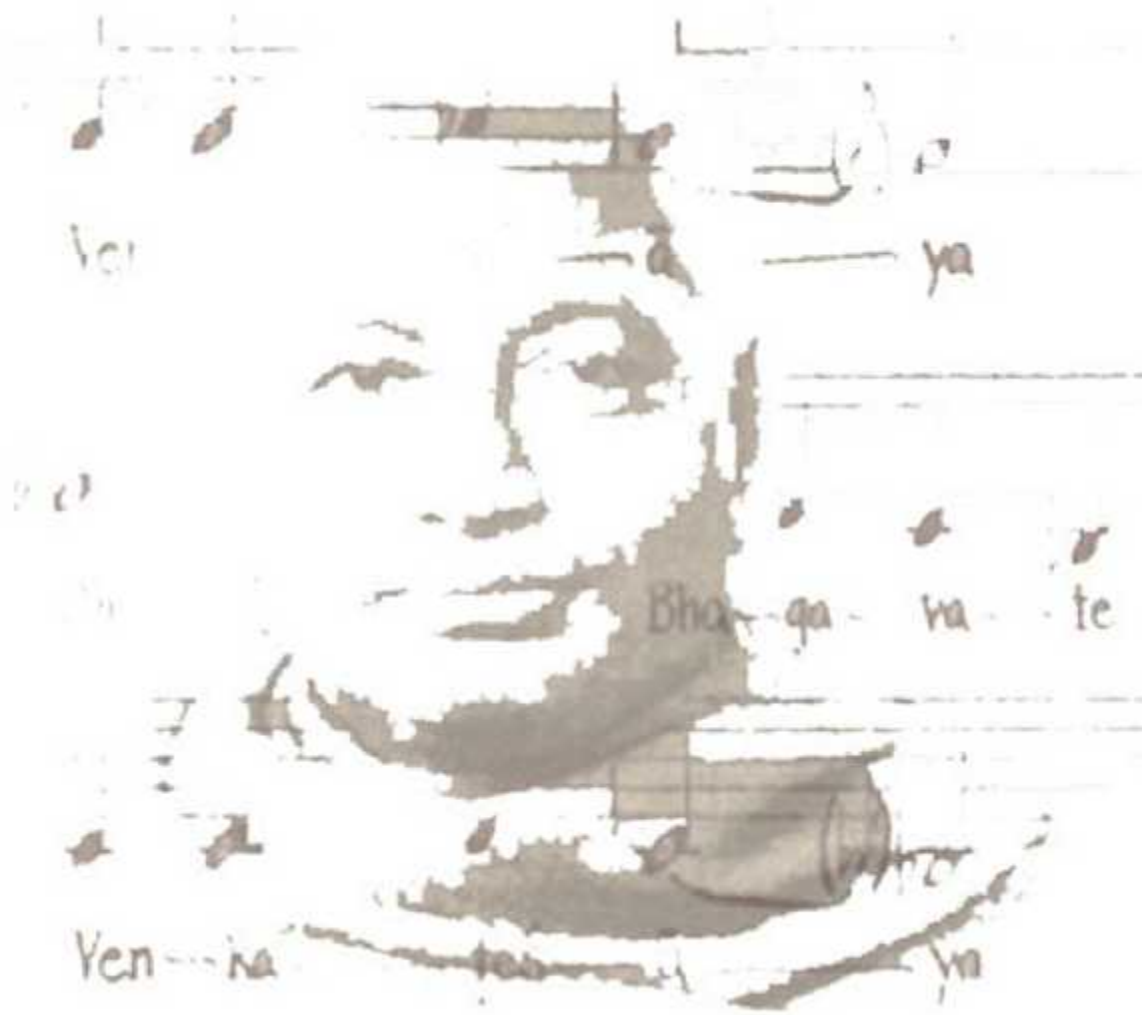


A Season's Harvest

1977

Living at The Feet
of the Guru



Om Namah Venkatesaya
Om Namah Shivaya

Living at the Feet of The Guru

Swami Venkatesananda

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Volume 1 - part 1
Living at the Feet of the Guru

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1 - The Spirit of Gurudev - The Eternal Disciple

His life and His teachings were not different except in certain respects. When we say 'the teachings', it is better not to confuse the teachings with what is published in His books. Most of the books were transmission of traditional teachings, for instance a lovely book called, 'Practice of Nature Cure'. That is the transmission of the teachings concerning nature cure, not necessarily His own teachings.

Even they received His spirit in as much as they were neither fanatic nor exclusive, but the practice of nature cure. In that, Sri Gurudev gave the traditional teachings, flavoured by His own spirit.

His own teachings were quite another thing. They were entirely His life, an extension of His own life. And so, when we discuss the life and teachings of Gurudev, we are really contemplating the spirit that lives with us as Sri Gurudev.

I have no doubt that His presence is still here. We may not be able to see Him now only because our vision is limited. It may even be as it was in those days when, on certain occasions, He wouldn't come out. So, even though one may not be able to see the physical presence, the spiritual presence is ever here.

There is one fundamentally vital question that should occur to us concerning, which we should be quite clear. Gurudev was a phenomenon, and so are you. Is it possible by listening to His life or his teachings to become like him?

The thought itself is absurd. I suppose we can imitate Him, that's not difficult - but it's not the reality. This is one aspect. Another aspect is more important, that He Himself was not an imitation. You may wonder, so what? In that, there was a teaching. When He was in Swarg Ashram, He was only an ordinary sadhu. At the same time, around Him, there lived others of His own age or even younger who had acquired fame and name and a great following, because they were specialists. One was a great scholar. Well, it was too late for Swami Sivananda to become a sanskrit-scholar - He was 36 or 39 when He came here. There was another who could be imitated, he was a mouni. All of us can imitate this. You can all become mouni sadhus, because it only demands that you should not talk. Swami Sivananda was not tempted to become a mouni or an ascetic or even a Kundalini yogi. He didn't pattern His life on somebody else.

What you are looking for is self-realisation, not 'other-imitation'. That is the example. Imitation is a waste of time, absolutely useless, apart from the fact that He Himself could not be imitated. He was too great. You could perhaps in a whole lifetime of contemplation on the Guru catch a glimpse of one aspect of his personality. When you think you have understood Him, you suddenly discover that there are too many other aspects which are baffling. So it was not possible to imitate Him - a second Sivananda could not be produced by the same Brahma, not in the same kalpa. Then one might ask, 'What is the sense in listening to these stories, these teachings, if they cannot be imported, not just imparted, but

imported - lock, stock and barrel?'

