

# Swami Brahmananda: A Spiritual Dynamo

## Swami Sarvadevananda

'My child, withdrawing the mind from the entire universe and keeping it on the *kuta*, the Unchanging—is that a small matter?' Saying these words, Swami Brahmananda lost himself in deep thought. I remembered the verse from the Bhagavadgita with the following phrase: '*kutastham-achalam dhruvam*; the Unchanging, the Unmoving, the Eternal'. I started wondering if I had understood the real significance of *mantra-diksha*, spiritual initiation, though I had been anxious to get it. I was overwhelmed by this thought.

—*Kalisaday Pashchima*.<sup>1</sup>

SWAMI BRAHMANANDA would keep his mind absorbed in 'the Unchanging, Unmoving, the Eternal' even as he lived in the world for the good of humanity. Standing by the Brahmaputra River at Mymensingh, examining its extended banks spanning eight to ten miles, he once said, 'Coming here, my mind is getting merged in the infinite' (419). In its natural state his mind would be moving on higher planes of consciousness. He would force it to come down to the normal workaday world by participating in such mundane acts as fishing, playing cards, smoking the hookah, or talking about mangoes. It was very difficult for ordinary people to understand the greatness of this extraordinary personality, who held firm the rudder of the Ramakrishna Order during its critical initial days after the passing of Swami Vivekananda.

### **Transcendental Guide**

At the beginning of the last century the Indian media had expressed serious doubts about the vi-

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ability of the fledgling Ramakrishna Order. The Calcutta newspapers criticized the monks for 'living a luxurious life' unconcerned about the needs of the motherland. They suggested that the sadhus did nothing to help the freedom movement after Sister Nivedita dissociated herself from the Order to actively pursue her political work. The British government also weighed in with its own—though diametrically opposite—criticism: it seemed convinced that the Order was secretly harbouring and inspiring the freedom fighters. One could not have been blamed for thinking that the very survival of

the Order was at stake, caught as it was between the insinuations of the local press and the oppressive surveillance of the British government. Taking all these pressures in his stride, Maharaj—that was how Swami Brahmananda was popularly known—protected, nurtured, and facilitated the growth of the Order with his singular spiritual power. But for Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, whose footsteps Maharaj followed, few believed that such an unassuming monk could, merely by the force of his spiritual presence, hold the Order steady against such cross-currents—the Order created by Swami Vivekananda to nurse the spiritual ideal that is to invigorate India for the next fifteen hundred years.

Brahmananda's spirituality was his dynamo—the fountainhead of power behind his personality; and it was this spirituality that had a remarkable impact in transforming the lives of those who came to him. One day Swami Akhilananda, who was then a very young boy, was told by Swami Vijnanananda to tell Swami Brahmananda: 'There is something within me that needs awakening—please help me to do it.' When Akhilananda asked Vijnanananda why he himself did not do this awakening for him, Vijnanananda replied with his usual humility: 'I have very little spiritual power within me, but Maharaj lives in the powerhouse. He can easily do what you ask.' Maharaj, of course, took Akhilananda's words very seriously, telling him that 'for this awakening one needs initiation' and promising to initiate him. According to Akhilananda: 'Maharaj made us feel that spiritual awakening and God-realization are not difficult to achieve. He made us understand that tremendous help will be given us if only we will struggle a little, and that we can easily reach the goal.'<sup>2</sup> After the inception and establishment of the Bhubaneswar Math, Maharaj instructed a monk saying, 'Perform intense japa, practise mental japa with every breath. If this turns into a habit, then japa goes on spontaneously. It even continues before and after sleep. If a boy performs meditation and japa in right earnest, a math can run on the merit of his practice.'<sup>3</sup>

Swami Shankarananda said: 'We have seen him

always stay in an introspective mood, in a spiritual atmosphere which is profound and grand, while running the administration of the Order.'<sup>4</sup> One incident may be mentioned in this context. It was 5 March 1916. The annual meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was being held at Belur Math. Maharaj was presiding. Swamis Saradananda, Premananda, and others were present. After Swami Shuddhananda had finished reading the statement of accounts, Maharaj looked at Premananda and said: 'Now you give them some spiritual instructions. ... Have these people come here—in this afternoon heat, spending money and undergoing trouble—to listen to these dry statement of accounts! Pour some nectar into their hearts.' Needless to say, Premananda complied.<sup>5</sup>

