking may not be the same one he is speaking about in the first part of this citation from Confessions IV.8.13).
21. Sayings of those who Grow Old in Asceticism, in O. CLEMENT, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2013), 273.
22. Gita, 6:5–6.
23. *Vana Parva*, 313.76.