Perhaps some of you have read some scriptures, The Bhagavad Gita or The Ramayana or The Yoga Sutras. There are doctrines in these texts whose words seem to be simple enough for the brain to transmit. The Bhagavad Gita is one such scripture. The words are quite simple, and the brain suggests that the translation is easy. But then the meaning is impossible! For one who has not seen an elephant, it is impossible to describe an elephant. We read the doctrines in the Gita, the Upanishads etc.. Do we know what they mean? The brain can provide the dictionary meaning, but this is not it.

What is the meaning, for example, of samadhi? There is a brilliant translation of the Yoga Vasistha, the only one of its kind, which was produced about 150 years ago. Every time the word 'samadhi' occurred in the original text, it had been translated 'anaesthesia'. The translator probably looked up a dictionary which told him 'samadhi' is 'anaesthesia', 'where one is not affected at all by the external influences.' That meaning is misleading. It does not lead me to nowhere, it leads me to somewhere else, where I do not want to go. Reading these scriptures, how do you know that this is possible? How do you know these teachings are real or valid? Look at him. As it says in the Narada Bhakti Sutras, 'Scriptures are validated by Saints'. That is the only way scriptures can be verified, otherwise they are just words, meaningless words which can be misunderstood. So, here we are on the horns of a dilemma.

I need the example of Sri Gurudev to understand the scripture. Yet I am afraid I cannot imitate Him. In any case, He Himself didn't like it. So, why do we listen to His life and teachings? In order that the spirit of Sri Gurudev may enter us and become life. Is it possible for us to inhale the spirit of Gurudev's life, as we inhale air, and let it enliven us? If we listen in that spirit, I am sure we shall all be blessed and benefited.

There is however a problem. First of all, to come to grips with the concept of Guru. Some of you who have not had His Darshan have one difficulty: you have not seen Him, and therefore you depend upon someone else's interpretation; and please remember that whoever it is that interprets Sri Gurudev, can only give you a passing picture. Nobody could describe Him totally. Nobody has seen Him totally. This is your problem.

Our problem was even more complex and complicated. First of all, though we saw Him constantly, He was such a dazzling infinity that every day we saw a different facet. Sometimes one facet was almost contradictory to another. You are left wondering which one is true. The whole thing was true, and in that He represented the infinite in its truest spirit. You see smoke going up, and you see water flowing down, both of them part of the same infinity. There is no sense in asking if the infinite seems to be confused. The question is absurd. Similarly with Swami Sivananda Himself. One day He did this, another day He did something quite the contrary, like fire going up and water flowing down - both of them are

the infinite, not just part of the infinite. They constitute the infinite, another facet of this infinite - that was the problem.

When it comes to understanding this sadhana, there is more difficulty. He had passed through an austere life, He had renounced the world. Many of us didn't have any world to renounce. I didn't have to renounce my wife - she is not here, I didn't marry. Most of us have nothing very serious to renounce. Some of us have renounced poverty, some have renounced boredom, some have renounced unpleasant situations. He had something else to renounce, and having renounced all that, He subjected himself to tremendous austerity. We came as young men. We had never been subjected to any hardship. Most of us came when the ashram had already been established. All that you had to do was to go there, knock, and somebody said, 'Yes. I'll give you some tea'.

Once Swami Sivananda was very angry. What is the present post office was then the office, and He used to work there at a small chair and table. Three of us were sitting in front of Him, working, when for some reason He said, 'Ha,- what is this? You have all become like baboons. You came here as sadhus, but you all become like baboons'.

We didn't have tables and chairs in those days, but still we had something. 'When the bell rings you go and have your tea, have your lunch. Do you know what the hard life of a sadhu means?' We just looked at Him. Then He went on, 'You want to be a swami - do you know how to beg?' 'No Swami'. 'Come on, I'll show you'. He took one of those little towels, tied it around His hand. 'Hold your bag like this - and you must have a little vessel, and when you go near the people, you must open this and say 'Narayanaya' and keep quiet. Have you clone that?' I said, 'No - of course not, the kitchen was established, then we came.'

He was so wild that two of us decided to go begging the next day down into Rishikesh! You know, we went along a road, singing, and received some alms from some houses and so on, but that is not begging. At the back of our minds was the sure guarantee of food. All that we had to do was to go round. Even if we collected nothing, we could go back to the ashram and have our food. What would be the feeling in your heart when you were not sure of that? That is different. That is begging. This is merely showing.

That was when He pointed out that our life is a mendicant's life. You must learn not to depend upon these things, but to depend upon, for want of a better word, God.

Though on this occasion, He was stern in His admonitions, on most occasions He behaved like our mother. No, not even like a mother, more, like our grandmother. He loved feeding us - it was non-stop. This is one respect in which His teachings dramatically and diametrically differed from His life. He underwent all sorts of hardships, but He would not let you ever think of it. He was very abstemious in His eating habits, but nothing gave Him greater pleasure than to

see people eat. He was a very big man with an enormous hand. Even when He gave you just a little, it was enough for lunch and dinner. Usually He was not very sophisticated in this - He didn't serve you the prasada on a plate or a leaf, He gave it from His hand to your hand, saying, 'Eat, eat it now.' He would tell you a very common sense reason why: 'Otherwise the monkeys will take it away from you - so better eat it now', right in front of Him. You had to eat, and as soon as your hands were empty, something more would come. Every time a visitor brought a basket of fruits, it went round. Half an hour later, another visitor came along; it went round again. Some visitors used to sort of complain - not really complain. 'Swamiji, you said to eat a little, but here you keep feeding us'. 'Huh. When you go home, you can fast.' That was the attitude.

Therefore, for most of us who lived with Him, it was very difficult to follow His example. He was fond of austerities, yet He almost discouraged people from leading an austere life. He had a complete double personality, being a teacher - if you listened to Him and responded to Him, then probably He would teach you. But more often than not He was a grandmother, not even a mother.

To be with Him and to watch Him, and pierce through all these to perceive the spirit of Sri Gurudev was difficult. One has to watch, observe minutely, in order to see what this spirit may be.

Firstly, let us look at the problem of the Guru. Unfortunately for us, this has become a problem. Why is this so? We often repeat a very beautiful and inspiring verse,

ishvaro gururatmeti murtibheda vibhagine,
vyomavad vyapta dehaya sri dakshina murtaye namah

Ishvaro gururatmeti murtibheda vibhagine - One alone appears as this trinity, the three words - God, Guru, and Self - indicate exactly one truth. They are not three different things, but one truth. We who are ignorant of the Self or of God, how do we pretend to understand the Guru? One who does not understand God, does not understand the Guru. One who does not understand the Self, does not understand the Guru.