Maharaj kept the twin ideals of God-realization and the welfare of the world ablaze in the minds of the monastic and lay members of the Order. Swami Vivekananda did not find it easy to convince his brother monks about the need for the new ideal of Practical Vedanta with its emphasis on service in the spirit of worship. Harder still was it for Maharaj to promote the ideal among the monks of the next generation. Though Maharaj emphasized meditation and japa, he gave service activities equal importance. In 1916 the Mission was in need of workers for relief activities. Many monks were hesitating to join the relief work, considering it an obstacle to spiritual practice. Coming to know of this, Maharaj said to the monks of Belur Math: 'Some amongst you, I hear, say that the activities of the Mission are obstacles to spiritual practice; that spiritual development is not possible through relief work and such other activities. ... You do not understand our attitude. You ought to accept the spirit [in which our work is carried out]. Of course, I have been repeating again and again, and even now I say this emphatically, that whether you go to do famine relief or any other work, call upon God in the mornings and evenings and at the end of the work—perform japa and meditation.' Maharaj reminded them of Swamiji's exhortation that one ought not to be afraid to dedicate one lifetime to

the welfare of the world, as many previous lives have been wasted through laziness. Hearing these inspiring words, the monks became free from confusion and misgivings and prepared themselves for the relief work with rejuvenated spirits (189–90).

Equally telling are Swami Turiyananda's utterances of 14 January 1921 on the same issue:

Many take these [service] activities to be inferior to meditation. They do not understand the significance [of these activities]. They say this on a whim. ... People fail to understand that Swamiji instituted this path after seeing the Self in all created beings. They merely repeat old-fangled ideas—wishing to confine themselves to meditation and japa. If one performs this service to Narayana [the Divine] in the right spirit for three days, one will have direct realization. ... You regard them as patients, not as Narayana, that is why you do not have any realization. But is it not true that everyone is Narayana? '*Ishvara sarva-bhutanam hrid-deshe'rjuna-tishthati*; God resides in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna.' If you cannot see that, the fault is yours (190).

### The Unfolding of a Perfected Soul

From the very early days of his life, Rakhāl—that was Maharaj's pre-monastic name—used to live in another plane of consciousness. As a young boy, he would get totally absorbed in the thought of Mother Durga while looking at the image of the deity during the annual worship of the Divine Mother at his birthplace Sikra. He used to prepare images of gods and goddesses and worship them. There was a big banyan tree in the middle of a vast meadow near his ancestral home. Rakhāl used to visit that secluded place known as Gazitala and spend long hours in meditation! The scriptures say that holy people are responsible for creating the holiness associated with places of pilgrimage. Even now many people report feeling a deep spiritual atmosphere at Sikra, though Maharaj lived there only for a short time.

Rakhāl belonged to the class of *ishvarakotis*—those that are spiritually perfect from birth. Even then, to set an example for posterity, he did practise intense spiritual austerities to acquire a lofty state

of mind. His intense love for God, sincere spiritual effort, and utmost renunciation made Rakhāl a Brahmananda.

Sri Ramakrishna, an ideal spiritual teacher, whose being was steeped in samadhi, whose consciousness was raised to the dizzy heights of non-dual Truth, took great care to build the spiritual edifice that each of his monastic children was. He guided Rakhāl step by step, making him a spiritual powerhouse. He taught him to be regular in his spiritual practices. On one occasion Sri Ramakrishna freed him from depression and mental distraction at the lack of spiritual experience by writing something on his tongue. Another day he gave Rakhāl a special mantra and also a vision of his Chosen Deity saying, 'Look, this is your mantra and this is your Chosen Deity.' Immediately Rakhāl saw the luminous form of God in front of him and was overwhelmed. He also instructed Rakhāl in many spiritual disciplines—*asanas* or postures, *mudras* or gestures, methods of japa, meditation, yoga, and the like.<sup>6</sup> Practising these disciplines in solitude Rakhāl experienced the highest realization.

Sri Ramakrishna's training was suited to meet individual needs and temperaments. Of Rakhāl's spiritual nature, vis-à-vis Narendra's, he had this to say: 'Naren dwells in the realm of the Absolute,

**O**ne evening while he was at Madras, he [Maharaj] went into *Samadhi* (the super-conscious state) during *Arati* [vesper]. He sat on the rug at the far end of the hall, his body motionless, his eyes closed, a smile of ecstasy playing about his lips. Swami Ramakrishnananda was the first to observe that he did not move when the service was over. Realizing what had occurred, he motioned to one of the young swamis to fan his head. ... For half an hour no one stirred—a boy who was crossing the hall did not even draw back his foot. Perfect stillness pervaded the monastery—a radiant, pulsing stillness.

