

SWAMI VIJNANANANDA

Sri Ramakrishna was a spiritual phenomenon, and his spirituality manifested in his spiritual longing and samadhi, in his singing and dancing, in his conversations and stories, in his action and behaviour, and even in his fun and frivolities. Many people consider Ramakrishna to be an avatar or a great religious teacher; but it is also interesting to observe his personal life behind the public gaze.

Needless to say, people would be surprised if they saw Ramakrishna wrestling with a young man in his room at the Dakshineswar temple garden. But it was not unusual for the disciples of Ramakrishna to have an ordinary situation turn into an extraordinary experience through the influence of the Master. It is amazing to see how the Master transmitted spiritual power to his disciples even in a playful way. Swami Vijnanananda vividly narrated one of his dramatic and unconventional encounters with Ramakrishna :

. I felt Sri Ramakrishna's room vibrating with a tangible atmosphere of peace, and the devotees present seemed to be listening in blissful absorption to the words that poured from the Master's lips. I don't recall what he said, but I experienced tremendous joy within. I sat there for a long time, my whole attention concentrated on Sri Ramakrishna. He did not say anything to me, nor did I ask him anything. Then one by one the devotees took their leave, and suddenly I found myself alone with him. The Master was looking at me intently. I thought it was time for me to depart, so I prostrated before him. As I stood up to go, he asked: "Can you wrestle? Come, let me see how well you wrestle" With these words he stood up ready to grapple with me. I was surprised at this challenge. I thought to myself, "What kind of holy man is this?" But I replied, "Yes, of course I can wrestle."

Sri Ramakrishna came closer, smiling. He caught hold of my arms and began to shove me, but I was a strong, muscular young man and I pushed him back to the wall. He was still smiling and holding me *with a strong grip. Gradually I felt a sort of electric current coming out of his hands and entering into me. That touch made me completely helpless. I lost all my physical strength. I went into ecstasy, and the hair of my body stood on end. Releasing me, the Master said with a smile, "Well, you are the winner." With those words, he sat down on his cot again. I was speechless. Wave after wave of bliss engulfed my whole being. I was pondering the fact that the Master had not won physically but his spiritual power had completely subdued me. Some time passed. Then the Master got up from his seat. Patting me gently on the back, he said:*

"Come here often. It is not enough to come once." Then he offered me some sweets as prasad, and I returned to Calcutta. For days the spell of that intoxicating joy lingered, and I realized that he had transmitted spiritual power to me".ⁱ

Ramakrishna later said of Swami Vijnanananda, "He wrestled with Krishna in his previous incarnation; he is not an ordinary person."ⁱⁱ

Swami Vijnanananda's premonastic name was Hari Prasanna Chattopadhyay. He was born on Friday, 30 October 1868 in Etawah, Uttar Pradesh, where his father, Taraknath Chattopadhyay, worked in the commissariat of the British government. Hari Prasanna was the eldest of six children, two boys and four girls. As Taraknath's job transferred him to different places, the children lived with their mother, Nakuleswari Devi, at Varanasi, where Hari Prasanna began his primary education. In 1879 his mother moved with her children to their ancestral home at Belgharia, near Dakshineswar. Hari Prasanna entered the Hare School in Calcutta, and in 1882 he passed the Entrance examination.

From his childhood, Hari Prasanna had a religious temperament and a tremendous passion for truth. Once, when he was about fourteen, his mother falsely accused him of something and scolded him. He protested vehemently, and when he failed to convince his mother of his innocence he tore off his sacred thread and cried out, "If I tell a lie, I am not a brahmin." Nakuleswari Devi was taken aback, and became afraid that some misfortune might befall the family. Strangely enough, the very next day a cable from Quetta (Afghanistan) brought the news of his father's death. His mother, grief-stricken, said to Hari Prasanna, "See the result of your curse."ⁱⁱⁱ

Very little is known about his early life; however, Hari Prasanna narrated the following incident from his boyhood: One day a gun shot in the bamboo grove behind their house in Belgharia. He rushed to the grove and found a wounded monkey lying on the ground. He distinctly heard the monkey chant twice "Rama, Rama" then, with folded hands it died. Hari Prasanna believed that monkeys are Ramachandra and that they die chanting Lord Rama's name.^{iv}

Meetings with Sri Ramakrishna

Hari Prasanna was only seven years old when he first saw Sri Ramakrishna. He later recalled:

I first saw Sri Ramakrishna in 1875 at Belgharia in the garden house of Jaygopal Sen. The Master came to visit Keshab Sen in that retreat house. I was then a little boy. I was playing with my friends and then just by chance saw the Master there. At that time the paths of the garden house were covered with red brick dust. Many people came. The Master was seated in a room. After seeing him, I returned to my home nearby.^v

The second time Hari Prasanna saw him, Sri Ramakrishna was immersed in samadhi at Dewan Govinda Mukhopadhyay's house in Belgharia. He later described the scene:

A young man [Narendra] was singing a devotional song, "Jai Jai Dayamaya, Jai Dayamaya" [Victory to the compassionate Lord, Victory to the compassionate Lord]. Sri Ramakrishna was standing in the group, and another young man [Baburam] was holding him so that he would not fall. The Master was completely oblivious of his surroundings. He wore a white cloth. His face shone with a heavenly lustre and a smile played on his lips. His teeth were visible, and there was such a joyful expression on his face that it seemed as if it would crack - like a cracked melon! His eyes seemed to be gazing at something, and he appeared to be immersed in an ocean of bliss.^{vi}

Another thing that struck me has remained imprinted in my memory forever. From the base of the Master's spine right up to his head the whole column had become inflated like a thick rope. And the energy that rose upward towards the brain seemed to be spreading its hood and swaying its head like a snake dancing in joy.^{vii}

In 1883 Hari Prasanna entered Saint Xavier's College in Calcutta, and Sharat Chakrabarty (later Swami Saradananda) and Ramananda Chattopadhyay (later the editor of *Pravasi*) were his classmates. On 26 November 1883 he and Sharat went by boat to see Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar with another classmate, Barada Pal. Arriving in the afternoon, they saw the Master briefly as he was about to leave for Mani Mallick's house in Calcutta. However, the Master invited them to come to Mani Mallick's residence too, so they returned to Calcutta by boat. Hari Prasanna attended the festival at Mani Mallick's and returned home late that evening. He later described what happened: "My mother scolded me. When she heard that I had gone to see Sri Ramakrishna, she said: 'My goodness! You went to that crazy brahmin! He has deranged the brains of three hundred and fifty young men!' It was indeed mental derangement! Even now my brain is hot. I did not pay any attention to my mother's scolding."^{viii}

During his college days, Hari Prasanna visited Sri Ramakrishna several times at the Dakshineswar temple garden. He later related those wonderful reminiscences to some devotees. On Krishna's birthday, 18 August 1884, Hari Prasanna went to see the Master at Dakshineswar. That evening he decided to spend the night there. He recalled his experience:

Sometime later the Master gave me some luchis [fried bread] and sweets, which were the Divine Mother's prasad. Sri Ramakrishna made a bed for me and set up the mosquito curtain. I fell asleep as soon as I lay down. At midnight I woke up and found the Master walking around my bed, saying, "Mother, Mother." I was dumbfounded and could not understand what was going on. That night Sri Ramakrishna blessed me.^{ix}

The Master's disciples felt an irresistible attraction for their guru. They learned more by observing his exemplary life and listening to his talks than from books. Hari Prasanna described another night's stay with the Master:

One evening I went to Dakshineswar and expressed to the Master my desire to stay overnight. He gladly gave his consent. There was no suitable eating arrangement at night in Dakshineswar. Every night some prasad of the Divine Mother would be sent to the Master for his supper, and from that he would eat a little and distribute the remainder among those who stayed with him. The Master's night meal was very small-like a bird's food. He would eat a couple of luchis, a little farina pudding, and some sweets. When I saw the small quantity of prasad, I was upset. I realized that I would have to fast that night. I was then young with a well-built body and a large appetite. That little bit of prasad was not enough for me. Knowing what was in my mind, the Master asked somebody to bring some *chapatis* [flattened bread] and vegetable curry for me from the nahabat. Even that amount of food was not sufficient for me, but I ate it and lay down on the floor in the Master's room.

At midnight I suddenly woke up and saw the Master pacing back and forth in his room. Sometimes he would go to the front veranda, muttering something, or he would chant the names of gods and goddesses while clapping his hands. During the day the Master talked and joked with the devotees; but now, at night, he was quite different. I was scared to death. I lay in bed, quietly observing the Master's madness. I could not get back to sleep. Sometimes the Master sang and danced, and sometimes he talked with someone. At last the night passed, and I was relieved. In the morning the Master was normal again.

