

LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF SRI MAHA SANNIDHANAM - JAGADGURU SRI ABHINAVA VIDHYATEERTHA MAHASWAMIGAL (contd.)

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PART 7: PEERLESS PRECEPTOR

Various types of people whom Lord Krishna classifies as the distressed, the seeker of knowledge or of wealth, and the man of wisdom, all these came to the Acharya for guidance and succour. Those suffering from various ailments would have him play the role of a divine doctor; persons with problems would seek the Acharya's guidance and sacred intervention. People desirous of progressing in the spiritual path as also those who have attained realization sought his guidance.

The Acharya would respond to each of them in an appropriate manner. The Acharya always went out of his way to make himself accessible to his devotees. He made no distinction of caste, creed or status as far as sincere aspirants were concerned.

Extreme Concern

A certain Muslim instrumentalist once visited Sringeri, and was seen by the Acharya playing his instrument in front of the Samadhi temple of the Parmacharya. The Acharya then sent word to the unsuspecting man to come and play his instrument at the time of the night puja. Usually musicians are allowed to perform only during the intervals in the chanting of the mantras in the puja. However, the already surprised musician was in for a greater surprise when the Acharya ordered that the loud Vedic chanting be stopped to facilitate the musician to play his instrument through the entire length of the puja while the Acharya chanted mantras mentally.

The Acharya accorded very high priority to

spiritual aspirants. On a certain day he was not doing well and visitors had been highly restricted. A spiritual aspirant in his twenties had traveled a long distance to see the Acharya and was to leave the next day. When this was made known to the Acharya, he called for the person, patiently heard him and gave inimitable spiritual advice.

The Acharya did not confine himself to just initiating a disciple into a mantra. He would willingly give clarifications when asked. For instance, a person approached him and requested him to explain the Dhyana Sloka of a particular mantra. The Acharya closed his eyes and gave such a lucid description that it seemed as if he were seeing a form in front of him and describing it.

The surprised devotee remarked, "The Acharya's explanation is so excellent that I can virtually see the form in front of me." Candidly the Acharya replied, "Of what use will my clarification be if I merely confined myself to mechanically translating the Dhyana Sloka? I was indeed visualizing the form described therein. That was the reason why I was speaking slowly, focusing my attention on the various parts of the divine form before describing what I was observing."

Inexplicable Compassion

His compassion was something that can only be wondered and not explained.

Some years ago an Ayurvedic physician brought the Acharya a rare preparation whose

composition he kept secret. The doctor said that the lotion he had prepared would heal any wound. The quantity supplied was very small and so was precious.

One day Acharya saw a badly wounded dog. He noticed that someone had hurt it with a knife and that the wound was very deep. The poor creature whimpered in agony. The Acharya was moved. Immediately, he ordered that the lotion be applied on the dog. Who indeed would have thought that such a rare medicine meant for the future use of the pontiff himself, would be given to treat a dog?

The application of the ointment was continued for a couple of days. It was surprising to note that the wound healed well beyond expectations and that too in a remarkably short period of time. The dog became completely normal.

Even when traveling he would notice persons or situations needing help. Once, as the Acharya's car sped through a city lane he saw a beggar lying prostrate on the ground and having fits. He ordered the driver to halt the car so that the man's welfare could be looked into. The driver replied that such sights were common and more often than not were mere pretences put up by beggars to earn the sympathy of passers-by and get alms from them. The Acharya refused to budge from his stance and said, "It matters little whether the man is a fraud or not. I am going to help him." Accordingly, the driver halted the car. The Acharya realized that the man had stopped having fits and was feeling thirsty. So, without a moments thought he picked up his own vessel and asked for the water to be taken to that man.

In the meantime, another car had stopped and its driver rushed with water to the sick man and gave it to him before the water vessel sent by the Acharya reached the spot.

When the Acharya resumed his journey he remarked, "How fortunate the other car driver was to be able to render help! I was not lucky enough to avail of the chance to help the suffering one."

Importance of Gratitude

One of the things that we learn from the Acharya's life is the importance of gratitude. The Paramacharya had engaged the scholar Sri Ramachandra Sastry to teach Tarka to our Guru. The studies were completed during the Paramacharya's time itself. After the Acharya's coronation as the pontiff, he could have treated Sri Ramachandra Sastry as a mere Asthana Vidvan, though of a very high caliber. This, however, he did not choose to do. In his own hand he wrote letters to Sastry and even addressed the latter as his Upadhyaya or teacher.