When this ignorance is there, there is only misunderstanding. And therefore we often appoint, disappoint, and dismiss the Guru. This is a famous pastime. I don't know if you have come across people who go about saying, 'Ah you are my Guru today'. As long as you scratch my back, as long as you satisfy my whims and fancies, you are my Guru. And a few days later I'll disappoint you. The disciple appoints the Guru - the disciple disappoints the Guru. All these sound too much alike!

This is the question - to know who the Guru is - to know Who the Guru is in relation to me? Is it possible for an ignorant, immature person to answer this satisfactorily? We are all emotional, sentimental beings, we have our own inner images, we have our own ideas about the Guru. He must have a nice flowing

beard and sit erect all the time.

If you had had Gurudev's Darshan, you would never have seen him rigidly erect. He sat curved forward slightly - He used to call it Hanuman asana. Even sitting erect like this suggests a certain vanity, a certain arrogance.

Because we have our own ideas about what a yogi or Guru should be like, when we come to Him, we don't recognize Him. If you do not know yourself, you cannot know the Guru. Guru is the manifestation of the Grace of God, evoked by your aspiration? The three are closely interlinked, they are three facets of the same being. If there is no aspiration, there is no Guru.

It is this inner aspiration, directed to the Omnipresent Being, that appears in front of you as the Guru. Only then can you recognize the Guru. It is therefore discipleship that is important. It is possible to say that the spirit of discipleship itself is the Guru. If that spirit of discipleship is there, you will recognize the Guru immediately, because that is the Guru. Naturally, in order to verify this inner spirit, it is necessary to go and resort to the Lotus Feet of a living Satguru and follow Him. All that is important. But the first aspect of this Guru is within - the spirit of discipleship. And that is what we saw constantly in Gurudev.

A young man had come from South Africa and spent some time with us; then the time came for him to return to his country. Gurudev was seated in the old office. When this man came in, he sat down and looked at Gurudev, and started shedding tears. When Gurudev saw a sincere person like this, His face shone. There was something extraordinary in all this, a radiance, a bliss which is indescribable. It was God, grandmother, father, all these things rolled into one. He looked at this young man with such compassion, such love, such affection, that it is impossible to put it into words.

Then He said, 'Ah, what is it?' 'Swamiji, I have to go back to South Africa.' 'Huh, you must go back to South Africa.'

Looking at Gurudev's face, smiling, cheerful, compassionate, he was consoled. Then he said to Swamiji, 'Where do we get Gurus like you in South Africa?' 'Ah! You don't get Gurus like me in South Africa. Hah - you don't get Gurus at all, Achaah.' Then He fixed His gaze on the young man's eyes and said, 'It is easy to find a Guru - it is very difficult to find a disciple.'

That is what He was throughout His life, He was a disciple. I know what He used to write occasionally, 'I have accepted you as my beloved disciple and I will guide you.' He may have written this, but when you came in front of Him, he would treat you as His Guru. The moment you entered the ashram, He saluted you, prostrated to you, bowed down to you. He never used the second person singular in regard to anybody - even to small children. Everyone was an elder, everyone was worshipful, adorable - everyone was His Guru.

It was one of those comic situations, when the Supreme Being Himself used to sit or lie down in the satsang. Somebody used to deliver a lecture - some silly man who had probably not even entered the spiritual path would discourse on Vedanta and other spiritual topics. Swamiji used to say that He listened to everybody's lectures with great keenness. He was a keen student - an eternal disciple, an eternal student. Even when a little child stood up and sang a song or recited a poem, Gurudev said, 'I listen extremely carefully'. Even though the talk might not have substance in itself, it used to trigger a train of thought, a chain of reflection in Him, and He would go to His room and contemplate thus. Many of the books were products of such contemplation. Is that possible for us to be an eternal disciple, a genuine disciple, a serious disciple? That discipleship itself being the primary Guru, the secondary guru appears in front of us in human form. As Gurudev used to say, referring to particular people from whom He had learned, 'I have learned a lot from him.'

One who had this receptivity, who was eager to listen, even to the humorous stories of one of His disciples, in order to learn, was an eternal disciple. The perfect Guru was an eternal disciple in whom the aspiration was never quenched or put out.

If that aspiration is awakened in us, if that discipleship comes to dwell in our hearts, it is then that we might come to know what Guru means. That same discipleship, that same aspiration which is the primary Guru, by God's Grace, and in God's Light, appears to be an external human being. But first and foremost we must be perpetually burning with aspiration.

2 - Gurudev's Attitude to the Guru-disciple Relationship

In the life of a Jivanmukta we find what superficially appears to be a contradiction, something which defies logic. Logic is the child of the intellect as well as being the governor of the intellect. Like your children, it is born of you and yet it governs you. The intellect cannot function without logic, therefore it creates logic and gets bound. The Sage however is free from all that. Those of you who have devoted some thought to life, may have realised that life itself is not logical. So, these two guiding lines have to be born in mind. Firstly, you don't jump to any conclusions, and secondly, if there are contradictions, then that is the unmistakable sign of a liberated Sage. He is not bound by anything. There is a truth which shines through Him and which has to be seen. There is a fragrance that emanates from Him, a fragrance of divinity that has to be inhaled like a perfume. As we inhale the life breath, can we inhale the perfume of a divinity? May it also enliven us.

Gurudev had an extraordinary attitude to the famous Guru-disciple relationship. I suppose you are already familiar with these two extreme views. One says that the Guru is the one that does everything, and the other claims that the Guru is not necessary at all. There are some who say that not only do you need a Guru, but that the Guru Himself does everything. This is a point of view, a theory - that's all. There is the other theory, the teaching, that no Guru can uplift you, that a Guru is absolutely useless. Gurudev was right in the middle. So, in most of these issues, where there are two extremes, He trod the middle path. It was beautiful.

How did He do this? Those who said that the Guru is not necessary - He didn't argue with them. If that person came to the ashram, sat there and delivered a discourse attacking all this guru business, Gurudev Himself would have applauded! He was not afraid at all of any criticism, of any other point of view being expounded here, right at His own Feet. If immediately after this talk we wanted to perform pada-puja, He would sit and allow it to be done. He didn't fight or argue with them, but quietly He said, 'Without a Guru you may be lost'. Even if you are enlightened and light is pouring out of your ears and nose, it is better to be a little humble and treat yourself as a disciple and seek a Guru.

On the other hand, there was a rather stern, tough article written by Gurudev Himself, entitled, 'Gurudom, the deathly Cancer.' He wrote it, had it read in the satsang, then had about 20 or 30 copies typed and sent it to all the journals that He was connected with.