—Sister Devamata,

*Days in an Indian Monastery*, 154





*Swamis Brahmananda and Premananda with other sadhus and devotees in front of the house at Kashimpur, East Bengal, where Brahmananda stayed for a few days in 1916*

the Impersonal. He is like a sharp, drawn sword of discrimination. Rakhali dwells in the realm of God, the Sweet One, the repository of all blessed qualities. He is like a child on the lap of his mother, completely surrendering himself to her in every way.<sup>7</sup>

While living with the Master at Dakshineswar, Rakhali's renunciation and indrawn mood went to such heights that he could not tolerate the company of any worldly-minded people. At times, in such deeper moods, he did not enjoy even the company of Sri Ramakrishna! There were times when Rakhali would go into deep ecstasy while doing japa; then Sri Ramakrishna had to bring him back to normal consciousness. Rakhali had many visions and developed many occult powers. But he did not pay any attention to the latter, as Sri Ramakrishna specifically warned against the serious hindrance to spiritual life that arises by possessing them. In later years Maharaj told Swami Sharvananda, a disciple of his, 'It is easy to acquire occult powers, but hard indeed to attain purity of heart.'<sup>8</sup>

One day at Udbodhan Swami Saradananda told his assistant Kiran, Swami Aseshananda: 'Do you take Maharaj to be an ordinary person? He can mould our minds into any shape he wishes, like a lump of clay!'<sup>9</sup> This statement is indeed remarkable, coming as it does from Saradananda, who was blessed with the vision of Brahman in all beings. Only a jeweller can value a priceless jewel. Saradananda's statement gives us a glimpse into Brahmananda's spiritual stature.

### ***Making God-consciousness Habitual***

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Maharaj continued his intense spiritual practices at Baranagar Math, Alambazar Math, and in different places of pilgrimage; he wanted to make the spiritual experiences that he had been vouchsafed under Sri Ramakrishna's care his permanent possessions. While at Omkareshwar he remained absorbed in the impersonal Absolute for six days and six nights, completely oblivious of the outer world.

At Panchavati by the River Godavari, Maharaj had the vision of Rama and Sita and experienced their living presence. He remained absorbed in samadhi for three days and three nights. In Vrindaban he lived in a state of perpetual ecstasy. He would not even talk to Subodhananda, who would attend to the few needs that he had. Subodhananda would beg food for him and put it in a corner of his cottage. One day Subodhananda asked Maharaj: 'Why do you live so strictly? You are the spiritual son of God Incarnate. He has already done everything for you. Through his grace you have attained samadhi. Then, why do you still have to sit like a beggar, begging for God's grace?' Maharaj replied: 'What you say is true. The Master did everything for us. But still I find a lack within. This proves that we need repeated practice in order to make the state of samadhi natural and habitual to us.'<sup>10</sup>

Vijaykrishna Goswami, a great Vaishnava saint who had seen Sri Ramakrishna and was influenced by him, also asked Maharaj the same question. Maharaj replied: 'I am only trying to become established in that vision of God which I received

through my Master's grace' (46).

These are only a few glimpses of the extraordinary life of intense spirituality that Maharaj lead. Experiencing the Truth in all its aspects and keeping his mind absorbed in God, Maharaj guided the lives of monks and devotees of the Ramakrishna Order. To him God was not a mere theory but a palpable presence. He would not do anything without direct instructions from the Master. The great spiritual treasure that he accumulated through intense tapasya was then laid open for distribution to innumerable people. Maharaj's life is a testimony to the veracity of the ancient spiritual truths.

### The Dynamo at Work

Swami Vivekananda once remarked: 'Raja [Swami Brahmananda] is the greatest treasure house of spirituality.' On another occasion Swamiji sent to Maharaj a European devotee who had come to him to have his spiritual problems solved, saying: 'There is a dynamo working and we are all under him.'<sup>11</sup> Standing on the ground of his own profound experience, Maharaj could say: 'Spiritual life begins after *nirvikalpa samadhi* [the highest transcendental experience]!'<sup>12</sup> This is indeed an astounding concept and a grand standard of spiritual life.