When I returned home, my sister asked, “Where did you stay last night?” “At the temple garden of Dakshineswar,” I replied. Immediately she exclaimed: “Did you stay with that mad brahmin of Dakshineswar? Don't go to that man again. He is really mad. I go there very often to bathe in the Ganges. I have seen him and I know about his madness.” I listened to her words and smiled.^x

Sri Ramakrishna was very concerned about his disciples' welfare. If anyone of them did not visit him for a while, he would ask someone about that person. Once, when Hari Prasanna did not come to Dakshineswar for a long time, the Master sent for him. When he arrived, the Master asked why he had been absent for so long. Hari Prasanna replied truthfully: “Sir, I didn't feel like coming. Moreover, I try to meditate, but I find I cannot.” “What do you mean you cannot meditate?” exclaimed the Master. After remaining silent for a few moments, he said, “Come near me,” *Hari Prasanna related what then transpired:*

As I approached the Master, he asked me to stick out my tongue. When I did, he drew a figure on it with his finger. My whole body began to tremble, and I felt an unspeakable bliss within. Then the Master said, “Go to the Panchavati and meditate there.” Following his instruction, I slowly moved towards the Panchavati. I walked with difficulty, intoxicated with joy from the Master's touch. Somehow I reached there and sat for meditation. Then I lost all outward consciousness. When I regained my ordinary state of mind, I saw the Master seated by me. He was rubbing my body with his hands. His face shone with a heavenly smile. I was still in an intoxicated mood. He asked me, “Well, how was your meditation?” “It was very good, sir,” I replied. Then the Master said, “From now on you will always have deep meditation.” He I further asked, “Did you have a vision?”

I reported my experience to the Master as faithfully as I could. Then I followed him to his room. I was alone with him. That day he talked to me for a long time and gave me many spiritual instructions. I was overwhelmed by the Master's love and compassion for me. I had not realized before that he had so much feeling for me. Sri Ramakrishna's grace was boundless.

On that day the Master said to me: “Never get involved with women. Always be careful. Let there be no stain on your character. I Never look at a woman, even if she is made out of gold. Do you know I why I am saying all this to you? You belong to the Divine Mother, and you will have to do a lot of work for Her. A pecked fruit cannot be offered to the Mother. So I tell you, be careful.”^{xi}

Hari Prasanna later recalled various episodes pertaining to his association with Sri Ramakrishna:

On one occasion I was massaging the Master's feet when a gentleman from Konnagar came to visit him. After he had left, the Master said, "You know, I can see the inside of a man's mind just as I can see the objects inside a glass case." I thought to myself: "Well, then he can also see everything in me. What a dangerous man he is!" But the Master would only speak of the goodness in others, not of their evil deeds or tendencies.^{xii}

Once during my college days when I went to visit the Master at Dakshineswar, I asked him, "Is God with form or without form?" The Master replied: "God is with form as well as without form, and again he is beyond both form and formlessness." Then I asked, "If God is all, is this cot also God?" He answered emphatically, "Yes, this cot is God, this glass, this utensil, this wall- everything is God." As he spoke, I experienced an inner transformation and was lifted beyond the realm of ordinary consciousness. My heart was illumined, and I saw the light of Brahman everywhere.^{xiii}

During my youth I had read the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and other great philosophers. One day I said to the Master: "Sir, what do you know about philosophy? Have you read the works of Kant and Hegel?" He replied: "What are you saying? Throwaway all those books. Knowledge of God is not in any book. Those books are all products of ignorance." What a great statement the Master made! Later, finding no way out, I gave up arguing. In the beginning we need faith for God-realization.

Once at Dakshineswar the Master gave me an English book and asked me to read and explain it to him. It was stated in the book: "Speak the truth. Do not covet what belongs to another, Control your senses," On hearing this, the Master felt elated like a boy and expressed his great delight. The Master's Joy even now is deeply impressed in my mind. I think that his expression of great delight was due to the fact that if a person attains perfection in those three disciplines, he is sure to reach God. Whenever he heard any discussion about God, he' would go into ecstasy.^{xiv}

When the Master was blessed for the first time with the vision of the Divine Mother, he thought, "If this vision of mine is true, then let this big stone [which was in front of the nahabat] jump up thrice." Immediately, the stone did in fact jump thrice. Whatever he thought came to pass. Seeing this, the Master was fully convinced of the genuineness of his vision.^{xv}

Hari Prasanna was not able to spend a great deal of time with the Master, but the unbounded grace of his guru filled his heart. Towards the end of Sri Ramakrishna's life, pointing to his own picture, he told Hari Prasanna: "Look, I dwell in this picture. Meditate on me." "Yes, I will," replied Hari Prasanna.^{xvi}

In 1885 Hari Prasanna passed the First Arts examination in the first division at Saint Xavier's College. He then moved to Bankipur in the state of Bihar, and entered Patna College to study for a B.A. degree. Hari Prasanna later recalled: "The day the Master passed away [16 August 1886] I saw him standing in front of me. I wondered: 'How did the Master come here? What is the cause of this vision?' The next day I read of the Master's passing away in the *Basumati* newspaper." Naturally Hari Prasanna grieved, but he remembered what the Master had once said to him: "Do you know why I love you? You boys are my very own. The Divine Mother has asked me to love you." Hari Prasanna later remarked: "I cannot express how much love the Master had for us. We don't have that capacity to love others. We became intoxicated seeing the Master, and now people are intoxicated just by hearing his name. How blessed they are!"^{xvii}

As a Student and an Engineer

In 1887 Hari Prasanna graduated from Patna College and then went to the Poona College of Science to study civil engineering. He was a brilliant student and was greatly loved by his professors and classmates. In those days at the College of Science those who secured first and second places in their examinations would immediately get jobs either in the State Government of Bombay or in the Government of India. One of Hari Prasanna's classmates, Radhika Prasad Roy, a poor and meritorious boy, needed a job badly. Hari Prasanna knew that he would secure one of the top positions, so a few days before the final examination he said to Radhika Prasad: "Brother, the financial condition of your family is not good. If you can get one of the two top positions in the examination, you will definitely get a government job. So I have decided not to appear for the examination this year."^{xviii} He was true to his word. Although Radhika Prasad did not place first or second, he remembered Hari Prasanna's greatness all through his life.

Once in college Hari Prasanna protested the remark of a Christian missionary professor of geology who had sarcastically criticized the Hindu belief in reincarnation. As a result, the professor intentionally gave him a lower mark in geology than he really earned. Due to this

mark, he placed second instead of first in his final examination. Despite this, after graduating in civil engineering in 1892, he was given the job of district engineer at Gazipur in Uttar Pradesh. While in this position, the Varahasi-Gazipur Road was built under his supervision. During this time he met Pavhari Baba, the great yogi of Gazipur, who was highly esteemed by Swami Vivekananda. As a government engineer, Hari Prasanna worked at Etawah, Bulandsahar, Meerut, and other places in Uttar Pradesh. During his years of government service he kept in close contact with his brother disciples and donated sixty rupees every month to the Ramakrishna Monastery. Sometimes the disciples visited him and stayed with him when they were sick, and he served them with loving care.

With Swami Vivekananda

Because his father died in his childhood, Hari Prasanna had to work until his family was financially secure. He provided for his mother and also for the education of his younger brother. As time went on, however, his uncle began to pressure him to get married. He became disgusted with these attempts to tie him to a worldly life and joined the Ramakrishna Monastery at Alambazar in 1896. He lived there humbly and spent most of his time in japam and meditation. He was a man of few words and did not care for chatting and joking as others did.

Swami Vivekananda returned to India from the West in 1897 and took Hari Prasanna with him on his travels in western and northern India. During this tour they visited the old Hindu temples of Rajputana. Vivekananda discussed the architecture of the future Ramakrishna Temple with him and expressed his own ideas as to how the temple should be built.

On their return to the monastery, Hari Prasanna drew a sketch of the Ramakrishna Temple using Swamiji's ideas as his guide. He also consulted with Mr. Guithar, a noted architect. Swamiji was pleased when he saw the sketch and said, "This temple will certainly come up, but I may not live to see it. ...I will see it from on high."^{xix}

On 13 February 1898 the Ramakrishna Monastery was moved from Alambazar to Nilambar Mukherjee's garden house at Belur. The site for Belur Math, the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Order, was purchased in March of 1898. Vivekananda entrusted Hari Prasanna with the task of remodeling the main building and constructing new buildings and the shrine for the monastery. Hari Prasanna drew up the site plan and building plans, prepared estimates, as

well as supervised the construction. He did all of this single-handedly. When the construction was completed, Vivekananda consecrated the Ramakrishna Math on 9 December 1898. On 9 May 1899 Hari Prasanna formally took sannyasa, final monastic vows. Vivekananda told him: "Do as we have done. Take your sannyasa directly from the Master."^{xx} Accordingly, Hari Prasanna went to Sri Ramakrishna's shrine and took his monastic vows with the traditional *viraja homa* ceremony. He became known as Swami Vijnanananda.

One day Swamiji expressed a desire to build a ghat and an embankment on the bank of the Ganges for the Belur Monastery, so he asked Vijnanananda for an estimate. Fearing swamiji might change his mind, Vijnanananda understated the cost and said it would be approximately three thousand rupees. This amount made Swamiji happy: He immediately consulted with Swami Brahmananda and ordered that the project be started. As the work proceeded, Vijnanananda realized that the cost would exceed his previous estimate. He humbly expressed his concern to Brahmananda who asked Vijnanananda to complete the project. Out of compassion for his younger brother, he accepted the responsibility of spending the extra money and risking a scolding from Swamiji.