Now there seems to be a contradiction. He is not supposed to be a Guru, and I am supposed to seek a Guru - if He refuses to be my Guru, it is like preaching brahmacharya to the boy and insisting that the girl gets married. There was this most beautiful synthesis, a middle path. It is possible that He may regard you as the Guru, but within yourself, be careful. You do not even have to tell Him, 'Do not take me as your Guru.' Then you become the Guru. If He obeys you, He becomes your disciple, and you become the Guru. If you tell Him, 'Go away', He

goes away and becomes your disciple. And if He stays, you become the Guru. Never mind all this, mind your own business.

How did He put the middle path into practice? Consider His attitude to new aspirants. In the letters we drafted for Him to new disciples, after signing, He would with His own hand write just two or three lines, 'I have accepted you as my beloved disciple'. That was only the first line. The second line is the most important one. 'I shall guide you and serve you nicely.'

You accept me as your disciple and you are going to serve me? That is the beauty. That is what I meant by saying that this is the most delicate middle path.

On the contrary, Gurudev used to talk to other people in the ashram as if He was the disciple. Every moment Gurudev was supremely conscious, vigilant is the word, that this Gurudom did not enter His heart. A thousand people might worship, bow down to Him, sing His glories, but He was not affected. This was the beautiful thing I saw.

He did not have the feeling 'I am the Guru' towards His disciples. His disciples could openly profess devotion to other masters. There was no problem at all. What happens if this disciple deserts you and defects to another side? It is alright. I am not a guru. It was an extraordinary thing to watch. His own disciples could be devoted to anybody. In the ashram there were senior disciples of Gurudev who were openly followers of other saints. That did not make any difference to Him at all. Not in the least.

But what is even more interesting - now comes the danger point - when the avowed disciples of other swamis and holy men came to Him, He accepted them. One was Swami Poorna Bodh, he was one of us and probably the best of us. He belonged to another order, the Avadhuta order. In this order you do not wear clothes, you grow a beard, and so on. Gurudev Himself sent Him to South India when his Guru's Guru was sick. When he returned here, initiated into the Avadhuta order, Gurudev said, 'Stay here, it's perfectly alright.' One day, this Swami wasn't quite pleased with his hair and beard. I am not sure whether Gurudev told him or he asked for permission. Gurudev said, 'Ha, shave it off.' That is a paradox again. Here is somebody who is not my disciple, I am not the guru, so I have no business to guide him. He looks up to me for guidance and so. Though he is the disciple of somebody else, I simply tell him, 'Shave it all off.' An extraordinary thing.

The master had transcended all limitations, so that for a moment He was the avadhuta swami, there is no difference at all - spiritually, between that swami's Guru and Him. The whole thing was beyond all distinction. It seemed to be an absolutely open heaven, where anybody was welcome to come and go. So, this is the paradox: the disciple needs the Guru, but that is his business. One should not feel that one is the guru. If the disciple feels that you are the Guru, that's his problem, not yours. Without denying your permission to treat him as the Guru,

or yourself as His disciple, He refused to allow the Gurudom to enter into it. And therefore He was a perpetual disciple, even though millions all over the world regarded themselves as His disciples.

This spirit was evident in Him right from boyhood. He always remembered anyone from whom He learned anything. As a young boy, He learned fencing with a stick - only for a few days, I believe, because His teacher happened to be an Untouchable. But a Guru is a Guru, one who taught me something. When it was time to go, Gurudev went to him, prostrated to him, offered him flowers, worshipped him. Somebody had objected to this Brahmin boy learning fencing from an Untouchable; but then, in response, the young Brahmin boy goes to him, worships him, falls at his feet.

In 1923 or 1924, when He was initiated, He had only a brief contact with the swami who gave Him sanyas. This I have heard from Gurudev's lips. 'Even though I spent only a few hours in the company of My Guru, I remember Him every morning.' That Swami merely gave Him the mantra; he didn't perform any ceremony. Everyone from whom He learnt anything He remembered every day. Even when He was worshipped by millions and regarded by millions all over the world as their Guru, He Himself felt He was a disciple, and He devoutly remembered all His teachers and regarded Himself as a disciple of all these great masters - that was His greatness, His glory. He could learn from anybody because of the spirit of discipleship, because of the absence of the feeling 'I am a Guru.'

Another interesting feature. We were half His age, almost nobodies on the spiritual path, we were His disciples. He was the master, He was our father, our mother; he fed us, sheltered us and guided us; he was our Guru, our God. Yet, if He had some work to do, if He wanted to tell us something, He would not send for us. He hated the very idea of treating you as someone inferior. He had to go to you. Only in the last few years the body couldn't take it, and there was no alternative.

Even when something unpleasant had to be told to you, He would try not to do it directly. He would get hold of somebody else or invent a little story, something indirect, hoping that you might catch it. That was the beauty. Only if we appreciate this, will we also appreciate why Gurudev went to all that expense of issuing so many publications, and even why He got so many biographies published. His teaching was His example. Therefore this example had to be brought to the attention of the disciples. How do you do that? Gurudev sets an example, so it has to be brought home to you that this is the example. One can say, 'Look at me, look what I am doing.' That is boasting and Gurudom again. And so He allowed others who saw the truth concerning these actions of His, to write about them, and He encouraged those things to be published. It was beautiful. A simple trick. The example had to be pointed out to the seekers, without the Gurudom entering again. That was the method by which Gurudev avoided the extremes of the Guru-disciple relationship.

3 - Renunciation

A fundamental principle of sadhana or spiritual life is renunciation. We recite this mantra quite often, 'Only by renunciation does man realise immortality.'

But what is renunciation? What should be renounced or what should not be renounced? What is the spirit of renunciation - not merely the external form of behaviour, but the spirit of renunciation? If we do not understand the spirit of renunciation, we are battling with the forms, imagining we are holy men. The holy man must be wholly man, not just a holy man with many holes.

There are two diametrically opposed schools of thought. What does the mantra say? Literally translated, it means, 'Not by any type of action, not by leading a house holder's life, not by earning or distributing wealth, but by renunciation alone'.

We are fond of jumping to conclusions: ah, not by these means. They must be renounced, so all actions must be renounced. No relationships, no progeny - so relationships must be renounced. No money, so wealth must be renounced. This is one view.

When you use such illogical logic, you are jumping to conclusions, you have come to a conclusion. That means, you are not alive any more! The scripture says that you cannot attain enlightenment or realise immortality by inner action. But where does it say that action should be renounced? The scripture does say that no relationship is going to help you, but where does it say that you must renounce them? The scripture says that this realisation is not attained by means of wealth, but where does it say that you should not touch money?