The Acharya would reveal his perfection even in mundane matters. He used to have a handkerchief with him, which he would use during the course of the day. As such, it would naturally be a crumpled piece of clothe after a while.

When giving darshan, for example, he would sometimes be seen folding this handkerchief. At the end of the exercise the folded piece of cloth would look as if it had been ironed—the edges of the cloth would coincide so perfectly that it would be hard for a person who had not noticed him folding it to believe that it had been done merely with the hands.

It was not that he did it with conscious intent but quite casually like anybody else folding a crumpled piece of cloth. Only in his case the result would always be perfect.

While peeling an apple, the Acharya would invariably do so in such a way that not even a thinnest slice of the flesh was peeled away. The skin alone would be neatly peeled off, and all this done in a most casual way.

Sometimes the Acharya would cut an apple and distribute the pieces among his attendants. All the pieces would be symmetrically cut, of the same size.

The Acharya never believed in keeping to himself what he had learnt. Hence he had trained many in Tarka. He was even more keen on expounding the Vedantic texts. He would welcome doubts and would not hesitate to send for numerous reference texts. He would permit interested people to attend his classes for he held that "even the mere hearing of the Sastras is beneficial. Thus, supposing 20 persons came for the lessons, maybe atleast one or two would listen intently and interestedly and thereby derive special benefit from hearing the Sastras."

Stamp of Realization

Quite often his Upanyasams clearly bore the stamp of realization. Since he regarded only a genuine practitioner as competent to preach, he was meticulous in his Anushtanams (religious practices). He would get up before sunrise, bathe and proceed for his morning Anushtanam which would go on till 9a.m. Only after that he would give audience. In the afternoon, after giving Tirtha prasadam and finishing his duties, he would go for his afternoon bath followed by Anushtanam and only then take Bhiksha. He would bathe, without fail, in the evening and perform Anushtanam for the third time. Thus, there was perfect consonance between his practice and preaching.

The Acharya's instructions also were unique and the method adopted was particularly suited to the disciple. A young devotee (in his twenties) was working in a management concern. He often had to take his assistants (some of them being old enough to be his father) to task. He felt that he was being rude and was disgusted with himself. He met the Acharya at Sringeri.

When they were together the same afternoon, the Acharya suddenly got up and proceeded at a great speed, beckoning the devotee to follow him. They quickly reached the Sharada Devi temple where a new gopuram was being built. Some workers were found to be idling, instead of attending to their tasks. The Acharya climbed the scaffolding with great agility and proceeded to reprimand them in no uncertain terms.

He then climbed down rapidly and walked back towards the bridge. His face bore a delightful smile directed towards the devotee. The devotee was amazed that the Acharya was seemingly angry a moment back but was so peaceful immediately afterwards. The devotee learnt a permanent lesson in the manner of handling official duties without a word having been exchanged.

Another young disciple was to appear for an honours elective exam during his engineering studies. He suddenly felt that the result of passing the exam would be a few worthless additional alphabets to an already worthless certificate. When he requested the Acharya's permission to immediately proceed to Sringeri, it was not granted.

The Acharya later clarified to him as follows: "I had told you not to come earlier because I did not want you to miss your examinations. A task undertaken should be accomplished whether one considers it important or otherwise."

The Acharya never forgot any good turn done to him even if the favour was meagre. During a camp at Chennai, a devoted lady yearned that the Acharya visit her house when he would be in the vicinity. Though it was not in his schedule, the Acharya graced her house and blessed her and her family members.

Wanting to express her gratitude at least in a small measure, the lady later went to the Acharya

and submitted a small silver glass filled with sugar. The Acharya accepted it and told the lady that he was pleased with her devotion and would have visited her even without such an offering. When she subsequently went to Sringeri, he remarked to the assembled devotees that the lady had given a big silver vessel to the Mutt just because he visited her house. This happened on her next visit too when he again expansively commented on her generosity. Having a crystal like pure heart, the Acharya also, like Yuddhishtira, was able to see only the good in others.

PART 8: MAHASAMADHI

From 1954, the Acharya had set a hectic pace for himself as the Jagadguru. During this time he packed his life with achievements of no mean order. For example, he had traversed the entire length of the country from Kashmir to Kanyakumari twice, in addition to numerous short tours. One effect of these tours was that many religious leaders became close to him, attracted as they were by his winning personality. These religious leaders included Advaitins as well as those belonging to other sects and religions.