Sometime later, Swamiji asked Brahmananda for the accounts. When he discovered that the expenses had already exceeded the original estimate, and the work was still unfinished, he became angry with Brahmananda and vehemently scolded him. The latter endured it calmly. When Swamiji returned to his room, Brahmananda went to his own room and closed the door and windows. After a while Swamiji regretted his bad temper. He then called Vijnanananda and said, "Could you check on what Raja [Brahmananda was called Raja or King] is doing?" Vijnanananda went to Brahmananda's room and found that the doors and windows were closed. He called for him but got no response.

When he reported this to Swamiji, he said: "You are a fool! I asked you to find out what Raja was doing; and you say, 'His door and windows are closed.' Go back again and tell me what he is doing." This time Vijnanananda pushed the door open and found Brahmananda on his bed, weeping. Vijnanananda said apologetically, "Maharaj, I am sorry; today you have suffered terribly for me." Brahmananda said: "Brother, can you tell me what wrong I have done that swamiji could scold me so harshly? Sometimes it becomes so unbearable that I feel I should go away to some place in the mountains, leaving everything."

Returning to Swamiji, Vijnanananda reported that Brahmananda was crying. At this, Swamiji rushed to the room, embraced Brahmananda, and said tearfully: "Raja, brother, please forgive me. It is my fault that my temper is short and that I scolded you. Please pardon me." Meanwhile, Brahmananda had regained his composure. Seeing Swamiji weep, he was also moved. Then he said: "What does it matter? You have scolded me because you love me - that is all." But Swamiji continued: "Brother, please forgive me. I know how much the Master loved you and never uttered a harsh word to you. And I, on the other hand, for the sake of this petty work, have verbally abused you and given you pain. I am not fit to live with you. I shall go away to the Himalayas and live alone in solitude." "Don't say that, Swamiji," said Brahmananda. "Your scolding is a blessing. How can you leave us? You are our leader. How shall we function without you?" Gradually both of them became calm.

Vijnanananda later remarked: "I shall never forget that scene in my life. I never saw Swamiji weeping so bitterly. What a bond of love existed between them! Swamiji loved his brother disciples like a mother, and that is why he could not bear any shortcoming in them. He wanted them to be as great as himself; nay, even greater than himself. His love was incomparable."^{xxi}

One hot summer day, while supervising the construction work of the embankment at Belur Math, Vijnanananda became thirsty. He noticed that Vivekananda was enjoying a cold drink on his upper veranda. Presently, one of Swamiji's attendants carried a glass to him and said, "Swamiji has sent this cold drink to you." Vijnanananda took the glass and found only a few drops at the bottom. He was disappointed and piqued by Swamiji's practical joke. However, he drank those few drops as prasad and, strangely enough, his thirst was instantly quenched. He was dumbfounded. In the evening Vijnanananda saw Swamiji, who asked with a smile, "Did you drink the cold juicer?" "Yes, I did," replied Vijnanananda. He then described his experience after drinking it, and Swamiji was pleased.^{xxii}

Vijnanananda later reminisced about his Belur Math days with Swami Vivekananda: Swamiji used to call me "Peshan" [an abbreviation of Prasanna]. One day I was sitting on the upper veranda of Belur Math eating puffed rice. Swamiji was passing by. All of a sudden he grabbed a handful of puffed rice from my bowl and began to eat it like a boy. I remonstrated: "Swamiji, why don't you take another bowl of puffed rice? By eating the food that I have defiled you are making me feel guilty." Laughing, Swamiji left. [According to Hindu custom, a senior,

or highly respected person, does not eat from the same plate with a junior person. A junior person would feel extremely ill at ease were this to happen.]

I used to take snuff. Once Swamiji went to Calcutta and bought a pice worth of snuff in a packet. Handing it to me, he said, "Here is a wonderful present for you." I opened the packet and found the snuff. Seeing me happy, he was happy. But when he became grave, it was difficult to go near him. Then only Raja Maharaj could bring him back to the normal plane.^{xxiii}

At Belur Math Vijnanananda lived in a small room close to Swamiji's room. Once at two 0' clock in the morning, Vijnanananda saw Swarniji pacing on the eastern veranda. Concerned, he got up and asked Swamiji why he could not sleep. Swamiji replied: "Peshan, I was sleeping nicely; but suddenly I felt a jolt, and my sleep broke. It seems to me that there must be a disaster somewhere and many people are suffering." That night Vijnanananda could not make sense of this statement. However, he later narrated: "The next morning I saw in the newspaper that at the same time Swamiji awakened, there had been a terrible volcanic eruption near the Fiji Islands, and many people were killed. I was surprised to read this news, and then I realized that Swamiji's nervous system was more responsive to human misery than a seismograph."^{xxiv}

Once in the dead of night at Belur Math, Vijnanananda heard a pathetic cry from Vivekananda's room. He thought that perhaps Swamiji cried out because he was sick. Vijnanananda silently entered Swamiji's room and asked, "Swamiji, are you not well?" Immediately Swamiji became quiet and replied, "Oh, Peshan, I thought you were sleeping." When asked the cause of his cry, Swamiji tearfully said: "Brother, thinking of the poverty and suffering of the people, I cannot sleep. My mind is restless with pain. So I am praying to the Master, 'Let good befall our people and let their suffering go away.'" Vijnanananda then consoled Swamiji and asked him to sleep. That night Vijnanananda was deeply moved to see how intensely Swamiji felt for his countrymen.^{xxv}

Vijnanananda had great love and respect for Holy Mother, but he seldom visited her in Calcutta. One day he went with Swamiji to Balaram's house in Calcutta while Holy Mother was staying there. Swamiji asked, "Peshan, did you salute Holy Mother?" "No, Swamiji, I did not." "What! Go right now and bow down to the Mother," said Swamiji. Accordingly, Vijnanananda went to Holy Mother and bowed down to her from a distance, bending his head to the floor. As soon as Vijnanananda got up, from behind he heard Swamiji say: "What is this, Peshan? Does anybody salute the Mother in this way? Bow down to her by prostrating yourself on the floor.

Holy Mother is the Mother of the Universe." Swamiji then presented himself to the Mother, and Vijnanananda did likewise. Later Vijnanananda remarked, "I could not imagine that Swamiji would follow me to the Mother."^{xxvi}

Once while at Belur Math Vijnanananda was wondering about Swamiji's work in the West and his relationship with Western women. Seeing Swamiji alone in his room, Vijnanananda asked him frankly: "Swamiji, while you were in the West you associated with the women there; but didn't the Master teach the contrary in this respect? He used to say, 'A monk should not even look at the portrait of a woman.' He emphatically told me not to be close to women, however devoted they might be. So I am wondering why you did so."

Immediately Swamiji became very grave and his face and eyes turned crimson with anger. After a while he said: "Well, Peshan, do you think that what you have understood about the Master is all that he is? What do you know about the Master? Do you know that the Master eradicated the idea of the difference between male and female from my mind? Is there any distinction of sex in the Atman? Moreover, the Master came for the good of the entire world. Did he come to liberate only men? He will save all-both men and women. You people want to belittle the Master by measuring him with the yardstick of your own intellects~ Whatever the Master told you is true; you follow that implicitly. But to me his instructions were different. He not only gave me instructions, he clearly showed me everything. He holds my hands -whatever he makes me do, I do."

Gradually Swamiji became calm. Noticing Vijnanananda's embarrassment, he said with a smile: "Can a nation rise or become great unless the primordial energy that lies dormant in women is awakened? I have travelled all over the world and found that women are neglected more or less everywhere, but this is particularly deplorable in India. That is why our nation has been degraded to such an extent. As soon as there is an awakening in women, you will see that the whole nation will rise up in its pristine glory. For that reason Holy Mother has come. With her advent there has been a stir among the women of all countries. This is just a beginning; you will see many more things later."^{xxvii}

A great soul sees greatness in others. In the last years of his life, Swamiji's mind was mostly absorbed in God-consciousness. One day Swamiji remarked: "I cannot say anything to Peshan because I see the Master in him." To this Vijnanananda responded: "The Master dwells in every being. It is no wonder that you see the Master in me through your divine sight." "No,

Peshan," said Swamiji. "It is not like that. I see distinctly that the Master has made his habitat in you nicely." Vijnanananda humbly replied, "Swamiji, you see whatever you want to; but I don't understand it."^{xxviii}

Another time Vijnanananda asked Swamiji, "Well, does the Master accept the food which we offer in the shrine?" "Yes, he does," replied Swamiji. "A ray comes out from his third eye and touches the food. If you want, I can show it to you today in the shrine."^{xxix} Vijnanananda fully believed what Swamiji had said, and proceeded no further. This mutual love and trust of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples made their lives joyful.

Vivekananda was a man of varying moods. Sometimes he was playful, and then everyone could approach him freely. But when he was serious, seldom would anyone dare to approach him. One day in a jovial mood, he said to Vijnanananda: "Peshan, it is time to write a new Smriti [scripture pertaining to social, moral, and ethical laws] according to the need of the present age. The old smritis are now obsolete." Vijnanananda asked: "Swamiji, why will the people accept your Smriti?" Immediately Swamiji, like a querulous boy, complained to Brahmananda, "Rakhal, listen, Peshan says that the people won't accept my message." Brahmananda pacified him, saying: "What does Peshan know? He is a mere boy. The people will definitely accept your message someday or other." Like a reassured boy, Swamiji said joyfully: "Peshan, did you hear what Rakhal said? The people will positively accept my message."^{xxx} Brahmananda's prophetic words came true!