In the early fifties, a certain Maharashtra Saint visited the ashram in Rishikesh along with his group. Gurudev was there and He asked him to conduct bhajan. He had a powerful voice, he was a brilliant man and the author of a number of compositions - and he sang mostly his own compositions. He wore white clothes, and still he was called a swami. Please remember the hall was literally filled with orange robes, and there he was sitting on the platform banging away at his musical instrument. One of his bhajans was a satirical song at the expense of all these swamis. I remember the words very well. 'These swamis, you go to them and ask them why they do not do some work. 'I have offered my body,' they reply, 'Everything has been burnt to ashes. I am Buddha, a dead body, and a dead body does not function. I have offered myself in the fire of sanyasa. So, I am dead, I cannot participate in any activity.' I remember the last sentence very well. 'When you ask him to work, he says he is Buddha - but when this dead body becomes hungry, my God, he can eat the world.' So, that is renunciation of activity.

But is renunciation of activity of action itself?

Krishna says, 'You fool, what are you going to renounce? You cannot remain here

for one moment without engaging yourself in some action.' Sitting, lying down, are actions, blinking is an action. Once we understand the spirit of renunciation as declared in the Bhagavad Gita we see that Gurudev was a manifestation of that spirit of renunciation.

The other point of view is expressed by many of these social service swamis, who say we do not have to renounce anything - we must go on working. There are others who say that sanyasa itself is not meant for this age. One should not take sanyasa at all. Renunciation was meant only for satya yoga.

Gurudev was exactly in the middle. Just as in every other respect He lived the philosophy of neither-nor - it is neither this nor that - 'neti neti'. One should not say that everything must be renounced, but neither should one say that renunciation is unnecessary. Renunciation is necessary, but one should know what is to be renounced and what is useless to renounce. Krishna specifically declared, 'These three ought not to be renounced - self-sacrificing service, charity and austerity - or simple life.'

Even these should be practised without attachment and veiled rewards. When will I practise self-sacrificing service, charity, austerity or a simple life, without attachment or an 'I' - eye - to its reward? Only when it becomes absolutely and totally natural - when it does not involve the ego. When you are breathing, you are not even conscious - you have no motivation for breathing or not breathing. Can you become as natural as this? Can charity become that, can an austere simple life become totally natural - not unconscious, not motivated?

So, what is to be renounced? The motivations are to be renounced, the attachment is to be renounced, craving for result is to be renounced. Can this be done? It does involve a certain action. Yagna is a certain type of action, Dana is a certain type of action, charity is a certain type of action, as is tapas. But even these must be lived without motivation. Once again, defining sanyasa, Sri Krishna tells us in the Bhagavad Gita that the renunciate is one who does not reject nor desire.

Once, at the suggestion of one of our senior gurubhais, there were some swamis here who used to recommend all sorts of disciplines to new aspirants - such as giving up salt or sweets, or tea or coffee for a month. This is alright to develop will power and all that. As suggested by this swami, I thought I would go without sweets for a month. And I was standing outside the present post office, which was the office at that time. Gurudev came along, He had some sweets in His hand, and offered me one. I had also been told that Gurudev would test you, and so, not to fall, naturally I said, 'No, Swamiji, I am not eating sweets now.' He looked sternly at me, His eyes were smilingly stern. 'Take it.' He says take it - so take it. As I was trying to put it into my mouth, He said, 'Do not ask - do not reject. Then you will know what sanyasa means.'

This spirit of sanyas must become natural to us. I do not know whether it can be

cultivated. We shall see as we go on. And yet sanyasa or renunciation is necessary. Without renunciation, the realisation of the infinite cannot be had. Which means that as long as you cling to the finite, the infinite is unrealised. It is not that the finite compels you to cling to it, but that you are clinging to the finite. Here is the bondage, here are the chains, and unless I abandon the finite, the infinite cannot become truly real.

I will give you a very simple example. You want to go up that mountain. What do you do? You first go to the Ganges bank. As you go down, you watch how your feet behave. This is exactly what they do. You leave one step and go to the next step - the next step is not your goal. You do not want to stay in that next step; but, without it, you cannot proceed further. And when you go down to the Ganges bank, unless you leave this shore, you cannot go to the other shore. The boat tied to this shore has also to be released.

Perhaps this is the significance of the famous sanyasa ceremony. You leave your home and shave your head, throw out the other clothes and put on orange clothes. It is just getting into the boat; but the boat is not your destination. It takes you somewhere, then you jump out of it, otherwise you will be drowned. Still your destination is not reached. You go there, step after step, you keep on leaving each step behind.

That is renunciation. It is not one event in a man's life, it is an ongoing spirit. One cannot say that on the 12th of September - I renounced - what? I did not renounce 'I', because I am here to say that. I renounced one form of life and jumped into another form of life. I gave up this shore and got into the boat - but the boat is not my destination. It is an ongoing endless affair.

Kadeshi varaikkum ushara irukkanam. 'Be vigilant to the end.' This was Gurudev's favourite expression. I have heard Him say it a thousand times. To what end He did not say. To the end of all this finitude, be vigilant and let that vigilance sustain this threefold activity - charity, self-sacrifice, and simplicity, and keep this spirit of renunciation alive.

There is one other intricate, subtle and therefore complex principle. Yet it is so simple. Coming back to our journey; if, while you are going down, seeing that you have to get to that step ten steps below, and before lifting your foot off the step on which you are standing, you reach out, then you are finished. Everything must happen at the proper time. That is why I insist that this spirit of renunciation must become natural. What is renounced must drop away without your knowledge, without your ego participation. Without the use of will, it just drops away. Because when these three - yagna, dana, tapas - have become natural, spontaneous, then every form of renunciation happens at the appropriate time. It does not hurt. It becomes a joyous event.

I have seen Gurudev in the most trying circumstances, when He had to do things He would not have liked two or three years before, but then the face was

blooming with joy. He might even tell you, 'I didn't want this, now it has happened,' not with a sour face, with no regrets. This has to happen now. I took this step, and then the next, and the next one is this. So these steps of renunciation have to happen at the appropriate time. One cannot renounce anything prematurely, then there is danger. I suppose you also realise that in order to renounce you must have it. A beggar does not renounce a kingdom, he doesn't own even a house.