Appointing Successor

On November 11 1974, he initiated a successor designate. The Acharya named his successor as 'Bharati Tirtha.' The Guru and his disciple made a number of visits together. Speaking about His Holiness Sri Bharati Tirtha, the Acharya once said, "When I was in Delhi (in 1982) my disciple was with me. He conducted himself the way a disciple should. On the occasion of Vidvat Sadas, he showed that he was more scholarly than the most erudite of the scholars who came." The Acharya had also mentioned in the speech that the tradition of the Sringeri Sarada Peetham is transferred from Guru to sishya just as a lamp lights another lamp. He thus indicated that the lighted lamp becomes as bright as the one that lit it.

One of the projects that he initiated in the eighties was the construction of a bridge across the Tunga. He was very involved in the work and was once having a discussion with the director of a leading firm in India. During the conversation he recounted the main features of all the important bridges in the country and then went on to talk about the salient features of world famous bridges in the UK, France, the USA and Australia. After this, he even asked an attendant to bring a small photo album in which he had collected, with necessary statistics, photographs of world famous bridges over the years. This shows how perfectly thorough he was.

With the passage of time the Acharya began to hint that his work in a mortal frame was nearing completion. He remarked to his personal assistant, "If I am there until 1992. A lot of activities, such as a bridge across the Tunga, can be accomplished for the Mutt. I may or may not live to see the latter."

Row of Samadhis

One day the Acharya and H.H. Sri Bharati Tirtha were standing in the Adhishtanam of our Parameshti Acharya. The Acharya then said, "After my life is over, you need not have to wonder where to have my Samadhi. It can be built here (pointing to the southern side of the Parameshti Acharya's Adhishtanam)."

Unable to bear such words, H.H. Sri Bharati Tirtha said, "Why should the Acharya talk about such matters now?" To this he replied "I am not just talking about my Samadhi. For you too it must be constructed on the southern side of my Samadhi. You know that Vidvat Sadas is being held in the Mandapam in front of the samadhis. If my Samadhi is also constructed adjoining the existing samadhis more people can be comfortably accommodated."

Premonition of End

The Acharya's speeches also subtly reflected the recognition that the time to relinquish the mortal coil was nearing. For instance, in 1986 at Chennai he said, "Brahman shines in the form of consciousness. If one were to get the direct realization of this entity one will fulfill the purpose of a human birth. This is what the scriptures say. Experience is also like that. The more absorbed we become in Brahman the more we realize all that is happening in the universe is merely an illusory sport."

Again, in Bangalore in July 1989, his benedictory discourse was spoken from the standpoint of a knower of Truth. Uncommonly, he even commented on this holy address to a disciple at Sringeri, in August 1989.

He said, "I remember that, while at Bangalore, I went one day to Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. That morning, I had been in Nirvikalpa Samadhi for a long period of time. Though I engaged in my normal activities, my mind was particularly indrawn that day. Perhaps, that is why I spoke about the viewpoint of a knower of Truth and about Samadhi. I now get a feeling that I shall not be discoursing on those lines again."

Final Days

From the second week of September 1989, he was not well. During this time, he asked his secretary to read to him, texts like Mohamudgara, Siva Maanasapuja Stotram and Brahmanuchintanam. He said, "Instead of mourning and wailing when one is sick, one can read holy works, such as these. This is what my Guru has taught me. But now I not able to read, and so you read them out to me."

In the early hours of the morning of September 21, 1989, he experienced chest pain and uttered "Narayana." His assistant came running. The Acharya's first reaction was, "Have I spoken so loudly that I woke you up?" The

characteristic of extreme compassion never deserted him even then. During the latter half of the morning he shed his mortal coil.

The Acharya did not live to see the bridge across the Tunga completed. Small matter though, for is he not, himself, the ultimate bridge enabling his disciples to cross the ocean of transmigratory existence?

PART 9: TEACHINGS OF THE JAGADGURU

1. It is a pity that when many of us are asked, "who are you?" The first thought that arises is "I am a Keralite," or "I am a Punjabi." If people feel that they are Indians, only then the nation will have great prosperity and the divisive forces will not be operative as they are today.
2. Our nation and its culture have a hoary past and we should all be proud of it. Mere aping of the West is not beneficial for us. For example, care of the aged parents has come down to us traditionally and we must never neglect this duty by imbibing concepts of some free societies, wherein concern for one's own parents is at low ebb.
3. By God's grace, we have obtained a human birth, the power of discrimination and someone to teach us about ultimate truth. If we still remain lazy, we will be wasting a marvelous opportunity.
4. Tendencies develop, regardless of the characteristics of the action performed. Hence, he who wishes to lead a proper life will do well to avoid evil deeds and repeatedly perform virtuous deeds.
5. An ideal disciple will indeed act as per the Guru's instructions and not give place to thoughts, such as 'Is it possible for me to do as he says? Shall I try something else?' If we follow our Guru's instructions, it does not mean that we are unintelligent. It only