At Allahabad (Prayag)

When the construction of the Belur Monastery was finished, Vivekananda advised Vijnanananda to start a centre at Allahabad (Prayag). This city is an important pilgrimage site because the confluence of three rivers—the Ganges, the Jamuna, and the Saraswati - is located there. Accordingly, Vijnanananda left Belur Math in the early part of 1900, and after visiting a few holy places, reached Allahabad in the fall. He first stayed with his friend, Dr. Mahendra Nath Odedar, and then moved to the Brahmavadin Club. The club members practiced meditation and prayer, held classes on the scriptures, sang devotional songs, and discussed spiritual topics. They were extremely happy to have Vijnanananda in their midst.

The club rented two rooms on the upper floor of a two-storey building - a small one (10 by 10 feet) for the shrine, and a larger one (18 by 10 feet) for a library and meeting room. In

front of these rooms there was a long, roofless veranda. An open staircase by the side of the house extended from the ground to the veranda, then to the roof. On the roof there was a privy that was cleaned daily by a sweeper. There was no water or electricity in the house. Vijnanananda had to collect water from the street supply of the municipality, cook his own meals (rice and vegetable curry only) on two kerosene stoves, wash the pots and dishes, and do all the household work. In addition, he regularly did physical exercise and practiced pranayama, breathing exercises. He spent mornings and afternoons in worship, japam, meditation, and study in the shrine room. In the evening, the club members would conduct a vesper service; he also gave classes on the Gita to club members in the library hall. He slept in this hall at night.

Vijnanananda loved to be alone and was a man of few words. If anybody asked for some advice, he would say: "Practise what you studied in the primary book in your childhood days: Always speak the truth and do not steal or covet others' things. Follow these two moral principles, and then everything else will take care of itself."^{xxxix}

During his early days in Allahabad, Vijnanananda would go for a daily bath before sunrise in the *Triveni* (literally, three braids), the confluence of three holy rivers. One day after his bath, while reciting a hymn to the Mother Ganges, Vijnanananda had a vision. The goddess Mother Triveni appeared as a beautiful young girl with three braids hanging down her back and then disappeared again into the water. He was overwhelmed by the vision. After chanting, when he began to walk towards the ashrama, he saw Mother Triveni walking in the same direction with her braids dangling. After a while she disappeared. When Brahmananda heard about this vision, he confirmed it as genuine. Vijnanananda himself said: "The test of a true vision is this: It leaves a lasting spiritual impression on the mind that generates awareness and bliss. I still get joy when I think of that virginal form of the Divine Mother."^{xxxix}

Swamiji had great affection for Vijnanananda, and called him the "Bishop of Allahabad." As a result of his intense, one-pointed spiritual disciplines, Vijnanananda had various kinds of visions and experiences. On the day Vivekananda passed away, Vijnanananda was meditating in the shrine of the Brahnavadin Club and he had a vision of Swamiji seated on the lap of Sri Ramakrishna. Vijnanananda became very anxious about Swamiji. He wondered, "Why have I seen Swamiji in this way?" The next day he received a cable from Belur Math with the sad news of Vivekananda's passing.^{xxxix}

In Allahabad, Vijnanananda did not make any effort to preach the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. In fact, preaching was against his nature. He was satisfied leading his life according to the ideal of Sri Ramakrishna. He plunged into the inner realm, and seldom went outside the club. His simple, austere, god-centred life nevertheless attracted people, including Pandit Madan Mohan Malavya, a saintly and scholarly leader of India who founded the Varanasi Hindu University. The pandit was charmed to see in Swami Vijnanananda the living representation of Vedanta. The swami was completely indifferent to worldly comforts or any other external things. One day, seeing the swami's worn-out water jar, Madan ! Mohan remarked, "It needs replacing."^{xxxiv}

A Vedanta scripture says: "If you want the knowledge of Brahman, shun crowds like a snake, good food like poison, and sex like the devil." Vijnanananda followed this advice to the letter. He was extremely punctual. During the daytime he would give interviews to earnest people, but if a person arrived even one minute late, he would not see him. At night j he would not allow anybody to stay in the centre. His dress was quite unusual: a long loose shirt (either cotton or woollen) with many pockets, a piece of dhoti (cloth) reaching his knees, a couple of pairs of socks (even in the hot summer), worn-out shoes, and a cap that covered his ears. When he went somewhere *byekka*, an open horse-carriage, people on the street would look at him with curiosity. Vijnanananda would make fun of them: "What are you looking at? A monkey? Yes, I am a monkey devotee of Lord Ramachandra."^{xxxv} This is the way mystics hide their true stature from the gaze of the public.

No one ever saw Vijnanananda wasting his time by indulging in chit- chat or gossip, nor did he allow others to do so in the centre. When he was not practising his spiritual disciplines, he studied Vedanta literature thoroughly and regularly with Bhagavat Dat, an orthodox Vedic pandit of Allahabad. He also published a number of important books during his thirty-eight-year stay in Allahabad. In 1904 he translated *Sri Ramakrishna 's Life and Teachings* by Suresh Chandra Datta from Bengali into Hindi and published it as *Paramahansa-Charitra*. His later publications were: *Jalsarvarilher Karkhilnil*, an engineering and waterworks manual in two volumes in Bengali; translations of Varahamihira's *Brihajjiltaka* and *Surya- siddhanta*, two ancient Sanskrit astrological and astronomical works, the first into English and the second into Bengali; and translations of *Devi Bhagavata* and *Narada Pancharatra*, two famous Hindu scriptures, from

Sanskrit into English. Towards the end of his life, he was translating Valmiki's Ramayana from Sanskrit into English, but this was left unfinished. He later said of this experience: "When I sit down to translate the Ramayana, I forget the world. I see Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, and Mahavirji in front of me."^{xxxvi}

During his early period of sadhana in Allahabad, Vijnanananda was very strict about women; he did not allow any women to visit the Brahmavadin Club, which was actually men's club. One day the sweeper went somewhere to do errands, so he sent his young daughter to clean Vijnanananda's privy. She met the swami while walking down the steps, and greeted him with a smile. He did not want a woman to clean his privy, so he told her, "Starting tomorrow I don't need anybody to clean my privy." She reported this to her father. That evening the sweeper rushed to the swami and apologized. At first Vijnanananda said sternly to him: "I don't need anybody. I shall go to the public privy." Later, out of compassion, he told the poor sweeper, "If you want to serve me, please come; but don't send anyone else." Shivananda once remarked, "Even a she-fly has no entry in Hari Prasanna's ashrama."^{xxxvii}

Let the reader not misunderstand: Vijnanananda did not hate women, But he was an ideal monk who followed his guru's advice without compromise. Later, when he moved to his own ashrama, his sister came to visit him. He arranged for her to stay in an inn. In 1918 his mother came to Prayag for a pilgrimage and holy bath during *Purna Kumbha* (an auspicious festival that falls once every twelve years). He arranged for her to stay in the ashrama guest house and served her wholeheartedly. He was a pure soul who had conquered lust - a great obstacle to spiritual life. Once he said to a monk in Allahabad: "I have never seen any woman even in my dreams [meaning, no lustful dreams] In my fifty-three years of life, the Divine Mother has never shown me Her bewitching form."^{xxxviii} During a talk to the monks at Belur Math in 1937, Vijnanananda said: "Respect women as you respect Holy Mother in the temple. They are aspects of the Divine Mother. Bow down to them from a distance, because you are monks."^{xxxix} When Vijnanananda became president of the Ramakrishna Order, he initiated many women and was very kind and loving towards them. Once he said to a woman devotee: "Call on Holy Mother; you will achieve everything. The Master is very strict about bestowing his grace, but the Mother is very compassionate. I have achieved everything by her grace."^{xl}

Vijnanananda practised severe austerities fifteen hours a day for ten years while at the Brahmavadin Club. In 1910 he bought a house and a vacant plot across the road from it in the

Muthiganj area of Allahabad. He turned the house into a Ramakrishna Monastery and built another house on the vacant plot for a charitable homeopathic dispensary. He took Brahmachari Panchanan from the Varanasi Home of Service as his assistant. Panchanan worked in the charitable homeopathic dispensary and he also served the swami from 1910 to 1924. He later left the Order. Vijnanananda continued to practise his sadhana in solitude as Sri Ramakrishna had directed: "Meditate in the mind, in the corner of the room, and in the forest." He was a yogi as described in the Gita: "He knows bliss in the Atman and wants nothing else. Cravings torment the heart: he renounces cravings. He is unperturbed by adversity, does not hanker after happiness, and is free from anger and fear. I call him a seer, and illumined" (2:55-56). However, the swami could not hide himself for long. Gradually people became aware of his spiritual greatness and began to come to him for guidance.

Allahabad has an extreme climate - very hot in the summer and severely cold in the winter. The ashrama had no electricity and moreover, it was very close to the main rail line in Muthiganj, which made it very noisy. It was unbearably hot in the summer, so Vijnanananda would meditate with a wet towel on his head. Despite these hardships, nothing could disturb the equanimity of Vijnanananda's mind. Sometime in 1916 or 1917 the swami suffered from acute blood dysentery for many days. He did not allow anyone to serve him; he only asked his assistant to keep a jar of cold water in his room. He endured the pain alone in his bed with his eyes closed, as if absorbed in deep meditation. If anyone offered to help, he would put his index finger over his lips to indicate "silence," and then would dismiss the person with a wave of his hand. Vijnanananda was an embodiment of forbearance, and finally was cured with homeopathic medicine.