We will go back to Gurudev's life. The first thing to renounce is tamas, laziness. And therefore, in His own life and the life of those who sought His refuge, He tried by every means in His power to knock out laziness. Do something. That was His gospel. Express yourself, only then will you get a clear look at yourself. You sit and close your eyes and look at the tip of your nose. It is easy after a few days practice. 'I have no desires at all. I have no ambitions at all. I am Brahma ...' That is easy. There are hundreds of vultures hidden in you. Let one of them come out. Just see what happens. You know how to sing, come on, sing; you know how to type, come on, type; you know how to write some nice articles, come on, do that. 'I was very sattvic and had no desires, no ambitions, no ego, Oh, I was so calm and peaceful.' But put this man to work in something, immediately all those things come up - jealousy, hatred, ambition, desire, disappointment, greed.

Even in His childhood, we are told by those who knew Him, He was a very active boy. Wherever there was action, there He was. He was also a fighter. He used to fight, and if somebody in the household took Him to task, it seems He would walk out in a huff. He was very sensitive. When later He gave us the formula, 'Bear insult, bear injury, this is the highest sadhana' - that was also cultivated. He was a very sensitive person. He lost His mother very early in His life and His elder brothers and sister used to look after Him. I met the woman in Mysore. She told me how, when He quarrelled with somebody and was taken to task or scolded, He would disappear from the house, go away for a day. A little boy, where could He go? He could not renounce the world and become a swami. After a while He would quietly come and stand under a tree. Somebody would notice Him and say, 'Come on, come inside.'

He was sensitive and He was a hard worker, a hard fighter, right from childhood, very mischievous. But there was one golden quality in that little boy - the quality of charity. Simplicity was also inborn. You can see immediately that if you do not lead a simple life, you can do very little charity. If simple living is not natural to you, you may have ten shirts, but if someone gives you another, you will keep it, saying, 'This may be useful.' But if simple living is natural, then even the third or fourth you will tend to give away. So, charity and simple living go together. This was His nature. He was devoted to simple living, although the definition of simple living changed. Self-sacrifice was His nature. He would do anything for anybody in distress or trouble, even as a young boy. Many of the fights and quarrels He got into were also due to defending weak people. Please remember that I am not describing a young saint, but a young boy.

He had very fastidious tastes in food, and this lasted quite a long time, though He could adapt Himself to very simple food. Whatever little He took had to be nicely prepared. Gurudev's sister said that if one day the dahl was not prepared to His liking, He would throw it away, get up and walk away. He loved ghee, and the ghee had to be fine, pure and a certain quantity; if that was not there, He would get cross. Later we discovered that ghee is very good for the voice and the throat. He probably knew then and there that His kirtan would thrill the hearts of millions of people.

So, here were these two qualities - on the one side, intense dynamic action, on the other side, its corollary, sensitiveness, aggressiveness. This may not be new to you. Gurudev was very aggressive and dynamic and very powerful. He was not a weakling at all. Weakness He did not approve of. Weakness is tamas. Unless you get over that tamas, you will never get anywhere. You cannot reach the other shore unless you are prepared to abandon this side. This side is tamas. Get onto the flowing river, it is rajas. Even if you commit mistakes, be active. If you are ambitious, all right, be active, and express your action, your talents, and you will see the ambition standing in front of you. Then you will say, 'My God, all this was in me, all this craving, all this ambition, all this desire, all this attachment was in me. It is thanks to this dynamic service I am able to see it in front of me.'

Later, while He was undergoing training as a doctor, He started a journal, called Ambrosia. On the cover is an extraordinary illustration: a muscular man flexing his muscles on one side and holding Ambrosia, the journal, on the other. The message seems to be: 'Read this magazine and you will become like this.' Everybody must become like that. Strong, muscular, hefty, dynamic. There again, He was intensely dynamic and at the same time charitable. All that knowledge was distributed. There was nothing kept for Himself. It was self-sacrificing service; simplicity itself. He used to write the articles for the journal, get it printed and distribute it, ask for advertisements, collect subscriptions - three rupees per year.

You can see there a combination of many factors, some saintly and some perhaps not so saintly. But we are talking about Swami Sivananda when He was still a young man. There was self-sacrifice, there was charity, there was the desire for disseminating knowledge - at the same time there was ambition, happiness at some little factor. Tamas had been left behind, now a rajasic life was being led.

Then He was not satisfied with the scene there was in India, and He went over to Malaya. Gurudev Himself said that Malaya was full of mosquitoes, malaria, money and prostitutes. It is our good fortune that Gurudev was not bitten by any of them. His own boss, the doctor for whom He worked had malaria, and had to be carried around. It was a good life for the people who went from here. He was ambitious, and it was there that this rajas took a certain form. He saw immediately that, whereas service is good, pleasure may not be so good - it may be misleading. And He also saw what renunciation is. What must be renounced? Anything that stands in your way as an obstacle must be renounced.

Why did Swami Sivananda go to Malaya? To serve. In order to serve, what do I need and what are the obstacles? I need money, so I get money. I need good health, so He was cautious, He did not expose Himself to malaria and he did not expose Himself to the pleasure-seeking life of Malaya. These are obstacles, renounce them, keep off. And at the same time, there are good things. Service is good, charity is good, the simple life is good. These He deliberately promoted, for these were also natural to Him. The other temptations could not even touch Him, because He was too busy.

You see. It is not when you fight against the so-called evils that you succeed, but when you are too busy to pay any attention to them. Virtues are not cultivated in themselves, by themselves. When you are too busy doing something good, you have no time for vice. Because we do not understand this, we knock our heads against stone walls and bleed. When you want somebody to smile, you do not pull his cheeks away, you tickle his foot and the mouth smiles. So the action is here, the result is somewhere else. In order to cultivate good qualities, I do not have to go on manipulating them. Tickle somewhere else, that thing becomes good. What must I do in order to overcome some evil habits or evil thoughts? Be active here, then that will disappear, you have no time. That was what he demonstrated in Malaya.

If in this manner life is kept at full tension, there is absolutely no possibility of the mind indulging in useless thoughts or harmful emotions. At the same time, this self-sacrificing service, as also charity, continued. What had been renounced? The pleasures of life had been renounced, had been seen to be hollow. Renounced is not the proper word - they had no value at all. It is only because the mind, or something else, sticks the label 'pleasure' on certain experiences that the mind thinks of them. When does the mind not think of them as pleasure? When something else gives you pleasure. When service and charity give you pleasure, when satsang gives you pleasure.