- implies that we have surrendered for our own good to a power superior to us.
6. The light of a lamp falls on its surroundings. One may study Sastras in that light, while another may, paying no attention to it, spend time sleeping. Similarly, great souls are always showering their grace. Each one can derive benefit depending on one's mentality.
 7. The best disciple directly understands what his guru desires him to do even without the preceptor actually telling him anything. By devotion to the preceptor one attains the highest goal. If one has single-minded devotion to one's preceptor like Ekalavya (who attained magnificent proficiency in archery by virtue of his faith in Dronacharya even without the latter actually teaching him anything), one need not have any fear regarding one's spiritual progress.
 8. When tendencies nurtured in the previous birth are the same as those in the present birth, then obstacles to a course of action are negligible. On the other hand, when past and present trends are at variance, the course of action is decided by the one which is the stronger. If one tries hard enough, one can certainly overcome the past tendencies. How hard one must try cannot be determined beforehand. Only when obstacles arise one must try hard till one succeeds.
 9. It is ridiculous to suppose that Prarabdha can be more powerful than one's will. The reason for this is that Prarabdha itself is a result of one's will. What one performed guided by one's will in the previous births, is what is now appearing as fate. What one has brought about due to exercise of will power in the present birth can certainly be overcome, provided one makes adequate effort.
 10. Let us suppose that a student takes an examination. He would be very involved with it mentally. If he does not fare well in a particular subject, he gets worried and for that reason will not perform well on the next day also. He who is calm after dedicating the result to God prepares whole heartedly. Such a student will prepare well for both the examinations. As he is without worry, he will perform better.
 11. There is no reason whatsoever to despair about one's spiritual progress. If one tries hard enough, one will certainly make much progress. After all, prarabdha has been compared by Brahma to a seed. What one gets out of the field is determined not only by the seed but also by the effort one makes to till the land. By proper manuring and the like, the result can be very much improved. It is meaningless if a man just sits quiet and expects fate to lead him on in the spiritual path.
 12. The greatest impediment to Bhakti is the ego which repeatedly asserts itself and prevents self-surrender. Thus a man can truly surrender himself to Isvara only if he annihilates his ego. Repeatedly thinking of Isvara and practicing spiritual discipline precisely in the manner indicated by the Guru, go a long way in effacing the ego and engendering devotion.
 13. One must never doubt the wisdom of God and must never feel that attempts to reach Isvara are not noticed by the Lord who is an ocean of mercy. The Lord grasps the inner feeling and is not concerned with mere externals and so prayer must be done with utmost sincerity. Even if one accidentally makes mistakes while praying, one need not be unduly concerned.
 14. When praying to Isvara it is best not to ask

for anything. Asking Isvara for worldly things is not a good practice at all. Isvara knows what is best and one should leave everything to him. One should love Isvara purely for the sake of love. By keeping the company of sages one develops pure devotion. Everything which one does should be completely dedicated to Isvara. One should act for his sake and offer the fruits of all actions to him.

15. The need for mind control is quite obvious. Only he who has control over his mind can be successful in worldly pursuits and be happy. Such being the case, what need be said about the need for mind control in the case of spiritual aspirants? To study, to work, and even to play well, the mind must be concentrated on the task in hand and this is possible only if one has control over the mind.
16. The source of bliss is not something external but is one's own true nature, the Atman. Not realizing this, man devoid of discrimination seeks happiness in external objects. It is because of the mistaken feeling

that happiness can be obtained from things external that the mind goes outward.

17. People are often devoid of dispassion. The reason for this is the lack of discrimination. Dispassion may dawn due to some calamity but that dispassion is only temporary. The dispassion which results from discrimination is lasting. The importance of burning dispassion can never be overemphasized. It would not be wrong to say that much of the trouble which people encounter in controlling the mind is due to want of vairagya.
18. Desire, anger and greed are described by Sri Krishna as the triple gates to hell. These are man's worst enemies and one must never succumb to them. Desire can be overcome by dispassion. Anger is a result of frustration of desire. Thus, by conquering desire completely one can conquer anger. An attempt must be made to control greed by impressing upon the mind that in reality everything belongs to Isvara alone and that one is but an instrument in the hands of Isvara.