In the beginning the financial condition of the Allahabad Ramakrishna Math was poor. There were only a few devotees and Vijnanananda had to take out a loan of 4,100 rupees in order to buy the house. A Muslim horse-carriage driver collected monthly subscriptions for the ashrama from some of those devotees. At that time the swami had not started to give initiation, so he had no disciples to assist him. He appointed Beni, a local boy, as his personal attendant.

In the early stages, there were no cooking facilities in the ashrama. Some devotees took turns cooking for Vijnanananda in their own homes and Beni would collect the food in a tiffin-carrier. The swami asked the devotees to cook simple meals for him, so they cooked only rice, lentils, and a vegetable. These devotees knew his temperament, so they never disobeyed him;

they were happy to serve this great soul. Later, when the ashrama grew, Vijnanananda established cooking facilities and hired a cook. The swami was so fond of tea that he took it several times a day. He would buy the best tea available in the market and would invite everybody - visitors, servants, sweepers, and carriage-drivers - to his tea parties.

Vijnanananda believed wholeheartedly that all works of the ashrama belong to God, but the head of a centre is responsible if anything goes wrong. Once the doctor of the charitable homeopathic dispensary resigned. This created a great difficulty for the swami. He could not find a doctor immediately, and he was very concerned for the indigent patients. He pondered: "Well, it is the Master's work; I shall give medicine chanting his name." Vijnanananda had no knowledge of medicine, nevertheless he started to go to the dispensary every morning. He gave homeopathic medicine to the patients without asking about their diseases or physical problems. When the female patients tried to tell him their physical problems, the swami said: "Don't talk about your disease. Take the medicine and go home."

It was amazing: Every single drop of homeopathic medicine he gave cured each patient - not one had to return for a second dose. When this miraculous news spread, more patients began to appear every day. It became difficult to control the crowds. Then the swami brought in a doctor from Varanasi and was relieved of the responsibility. The doctor checked the stock of medicine and discovered that even the nitric acid bottles were empty. Frightened and amazed, he said to the swami, "Maharaj, you have cleared even the nitric acid!" Vijnanananda simply said: "I have given medicine in the name of the Master and the patients got well. There is no credit for me; I did as he asked me to do."^{xli}

In Varanasi

Sometime in the 1880s, probably while he was a government engineer, Vijnanananda met Trailanga Swami, a venerated saint of Varanasi. He later spoke about his visit: "I went to see him and found him lying naked in the hot summer sun. People said he had a dark complexion, but I found him as bright as molten gold. He seemed to me to be a great soul. He emanated a lustrous radiance, demonstrating the difference between ordinary mortals and spiritually powerful souls."^{xlii}

Since Vijnanananda was an engineer, he was always consulted regarding the construction of the Ramakrishna Mission's hospitals or temples. In 1909 the swami went to Varanasi to

supervise the construction of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service. While riding from the rail station to the centre, Vijnanananda's horse carriage suddenly overturned, and one of his legs was twisted inside a wheel. Although he was in severe pain, he was able to pull his leg out immediately. Vijnanananda reached the ashrama by another carriage, and the doctors took care of him quickly. That night he had a high temperature and a terrible headache. He thought to himself: "Lord Vishwanath, I have come to your city to work for the Master., This is an unselfish action! Why has this accident happened ? The Master's work will suffer. Thinking thus, he fell asleep. Vijnanananda later narrated the following experience:

It was 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. I saw Lord Shiva with matted hair and smiling face appear before me. I said: "Lord, have you come to take me? But I cannot go now; I have to complete the Master's work first." He didn't listen to me. Smiling, he came forward and then embraced me. Immediately my body became as cold as ice. I then said to him: "Good-bye now, Lord. I shall have to do the Master's work." Lord Shiva laughed and left. Strangely enough, in the morning I felt no fever and also my wounds were healed to some extent. Even now, sometimes I see that calm, smiling form of Lord Shiva.^{xliii}

In 1918 while he was at Varanasi, Vijnanananda visited Sarnath, about six miles away. Sarnath is a historical site where Buddha gave his first sermon. Vijnanananda once mentioned to a professor from Sarnath that the images of Buddha and other deities looked beautiful and living when they were first excavated. But when they were later preserved in the Sarnath Museum, those images lost some of their solemnity and charm. Even so, these divine images are always inspiring. The swami described his visit to Sarnath and his experience:

Once, during my morning walk, I decided to visit Sarnath. I had no previous plan to do so. After arriving there on foot, I looked around. While I was there, a guide informed me that there was a stone image containing carvings of Buddha's entire life story from his birth to mahaparinirvana [death]. The guide accompanied me there. While looking at the image I had a wonderful vision. I saw a formless ocean of light, and the whole universe was gradually merging into it. Like a speck, I was watching that blissful glow with wonder, standing on the shore of the ocean of light. I was beside myself. Then in the twinkling of an eye the universe completely disappeared; and from the ocean of pure consciousness the compassionate, loving form of Buddha appeared. What a joy! Even now while describing it, I feel that joy. I was in that state for

some time. Then I heard the guide's voice, "Let us go forward -let us go forward." Gradually I regained my normal consciousness. The guide thought that I had fallen asleep. I followed the guide, but I was extremely intoxicated. In the afternoon when I returned to the centre, the monks asked where I had been and said that lunch had been saved for me. I didn't tell them where I had been: I only said, "I don't feel like eating now." I quietly went to bed. That blissful intoxication continued for three days.^{xliv}

Later, when I went to visit the temple of Vishwanath in Varanasi, I thought to myself: "Why have I come here? To look at a stone?" Then the same vision opened up. It was as if Vishwanath were telling me, "The light is the same here as there -Thuth is one."^{xlv}

On 5 February 1938 Vijnanananda again left Allahabad to visit the centre at Varanasi. After supper the monks and devotees assembled in his room and asked him to talk about Sri Ramakrishna. Instead of sharing his reminiscences, the swami asked, "Well, whom do you love - the Master or the Mother?" "We love both," came the answer. The swami said: "Then it is all right. The Master is Rama and Krishna, and the Mother is Sita and Yogamaya. As the king visits his subjects sometimes in royal dress and sometimes in disguise to evaluate their needs, so the Master came this time in disguise. ...It is true: the Master will. come back soon."^{xlvi}

The next day at 5:00 p.m. Vijnanananda went to visit the Durga Temple by car. He returned an hour and a half later and immediately went to bed. No one dared to ask him anything. He remained immersed in the thought of Mother Durga for quite some time. When his spiritual mood subsided, he sat in his chair and supper was served. Seeing the various dishes, he remarked: "Who can eat so many dishes? When I could eat, nobody gave me sufficient food. Now I cannot eat and people are serving me all kinds of food." After supper Vijnanananda told the monks: "The Americans respect Swamiji more than the Master. Swamiji had a wonderful, over-whelming personality. People felt inadequate in front of him. When we mentioned this to Swamiji, he said, 'It is the play of that mad brahmin [*meaning the Master*]; he is working through me.' Swamiji was very simple and a man of renunciation."^{xlvii}

Pilgrimage

In the latter part of his life, Vijnanananda visited various holy places. On 21 December 1931 the swami went to Ramakrishna Math in Madras. From there, he visited the temples of Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva in Kanchipuram; then those of the Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundar-eshwara in Madurai. He proceeded to Trivandrum and from there travelled to Kanyakumari. He entered the temple and looked at the Mother Kumari, the Virgin Goddess, for an hour without blinking. From the seashore he saw Rock Island where Vivekananda had meditated and had a vision before he left for America. Vijnanananda then visited Rameswaram, Bangalore, Mysore, and Ootacamund, before returning to Madras. Vijnanananda told the devotees in Madras: "The goal of human life is to realize God because only that can give us real and permanent peace. Truly it is the ego, a product of ignorance, which has covered our God-vision. Once someone asked Sri Ramakrishna, 'Why can't we see God?' He immediately covered his face with a towel and asked: 'Can you see my face? No. Because this towel is the barrier; yet I am seated in front of you. Similarly, remove the veil of ignorance, which is between you and God and you will see Him everywhere.'"^{xlvi}

In 1932 he visited Chittrakut, where Lord Ramachandra stayed during his banishment; Dwaraka on the shore of the Arabian Sea, where Lord Krishna lived; Rajkot in Gujarat; and Bombay. In 1933 Vijnanananda went to Sri Lanka and visited three important Buddhist holy places: Kelani Temple, where it is said the Buddha visited three times; Kandy Tooth Temple of Buddha; and the Bo-tree of Anuradhapuram. In the same year Vijnanananda went to Delhi, Lahore, Peshwar, Landikotal, and Shillong.

In 1935 Vijnanananda went to see the famous Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar. He then visited the Konarak Sun Temple. On another occasion he visited the Jagannath Temple of Puri. He later spoke of his experience there: "On entering the temple, I embraced Lord Jagannath. He seemed to be soft like a doll of butter."^{xlix} He also visited Dinajpur, Tamluk, Kamarpukur (the birthplace of Sri Ramakrishna), and Jayrambati (the birthplace of Holy Mother). He then installed the foundation stone of the Ramakrishna Mission in Kanpur. At a later date he visited Dhaka and Barisal in Bangladesh.