These three, Swami Sivananda had in abundance in Malaya. In that service there definitely was a tremendous ambition: to be the best doctor. It seems that when Swamiji went to the person who was supposed to employ him, a young Englishman, he simply asked Swami Sivananda, 'I have a vacancy, but that is for a doctor to be in charge of a hospital. Do you think you can manage a hospital?' Swami Sivananda said, 'I can manage not one or two, but five hospitals! Put me in charge.' That ambition was definitely there. There was also the spirit of self-sacrifice. So, when the accountant did not carry out his duties, Swamiji would also do that. If the ward-boys were absent, He would sweep the whole hospital. If the nurses were absent, He would do their job also, without grumbling, without making a fuss. Only *tamas* had been abandoned, the desire for pleasure had not arisen at all. It had no chance to arise, as *tamas* never had a chance to come up.

His family was not very prosperous. They were ordinary Brahmin landlords in South India. So, as a young boy He had probably not had much wealth. And in

Malaya there was a tremendous opportunity to earn and handle a lot of wealth. He said, 'That I would like, I am going to have it.' So, even though He led a simple life, which meant there was plenty to spend in charity, He did not stint himself. He did a lot of charity to Himself also. Swami Shraddhananda told us that He used to visit two stores regularly - once a month. One was the book-store, the other was the jewelry shop. Any nice new ring - all his fingers had to have rings. Then He would go for a walk one day on the beach, and the next day throw them away. That was renunciation. 'I have seen what it is to wear rings, now I can discard it.' Not without knowing what it is to be wealthy; so He earned a lot of wealth. He enjoyed Himself, He enjoyed the feeling of being wealthy. Then He gave all these things away. I do not know if you can appreciate it. Not be merely abstaining - 'Oh, no, no, I do not want to touch it at all.' Then it is possible that, at the back of your mind, something is bothering you; or much later, when you are old and incapable, you say, 'My God, if only I had in those days got a small bank balance or something like that, I would not be suffering now.' I never heard this from Swami Sivananda. Yet He was leading a simple life in a different way. He was not indulging Himself as the other doctors were indulging. He earned a lot, and He spent a lot.

Slowly something else was happening. Some questions: what is life? Because during this period in Malaya He was also directly exposed to spiritual thoughts and ideas. There were many swamis wandering around, and He used to be a permanent host, open house to them all, swamis, beggars and wanderers. Anybody who went from India was always welcomed, lavishly entertained in that house, worshipped in that house. And He also used to read spiritual literature voraciously. The seeds of the satsang that He used to conduct later were also sown then. What is it that leads a man astray? Mostly bad company. Swamiji had an extraordinary way of manipulating. He would go to the book-store and order all the latest religious books. He did not choose, I would add that he did not even read them. He would buy them and keep them in His own personal library. When a friend came along, He would say, 'Doctor, have you read this? It is very interesting'. He had read one page or maybe the publisher's foreword. The doctor would take it home. He comes back a week later. 'Ah, did you like the book?' This had two purposes. One, He got the essence of the book without reading it, and two, He cultivated a sort of reputation in His own village that He was a man only interested in religious matters. So, if you wanted to have a drink, you did not go to Him. The best way of ensuring that the company that resorts to you is always good company.

All this at the same time must have had some effect on His consciousness. I am serving, and there is a feeling that I am relieving distress, that I am saving life, I am able to prolong life, I am able to relieve distress, promote happiness, health and so on. This was getting shaken as time went by, and another step had to be taken. From this side, He got into the boat of action, and soon another step had to be taken.

4 - Vigilance

When we realise that renunciation is spirit and not form, it does not mean that there should not be a form of renunciation. Renunciation, whether it is manifest in external form or unmanifest, is still the spirit. It is important to bear this in mind, because if sannyasa or renunciation is to be confined to people belonging to a monastic order, then moksha is also restricted. Then self-realisation or God-Realisation becomes restricted, the monopoly of a few. The spirit of sannyasa is available to all. It may, in the case of some be accompanied by a formal renunciation, an externally discernable form of renunciation, and in the case of some it may not be so.

The spirit of renunciation is not a matter of effort, it is not the end-product of a series of actions. Effort is invariably associated with 'I'. Renunciation is completely and totally free of this 'I will'- 'I will not' problem. Does this mean free indulgence? No. That also has to be renounced, because that also is a manifestation of the same ego. 'I will do what I like', 'I will not do what I like', or 'I will renounce'. These are identical statements, the distinction is merely alphabetical. There is no vital spiritual difference. 'I will' and 'I will not' are totally opposed to the spirit of renunciation. When 'I will' and 'I will not' are both dropped, effort is dropped. When effort is dropped, everything is not dropped, there is no indulgence. The real spirit of renunciation is when the divine will prevails.

Here is a simple illustration. You may say, 'I will take a shower' or 'I will not take a shower'. But this is the play of the ego. Whether you want to do something or you do not want to do it, or you decide to do something you do not want to do, all this causes problems.

There is another problem. It is raining heavily outside and you have no umbrella or raincoat. You dare not say, 'I will not become wet'. Somebody else is the controller - that is what I am talking about. Here is something which is not my choice at all. It is one of choiceless renunciation. Renunciation becomes a choiceless, effortless happening, not because 'I will' it or 'I will not', but because it is willed.

Is there no effort involved at all in renunciation? There is an effort. Once again, Gurudev's fundamental philosophy ought to be borne in mind. It is neither - nor. One extreme is to say, 'Everything depends upon my effort, I will or I will not renounce'. Another extreme is to say, 'Some karma is in charge, I have nothing to do'. It is a matter of total passivity, if this is possible at all, which I am very doubtful about. Gurudev's was the middle path again here. One has to make one effort, one single perpetual unending effort. That is vigilance.

Vigilant watchfulness, this was His word, throughout His life. To be awake, to be alert. This I have to do. This cannot be abandoned. This cannot be renounced. If this is renounced, then you are worse than a cabbage. This intense watchfulness,

to be perpetually awake, or never to be spiritually slothful or asleep, that much of effort is called for. Then that itself determines what renunciation is. That watchfulness is able to observe the immediate situation, the immediate problem, and that is removed, not dropped but removed. It disappears even as darkness disappears before light. This is what we saw in Gurudev.

So from moment to moment, there appeared to be a change, the renunciation appeared to be perpetual. At times one might even have wondered whether Swamiji was compromising. There is - a big difference between compromising and renunciation, being perpetually sustained as an ongoing event. In compromise, you wish it were otherwise, but you are constrained to accept the situation in which you find yourself. There is remorse, there is despair, there is self-pity, self-condemnation, sorrow. This we never found in Gurudev. The spirit of perpetual renunciation, which shone as a blazing light within Him, dispelled darkness wherever it existed, in whatever form it might exist, even if it meant the dispelling of an external semblance or form of a thing called renunciation.