When Sri Ramakrishna trained his disciples, he gave them the power necessary to transmit his spiritual heritage. Consequently, wherever his disciples went they would create such an uplifting atmosphere that everyone's mind would be filled with joy. Although reticent, when asked, Vijnanananda always talked about the Master and spiritual life. In Barisal he said to the

devotees: "Only a few people can realize or understand God. This is not possible without purity of the heart. One should be extremely careful: Bad thoughts are like poison."¹ One day a judge's wife asked, "Maharaj, how can we control the restless mind?" "Punish the mind with a whip," replied the swami. The lady said: "The whip is in my hand, but the mind is far away. How can I thrash it?" Vijnanananda burst into laughter.^{li} Another day he said to the devotees: "Chant the Lord's name; you will get peace." Then he mentioned the nature of the Soul, or the Atman: "The Soul is not matter. The Soul is beyond birth and death. The Soul is eternal. The individual soul is subservient to the Supreme Soul [Paramatman]."^{lii}

In December 1936 Vijnanananda went to Rangoon, the capital of Burma. The Burmese devotees were happy to meet a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. On 11 December Vijnanananda went to see the famous reclining image of Buddha at Pegu, forty-five miles from Rangoon. He stood motionless in front of the image for a long time. His companions did not dare disturb him. After a while Vijnanananda regained a normal state of consciousness and they returned to the car. He remained silent and serious all the way back to Rangoon. Later, when repeatedly asked by the monks about his spiritual mood, the swami said: "Today Lord Buddha has graciously vouchsafed me his vision. I clearly saw that the reclining image of Buddha was living, as it were. How magnificent was the beauty of his luminous form!" After saying this, he again became silent.^{liii}

During his stay in Rangoon, Vijnanananda initiated some devotees. In the afternoons he answered the questions of spiritual aspirants. One afternoon a monk asked, "How can we still the mind?" Vijnanananda replied: "It is quite essential to practise japam and meditation regularly every day. Then gradually the mind will be calm and steady. Try to live alone. A real holy man lives in solitude." Later he added: "It is no use listening to too many spiritual instructions at one time. It is far better to hear and concentrate on a few instructions and practise them. Often some people take too many instructions but do not follow any at all- that does not bear any results. What good advice you have heard, try to translate into action."^{liv}

On 12 December 1936 Vijnanananda heard that Prince Edward VIII had renounced the throne of England in order to marry an American woman. The swami commented: "Look, the prince gave up such a vast empire, wealth, honour, and everything just for a woman! So a woman is greater than an empire, and again God is greater than a woman. Who renounces anything for God? God is the greatest of everything - upon gaining him one knows that there is

no greater gain. But it is extremely difficult to attain him. The prince's renunciation of the empire is praiseworthy. Renunciation of any kind is good; it increases mental strength and dispassion. Today he has renounced the empire, perhaps in the future he may give up that woman."^{lv}

When his attendant came to bow down to him, the swami said: "Today you won't get food in the monastery. Edward VIII has given up such a vast empire; will you not be able to give up food for one day?" When the monk agreed to fast, Vijnanananda said: "Look, the king has renounced his kingdom for a woman! What a play of Mahamaya!"^{lvi} The swami continued to praise renunciation, then finally said, "There is little hope of making any progress in spiritual life without renunciation."^{lvii}

At Belur Math

On 9 December 1898 Vivekananda had consecrated Belur Math by worshipping the relics of Sri Ramakrishna. During this auspicious occasion, Swamiji had said to a disciple: "The Master once told me, 'I will go and live wherever it will be your pleasure to take me, carrying me on your shoulders - be it under a tree or in the humblest cottage.'" Belur Math was very special to Vijnanananda, as it was to the other disciples and devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. Vijnanananda lived mostly in Allahabad, but from time to time Brahmananda asked him to oversee construction work for the Order. As described earlier, in 1909 he went to Varanasi and in 1910 to Kankhal (Hardwar) to supervise construction work. From 1919 to 1920 he supervised the construction of the Vivekananda Temple at Belur Math. After breakfast he would go to the construction site to guide the workers until 1:00 p.m. and return again in the afternoon. He always maintained his calmness during intense activity; he was truly a karma yogi. He reminded the labourers: "Look, work carefully. You are building the temple of Lord Shiva."

One day Brahmananda asked Vijnanananda how the work was progressing. Vijnanananda reported that his work was suffering because there was a shortage of materials. Brahmananda said that the materials would arrive by boat before the next morning, but Vijnanananda doubted this. Thereupon a bet was laid and both retired for the night. Early in the morning Vijnanananda got up to see if the boat had come. It had not, so he returned to his bed, elated at the prospect of winning the bet. A little later, Brahmananda went out, saw the boat moored, and quietly retired. After daybreak Vijnanananda went to him and joyously demanded his winnings. "What for?" inquired Brahmananda. Then the disconcerting truth dawned upon

Vijnanananda. Finding the tables turned on him, he said, "Well, I have no money; you must pay it. for me." All laughed. On another occasion, a similar result greeted Brahmananda's prediction about rain. Later, Vijnanananda narrated these incidents as a tribute to his illustrious brother monk.

The disciples of the Master had tremendous mutual love and respect for one another; this created solidarity within the Order. Once Brahmananda told some of his disciples: "Hari Prasanna Maharaj has come from Allahabad. Have you met him? Please go and pay your obeisance to him. He is a knower of Brahman; and having attained the supreme state of beatitude, he is calm and silent. It is difficult to recognize him; he generally eludes people."

After Brahmananda passed away in 1922, Shivananda became president of the Ramakrishna Order. On 25 April 1933 Shivananda had a stroke. His right side was paralyzed and very soon his speech became impaired. A few months later Vijnanananda arrived at Belur Math to see him. When the monks asked Vijnanananda the reason for his surprise visit, he replied that a couple of days before he had been very disturbed about Shivananda's condition; then the Master appeared to him and said, "Don't worry; I am looking after him." "Immediately my anxiety ceased," said Vijnanananda. "Next it came to my mind that I must see this great soul who is protected by the Master. So I left for Calcutta yesterday."

Although Shivananda could not talk, he was pleased to see his brother disciple and blessed him. Vijnanananda later described his experience: "That day Mahapurush [Swami Shivananda] laid his hand on my head; his touch changed my mental attitude. He passed on to me his great desire to help people spiritually and to assume responsibility for them. I now feel that as long as I live and have the least strength in my body I shall do the same and give the Master's name to all." All these years Vijnanananda had lived a quiet and secluded life. He had avoided crowds, and spoke only occasionally to select individuals on spiritual matters. After this incident, however, he began to mingle more freely with people and to give initiation to seekers, refusing none.

In 1934, after Shivananda passed away, it was proposed that Swami Vijnanananda become a trustee and the vice-president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Swami Akhandananda, the president, knew that his brother monk collected fountain pens as a hobby, so he wrote to him, "Brother, please give your consent and sign your name; and I shall present a fountain pen to you." Vijnanananda wrote back: "Brother, when you send me the pen, I shall sign

my name with it." Akhandananda sent him a pen; the swami signed and became the vice-president of the Ramakrishna Order. This incident shows the results of Sri Ramakrishna's training- his disciples had no desire for power or position. After becoming vice-president, Vijnanananda travelled widely and initiated many people. About initiation, he remarked: "When people come to me for a mantram, I take them to the Master's shrine and introduce them to him. Afterwards the Master will do what is necessary."

On 20 December 1936 a devotee asked Vijnanananda at Belur Math: "One is supposed to repeat the mantram with joy, but quite often I feel depressed. What shall I do?" The swami replied: "Japam means repeating the Lord's name. It does not matter what mood you are in, you should continue your japam. Know for certain that you are separate from the mind. Don't pay any attention to whether you have joy or misery in your mind." Soon after, another devotee approached him for initiation. The swami at first declined, then said indignantly: "People take initiation and then write letter after letter. They do not practise spiritual disciplines according to the instructions. They only complain and disturb me." When the devotee finally persuaded Vijnanananda to accept him, the swami compassionately said: 'All right. If you do not write me too many letters, come tomorrow morning for initiation."

Once while at Belur Math Vijnanananda went to visit Kalighat in South Calcutta. There he had a mystical experience that he later narrated: "I was taken inside the temple. I saw and touched the Divine Mother's image; then while I was circumambulating the deity, the Mother, out of Her infinite mercy, revealed Herself unto me. She roused my *kundalini* [the serpent power that resides at the base of the spine] to the *sahasrara* [the thousand-petalled lotus on the crown of the head] and illumined it quickly."

On another occasion he had a vision of Lord Shiva in the Art Studio of Calcutta. He described this experience: "I went alone to the studio and saw a beautiful picture of Lord shiva. He was in a standing posture and had matted locks and a beard. A standing portrait of Shiva is rare. I gazed at it intently and was soon filled with ecstasy. The picture became living to me, and I felt that Lord Shiva would talk to me. I still vividly remember that sweet divine mood and I feel joy whenever I think of that picture."

Sometimes after talking about his visions he would realize that some of his audience were sceptical. He would then change the topic and speak in a lighter vein: "You see, Rakhai Maharaj

and I had all sorts of visions. Both of us had little sleep at night, so we used to see all those things. You are all young Bengalis; you do not have to believe in them."

Vijnanananda considered Belur Math to be a genuinely holy place; it had been sanctified by the touch of Holy Mother and all sixteen of Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples. Once the swami remarked: "Mother Annapurna [the goddess of food] is ever-present in Belur Math. It is a place of mendicants who have no money. But people bring food and all sorts of things. It is the grace of the Mother that the monastery store is always full. ...Anybody who lives in Belur Math and practises japam and meditation intensely in solitude will attain spiritual experiences." In 1937, after Akhandananda passed away, Vijnanananda became the president of the Ramakrishna Order.

"A Hidden Knower of Brahman"

Brahmananda once remarked, "Vijnanananda is a hidden knower of Brahman." The Bhagavata gives a description of an illumined soul's way of life: "Though wise, he plays like a child unconcerned about status; though highly intelligent, he behaves like a fool without any plans; though learned, he speaks like one who is mad to avoid popularity; though established in the truth taught by the Vedas, he roams about like cattle with absolute unconcern for all established codes of conduct" (11.18.29). We must look at Vijnanananda's actions from this perspective in order to understand their true meaning; otherwise, he will be misunderstood.

Another important characteristic of Vijnanananda was his wonderful sense of humour. Although he seemed to be a serious person, he could make people laugh with his childlike simplicity, playful moods, jokes, and witty remarks. Humour has its place in religion: Although it is not accepted by many religions, it can actually be a mode of spiritual self-expression. Because a real Vedantin -a knower of Brahman -knows that the world is a dream, he can make fun of it.

One evening Vijnanananda pointed to the stars and said to his devotees: "They are my friends. How beautifully they are twinkling!" Soon after this a devotee asked the swami to tell a story. Immediately he said with a chuckle, 'Am I your grandmother?' Then he continued: "Yes, everything is a fairy tale -really. If you can think of the world as unreal, how happy you will be! Trouble arises when you think of it as a reality." In this connection he told the story of Diogenes, the famous Greek philosopher who considered the world to be a dream. One day some young

students tied the philosopher's legs and pulled him over the street. His body was covered with cuts and bruises. Then the students asked, "Do you still think that the world is a dream?" Diogenes replied, "Yes, the world is a dream -but a painful dream."

In 1933, on his way to Colombo, Sri Lanka, Vijnanananda stopped for a few days at the Madras Math. One day while he was removing his coat, sweater, shirt and T –shirt, the young monks were watching him with great curiosity. One young monk commented: 'Maharaj, Sri Ramakrishna compared the ego to an onion. If anyone removes the layers of an onion one after another, there will be nothing left. We see you are also removing your clothing like that.' The swami said with a smile, "Five sheaths are within the body, and I put seven or eight more coverings over that otherwise people will see my Atman." All laughed.

Once Vijnanananda asked a disciple, "Have you ever seen a *bhut* [ghost]?" When the disciple replied, "No:" the swami said: "There are five ghosts in your body. Do not fear. Chant the name of Rama; all the ghosts will run away. Where Rama's name is chanted, no ghosts can live." *Bhut* means ghost and also element. The swami made a pun by saying *pancha- bhut*, i.e., five elements- space, air, fire, water, earth -that constitute the human body, as well as everything else in this universe.

In Allahabad Vijnanananda once told a young monk, "I shall make you hear Krishna's flute." At noon he took the curious monk outside and showed him a steamroller that was levelling the street. From time to time the driver pulled the whistle. As soon as he heard the sound, the swami said, "Listen,there is Krishna playing the flute!" The monk burst into laughter. Vijnanananda said with a jovial grin: "Why are you laughing? As Lord Krishna unselfishly does good to the world, so does that steamroller."

As a knower of Brahman/,Vijnanananda could read others' minds. The scripture says: "Tell the truth, but don't tell a harsh truth. However, if you love a person tell the harsh truth." Vijnanananda told people,when asked, what was good for them. Sometimes his words were pleasant and sometimes unpleasant. It was not possible for him to flatter anyone or to utter an agreeable falsehood for the sake of courtesy. Once a fashionable modern girl came to the ashrama and sat abruptly in front of the swami. She then posed a question, "What is your advice to us?" His typical answer was, "Eat much, talk much, and quarrel much." The girl was very embarrassed. Perhaps Vijnanananda sensed her quarrelsome nature, and intended for his sharp answer to remind her not to quarrel the rest of her life.

In January 1938 when Vijnanananda went to Belur Math for the dedication of Sri Ramakrishna's temple, he was almost constantly surrounded by people. He said: 'Allahabad is a nice place. I have sufficient privacy there, and not too many people come to me. But in Belur Math I am surrounded by a crowd almost continually -I can hardly breathe. Why do people come to see me? I am not a good-looking person, nor do I have any good qualities. Still people flock to me.' His attendant replied: "Maharaj, you are a son and representative of Sri Ramakrishna; so seeing you they get peace." Later, on the Master's birthday, he greeted the devotees without taking any rest. He said to his attendant: "Today is an auspicious day, and the devotees are coming from a long distance just for a little peace. Let them come. It does not matter whether or not I get rest today."

Sometimes Vijnanananda would enjoy light-hearted discussions. Once he was seated on the upper eastern veranda of Belur Math and two devotees were debating: Which is greater –self-effort or grace? They asked the swami, "Which one is greater?" Without answering their question, he asked a third devotee to say something. The high-spirited discussion continued and he listened. At last when all of them asked him for a solution, he said, "Whatever one thinks of as great, that is great to him."

On another occasion he became the umpire of a debate between two devotees. One devotee said: "Maharaj, my friend says that knowledge is greater than devotion, but the Master said, 'Bhakti [devotion] has access to the inner court of a house and jnana [knowledge] can only go as far as the outer rooms.' He is not accepting the words of the Master." Vijnanananda signalled the other devotee to answer. That devotee said: "The Master declared: 'The sun of knowledge melts the ice of devotion.' So knowledge is greater than bhakti." When they could not reach any conclusion, the swami said: "Devotion is great to a bhakta and knowledge is great to a jnani. In the initial stage an aspirant experiences a difference; but after attaining perfection, he realizes that knowledge and devotion are the same."

Sometimes the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna would tease each other or have fun with the young monks to ease the rigid routine of the monastery. Once a young monk expressed a desire to give a lecture. Brahmananda arranged a meeting on the veranda and asked all monks to be present. The speaker was formally dressed and had also put on a nice turban. Then

Brahmananda announced, "I propose that Swami Vijnanananda take the chair and preside over the meeting." Immediately Vijnanananda got up and announced, "I now dissolve the meeting." All laughed and the meeting ended.

The minds of knowers of Brahman always soar high. In order to help mankind, they cultivate some hobbies or desires to bring their minds down to the earthly plane. Vijnanananda had some interesting hobbies. He had a large collection of fountain pens, and most of them were very expensive. Sometimes he would go to Calcutta with his attendant to buy new pens. He once said about his method of writing, "I have several fountain pens which I fill with ink, and then I write." Once when he was in Belur Math, Shivananda presented him with a good fountain pen and a flashlight. Another one of his hobbies was collecting tea sets. One day he went to the market and bought a German cup and saucer and showed them to Shivananda. While Vijnanananda was in Rangoon he bought a cup and saucer set made of ivory. Whenever he travelled he would carry a small suitcase that contained his tea sets and a flask of tea. He also had a wide selection of pocketknives and pocket watches. Some of these articles are still in the archives of the Ramakrishna Math in Allahabad.

Once Vijnanananda went to Belur Math and heard that Swami Shuddhananda had ridden in an airplane. He immediately asked to have a plane ride. An arrangement was made and he flew over the Belur Monastery.

Allahabad is very hot in the summer. Because of that Vijnanananda had three beds -one in the courtyard, one on the veranda, and another in his room. He usually slept in the courtyard, but if it was raining he would sleep on the veranda, and if there was a severe rainstorm he would move to his room. He allowed no one to clean his room except Beni, his faithful servant. The swami was very fond of Belli, a pure, guileless boy. Once Vijnanananda wrote a letter to Beni from Belur Math and asked a monk to write the address of the Allahabad Ashrama on the envelope. The letter was addressed to Dr. Beni Madhav, M.A.B.L., LL.D. The monk, out of curiosity, asked, "Maharaj, who is he?" The swami only smiled. Another monk indicated that it was Beni, the swami's servant. All laughed. Beni served Vijnanananda until the swami passed away. Vijnanananda left some money for Beni, which he donated to the centre, where he lived the remainder of his life.

The Consecration of Ramakrishna Temple

Swami Vivekananda had expressed an earnest desire to have the relics of Sri Ramakrishna permanently housed in an enduring and imposing temple that would continue to inspire people for ages. Shivananda had laid the foundation stone for this temple on 13 March 1929. Afterwards, when the new temple site was selected in July of 1935, Vijnanananda had to re-lay the same stone one hundred feet south. It took nearly three years to construct the main part of the temple, then another year to complete it. In the early part of 1938, Dr. Carl G. Jung, the celebrated European psychologist, came to Belur Math. He asked Vijnanananda, "Did Swami Vivekananda give you the idea to build this Ramakrishna Temple?" "Yes, he did," replied the swami. "I made the first plan based on his ideas, but he did not like it. I revised the plan a couple of times and Swamiji approved the last one."