Another beautiful characteristic of Gurudev was His intense humanness. I have seen, and so have you, thousands and thousands of people who look like human beings. But in Him we saw the perfection of what humanness can be. Perhaps that is self-realisation, or renunciation, or God-Realisation - to be exactly what God created you, without the least perversion. It was so beautiful to watch, and one of the most beautiful human qualities is love. What is love? I do not know, perhaps you know. There again this Love was born in Him as Him. Swamiji was a very loving person, not only lovable, but also very loving. This was true of His childhood, as well as of His youth and of His days as a doctor in Malaya. And it was true throughout His life. It is natural that, when this love resides in a young heart, there should be an intensity of friendship. One could see from the description of Him provided by His friends, from their attitude towards Him and the way He responded to their friendship, that Gurudev was capable of intense personal friendship. Once Gurudev received in His own Kutir a retired postmaster; the way He patted him, slapped his arms and thighs, carried on with this old man, made us realise that, if this was possible after half a century of separation, then it must have been a tremendous thing when both of them were young. Similarly, when He saw somebody He had known 30, 40 or 50 years before, there was a thrill on His face, not just the impersonal, passive, what we call divine love, but an intense, human friendship, a thing which we do not normally expect in a sanyasin. We noticed the same thing when Gurudev visited Patamadai. There was joy in His face to see the places associated with His childhood. He must have enjoyed life there, including the company of friends. When we also remember that He loved His patients and looked after them with greater love and affection than they received from their on parents, one can easily imagine what intensity of friendship must have characterised His life in Malaya. To snap those ties, just like that, that is renunciation of a very high order.

There was this friendship, possibly bordering on attachment, and this inner light, this vigilance, being alert, being luminous, looked at this friendship, at this

attachment, which naturally flowed towards people, around Him. It was dark a few minutes ago. Now that the electric lights have come, we say the darkness has gone. But did it? No door was opened. Where did the darkness go? All this sounds glorious, wonderful. I am serving sick people, poor people, and deriving some kind of a satisfaction from this - 'that I am relieving distress, that I am saving people, helping more babies to be brought into this world.' In all that there is some ignorance, some foolishness. When the inner light shines upon that ignorance, what happens to it? That is what happened to Swami Sivananda.

That is the happening called renunciation. He just left Malaya and came back to India. Why did He come back to India? The question does not arise at all. He had to go somewhere. If He did not go, you are going to ask, 'Why not'. There is no question, as there was no motivation. Just then, the situation changed, and renunciation happened.

Why do I labour this point? Because there was no regret at all in His heart, there was no feeling that He was abandoning His friends, deserting His job - no question at all. There was no regret over what might or might not have happened in the past. Whatever dropped, dropped. There was neither a dis-satisfaction, bordering on pride, saying, 'Oh, look how much I have renounced', nor was there, 'I should not have renounced that, I should not have allowed this to happen.' There was no regret at all. It was a continuous march of bliss because the light was there constantly. And, in that light, what had to drop away, dropped away. What had to go, went. Even these are mere expressions.

He came back to India and, after some magic vanishing trick in his own home town, He came north. Somehow He got back into the train and found Himself in Benares. And though He was a highly educated person, somehow He believed that Benares was in the Himalayas. He came there, the ticket had expired, He had a few rupees left, so He gave them away. 'Now that I have reached my destination, what do I need money for?' But what He did not appreciate was the difference in climate. It was probably early in March or round that period, so it was cold. Madrasis are not used to this kind of cold. He was shivering, and He could not understand the language. He did not know how to beg. All His ignorance was coming out. So what do you do? He spent a night in one corner of the railway station. Some man noticed Him. He had a spare blanket, took it and gave it to Swami Sivananda.

That was tremendous renunciation to pick up that blanket and cover Himself. What is not difficult to renounce is your bank balance. You do not possess it in any case, it is in the bank. Nor your wife and children, they are all independent beings. The most difficult thing to renounce is pride, the feeling that I have been at the giving end, I have never received anything from anybody. That is renunciation of a very high order.

Something somehow told Him that Benares was not what this inner light was looking for. 'Where do I go?' Gurudev went to Pandharpur. 'I thought this was My

destination', and that thought also has to drop away.

The first lesson to learn as a sadhu is how to beg. How do you beg? What do you say? You go to somebody's house and stand in front of it. He was in white clothes, not even in orange; so people did not recognize Him as a sadhu or a mendicant. And they were Maharashtrians. They would ask this man in Marathi, 'What do you want?' He did not understand Marathi, so what could He do? And after a lot of reflection, He decided to stand in front of somebody's house and utter this formula, 'I am a Madrassi Brahmin, I am hungry, can you give me some food?' Can you do that? In the light that shone within, He had seen the vanity of the other type of life. In that light, what appeared to be ego earlier on melted away. There was no embarrassment. When I say this now I, am terribly unhappy even thinking of what happened to Him. Yet He was not.

This went on for some time. Probably He was able to enjoy the satsang of the devotees in Pandarphur. But there was another problem, and this throughout Gurudev's life was an extremely serious one. That problem had two aspects. How do I know that the person in front of whose house I am standing can afford to give me this food? In Malaya it seems He used to give food away very often. There were only two people in the house, the cook and Himself. When somebody came, He would sometimes give His food away and go hungry. How do I know that this person is not going to go hungry too. That was problem number one. Associated with this was the other problem. I am asking for this, receiving diksha from this person. What right have I to do that? What do I give in return? This was another principle that He held fast throughout his life. He used to tell us often, 'Do not be a parasite. When you go somewhere, when you receive something from somebody, make sure you can give something in return. If you can do nothing, offer a prayer. Do not be indebted, to people.' This was His constant refrain.

How did that inner light solve that problem? He took a job. It may sound rather strange that this person who had renounced, who had abandoned being a doctor in Malaya, could suddenly seek another job. The one that was readily available was a job as a postmaster's domestic servant. Can you do that? There it was, the job had to be taken. Soon afterwards the postmaster found out His real identity and asked Him, 'What are you here for, why must you work as my domestic servant?' And yet Gurudev was not prepared to live as his permanent guest; so a compromise was arrived at. It was that postmaster who directed Gurudev to Rishikesh. And so He came by train to Rishikesh. He lived for a little while in various places before eventually settling down in Swargashram. 'All that had to be given up and here I am in Swargashram.'

Even as a swami in Swargashram this principle was there. 'Here again I must not be a parasite, I must not take something for nothing.' So what do you do? About the same time, someone who had found out His whereabouts, wrote to Him from Malaya. 'You have an insurance policy here which has now matured. If you sign the following document and send it back to us you will get Rs 5,000.' What do you do? Do you say, 'No, no, I have renounced the world and all that. I want