The Ramakrishna Temple of Belur Math is a combination of Eastern and Western styles of architecture. The temple is 235 feet long, 140 feet wide, and the pinnacle of the dome is 108 feet high. On a marble pedestal in the shrine is an Italian marble statue of Sri Ramakrishna in the familiar samadhi (sitting) posture. The total cost of the construction was 800,000 rupees, of which 650,000 rupees was donated by Miss Helen Rubel and Mrs. Anna Worcester, two American devotees of Swami Akhilananda, the founder of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in Boston.

On 12 January 1938 Vijnanananda came to Belur Math from Allahabad for the consecration of the Ramakrishna Temple. On Friday, 14 January 1938, the swami got up early in the morning and put on a new ochre cloth. He sat quietly in his chair, waiting for the auspicious moment. He said to his attendant: "When I install the Master in the new temple, I shall say to Swamiji: 'Your consecrated deity has now been installed in the temple you planned. You said that you would watch from on high. Please see now that the Master is seated in the new temple.'"

Vijnanananda's health was not good, so it was arranged for a car to take him from the Math building to the new temple. A monk brought the relics of the Master from the old shrine and handed them to Vijnanananda who waited in the car. Then the procession moved to the accompaniment of conches, bells, and the burning of incense. A group of singers led the procession, singing the famous Bengali song in praise of Sri Ramakrishna that begins with "*Eshechhe nutan manush dekhbi yadi ay chole*" (A new man has appeared; come, if you want to see him). The procession reached the new temple at 6:30 a.m. Vijnanananda entered the inner

sanctum, placed the relics of Sri Ramakrishna on the altar, and offered the flowers. When the worship was over, he returned to his room.

After breakfast, his attendant asked him whether he had said anything to Swamiji. Vijnanananda replied: "Yes. I said to Swamiji, 'You told me that you would watch from on high. Please see now that the Master is seated in the new temple.' Then I vividly saw Swamiji, Rakhai Maharaj, Mahapurush Maharaj, Sharat Maharaj, Hari Maharaj, Gangadhar Maharaj, and others standing in the southwest corner watching the consecration ceremony." After a while the swami said: "Now my work is over. Today I am relieved of the responsibility that Swamiji entrusted to me."

His Passing Away

Some people in this world are selected by God to carry out His mission; it is God who decides what He will do through them and for how long. Sri Ramakrishna told Vijnanananda, "You belong to the Divine Mother and you will have to do a lot of work for Her." The swami obeyed his guru's order. He taught and inspired many people, less through lecturing ; than through his exemplary life, which was full of purity and renunciation. After the dedication of the temple, Vijnanananda began to prepare for his departure from this world.

He returned to Allahabad on 16 January 1938, then came back to Belur Math on 26 February for the birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. He told the monks at Belur Math: "Please arrange to have someone else as your president. My failing health may not permit me to come here again." His feet began to swell and a doctor diagnosed his condition as infectious dropsy. When his attendant insisted that he take medication, he said, "I have no faith in doctors." A monk suggested that the swami consult the famous physician who had treated Swami Shivananda. "Is there any doctor better than this one?" asked the swami. The monk replied, "Yes, there is one - Dr. Nilratan Sarkar." "Is there anybody greater than him?" "No, there is none. He is the best doctor here." Then Vijnanananda said: "Yes, there is one better still, and he is the Master himself. I am under his care." This was his last visit to Belur Math.

On 8 March 1938 Vijnanananda returned to Allahabad; he continued his last task- translating the Ramayana from Sanskrit into English. Unfortunately, he could not complete it. One day he was joking with a devotee: "Do you know the meaning of the word *rum*? [In Bengali it sounds like Ram, i.e., Lord Ramachandra.] It is a kind of liquor. You cannot know it unless you drink it. Similarly, you cannot know the glory of God's name unless you chant it.' He

decided to spend his last days chanting the name of the Lord. He refused medical treatment and gradually stopped eating. From time to time he drank some mineral water, tea, or lemonade.

A week before he passed away, a monk suggested that Vijnanananda consult an ayurvedic doctor. Vijnanananda gravely quoted a Sanskrit couplet, "Ganges water is the medicine and the Lord is the physician." He then waved the monk away. The swami calmly endured his pain; from time to time he murmured: "Mother, Mother," or "Master, let us go; let us go." On 19 April a devotee came from Assam for initiation. Vijnanananda immediately initiated him while sitting in a chair. His voice and facial expression changed while initiating the devotee and no one could believe that he was on the verge of death. The swami once said, "As long as I have a little strength in my body, I shall distribute the Master's name." He fulfilled his promise.

The news of Vijnanananda's serious condition spread. On Sunday, 24 April, some monks from Varanasi came with a doctor. No one dared to tell him to take allopathic medicine, so the doctor prescribed a homeopathic medicine and asked the attendant to give it to him mixed with water. The next day at 10:00 a.m. the doctor came again and asked Vijnanananda, "How are you?" "I am fine," replied the swami. His eyes were closed and his face was as serene as if he were immersed in meditation. When his attendants tried to change his position, he made a little noise "ah, ah," indicating that his end was imminent. A monk put a little Ganges water into his mouth and other monks began to chant, "*Om Namō Bhagavate Rama-krishnaya*" (Salutations to Bhagavan Ramakrishna). Vijnanananda's face beamed with joy and he passed away at 3:20 p.m. on Monday, 25 April 1938. The next day the monks and devotees carried his body to the confluence of the Ganges and Jamuna, placed it in a stone coffin, and then immersed it into that holy water where he had once had a vision of Mother Triveni.

Swami Vijnanananda's life verified that God is not a myth, and that religion means the realization of God. His spiritual experiences silenced the speculation of those who only talked of religion, and removed the doubts of many agnostics and atheists. Once a prominent barrister of Calcutta said to the swami, "Maharaj, we don't understand God; we understand money, property, and the material world." Swami Vijnanananda listened to him with closed eyes. Then, placing his hand on his own chest, he said: "Whatever you say is true from your standpoint, but I have experienced the one pervading consciousness behind this manifested world. I have seen it with my own eyes." The barrister was speechless.

Another time a monk asked the swami, "Do you see the Master even now?" Pointing to the picture of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vijnanananda replied: "The Master is there. He is always near me. Of course I see him, whenever it is necessary. He is guiding me."

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ⁱⁱⁱSwami Jagadiswarananda, *Swami Vijnanananda* (Ramakrishna Math: Allahabad, 1947),5-6.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 6.

^v *Ramakrishna as We*,243.

^{vi} *Ibid.*,244-45

^{vii} *Swami Vishwashrayananda, Swami Vijnanananda: His Life and Sayings* (Ramakrishna Math: Madras, 1980),8.

^{viii} *Ramakrishna as We*,245-46.

^{ix} *Ibid.*,247

^x *Ibid.*,247-48

^{xi} *Ibid.*,248-49

^{xii} *Ibid.*,249

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 250

^{xiv} *Ibid.*,250-1

^{xv} *Ibid.*,254

^{xvi} *Ibid.*,254

^{xvii} *Ibid.*,254

^{xviii} *Swami Vijnanananda,9*

^{xix} *Swami Apurvananda, Satprasange Swami Vijnanananda (Ramakrishna Math: Allahabad,1953), 11.*

^{xx} *Swami Vishwashrayananda,17*

^{xxi} *Swami Vijnanananda,240-44*

^{xxii} *Satprasange148-49*

^{xxiii} *Udbodhan ,41:301-2*

^{xxiv} Suresh Chandra Das and Jyotirmay Basuroy, comp. & ed., Pratyakshadarshir Smritipate Swami Vijnanananda (General Printers and Publishers: Culcutta,1977). 305-6

^{xxv} *Ibid.,314-15*

^{xxvi} *Satprasange187-88*

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^{xxviii} *Ibid.,126*

^{xxix} Sri Sri Ma O Sri Ramakrishna Parshadganer Smritikatha (Ramakrishna Shivananda Ashrama: Barasat,1965),89.

^{xxx} *Swami Vijnanananda,188.*

^{xxxi} *Udbodhan,42:663*

^{xxxii} *Satprasange, 14-15*

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.,14*

^{xxxiv} *Udbodhan ,42:663*

^{xxxv} *Satprasange,16*

^{xxxvi} *Swami Vishwashrayananda,32.*

^{xxxvii} *Satprasange,v-vi,8.*

^{xxxviii} *Ibid.,8-9*

^{xxxix} *Ibid.,181-82*

^{xi} Ibid.,180

^{xli} *Pratyakshadarshir Smriti*, 85-87

^{xlii} *Satprasange*,134-35

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^{xliv} Ibid.,92-93

^{xlv} *Prabuddha Bharata*, 1970:297

^{xlvi} *Udbodhan* ,45:223

^{xlvii} Ibid.,45:224

^{xlviii} *Udbodhan* ,43:285-86

^{xliv} Vishwashrayananda,32.

ⁱ *Udbodhan* ,40:547

ⁱⁱ Ibid.,40:602

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.,40:606

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ *Satprasange*,171

^{lv} Ibid.,177-79

^{lv} Ibid.,172-73

^{lvi} Swami Divyatmananda, *Divyaprasange*. (*Udbodhan Office: Calcutta, 1972*),147

^{lvii} *Satprasange*,173