Maharaj was the embodiment of dharma and condensed spirituality. He once said to a disciple of Swami Vivekananda: 'Look here Shukul, I find that the realm of the Absolute is separated from the realm of lila by a fine glass screen. Now and then I feel like merging myself into the Absolute by breaking through the barrier. But the Master does not permit it.'<sup>13</sup> Living on this high plane of consciousness, Maharaj managed the affairs of the Sangha.

Boshi Sen, the renowned botanist, who was very free with Maharaj, once said to him, 'Maharaj, you are a miser.' 'Why do you call me a miser?' Maharaj asked. 'He is a miser,' Boshi continued, 'who has plenty of money but does not give it to anyone. If you wish, you can make others see God, but you are not giving that [vision]—that is why you are a miser.' Maharaj instantly turned grave and said, 'Who wants? Even monks and brahmacharins come

and tell me: "Maharaj, grant me initiation, grant me brahmacharya, grant me sannyasa." No one says help me get God.'<sup>14</sup> It seems that Maharaj was waiting to give this knowledge and realization, and searching for the right person who was ready to receive it.

Maharaj once told Swami Prabhavananda: 'There are times when it becomes impossible for me to teach anyone. No matter where I look, I see only God, wearing many masks. Who am I, the teacher? Who is to be taught? How can God teach God? But when my mind comes down again, to a lower level, I see the ignorance in man and try to remove it.'<sup>15</sup> Remaining in this state of consciousness Maharaj used to guide and help every seeker of Truth.

Girishchandra Ghosh, the famous Bengali dramatist, actor, and producer, who was an embodiment of faith and devotion to Sri Ramakrishna, once contracted a serious illness that affected his physical and mental health. He said:

I found that I had lost my faith in Sri Ramakrishna. My heart felt dry. Many of the brother-disciples

**T**he Correct Raga · Maharaj was then visiting Dacca. Everyday many visitors would come to have his darshan. [The famous sarod maestro] Ustad Alauddin Khan would also come to meet him occasionally. One evening he started playing on the sarod with Maharaj's permission. There was a big gathering. The recital went on for a long time. The whole atmosphere turned solemn, still, and divine. Maharaj's mind was getting absorbed in samadhi. After he had finished a piece, the Ustad asked Maharaj with folded hands, 'Maharaj, what shall I play now?' With eyes closed in meditation, Maharaj said in a soft voice, 'Ustad, now play Shukla Bilaval.' The Ustad kept aside his sarod and making repeated prostrations at Maharaj's feet said, 'Maharaj, that this is the raga appropriate to this solemn atmosphere, to this time of the day, and as a sequel to the raga which I just played—only you could tell this!' Saying so the Ustad burst into tears.

—Swami Nirvanananda, *Devaloker Katha*, 118

came to see me. I had told them about the unhappy state of my mind, but they only kept silent. Then, one day, Rakhal came ... listened attentively, [and] then he laughed aloud. 'Why worry about it?' he asked me. 'The wave rises high out of the ocean; then it goes down again, and again it rises. The mind is like that. But please do not worry. Your present mood is due to the fact that you are about to rise to a much higher level of spirituality. The wave of the mind is gathering its strength.'<sup>16</sup>

When Maharaj left, Girish felt uplifted, his dryness had gone and faith had returned. That was the transforming power of Maharaj's words—they could bring back faith and joy.

While receiving spiritual initiation from Maharaj, many felt the direct touch of the Divine. 'The day Maharaj was to initiate me,' said Swami Yatiswarananda, 'I felt a spiritual power tangibly emanating from him. He raised his hand in benediction above my head, giving me instantly a vivid consciousness of an immanent Presence. I realized that the whole universe was merged in that Presence.' Further, 'That day, also, I got a glimpse of the divine nature and power of the guru. I was literally

**D**ivine Forgetfulness . When I [Swami Prabhavananda] met Maharaj, he was living, moving, and having his being in God continuously. The state of samadhi was natural to him, and he had to struggle at times to bring his mind down to the work of teaching and presiding over the Order. The following incident, originally told by Swami Ambikananda, may serve as illustration.

A legal document required Maharaj's signature. Three days passed, and Maharaj had not yet signed it. When the secretary came to get the document, he found Maharaj looking at it, pen in hand. An attendant said, 'Please Maharaj, won't you sign?' And Maharaj answered, 'I know, I know, I am trying. But you see, I have forgotten how to write my name.'

—*Vedanta and the West*,  
(September–October 1954), 59

transported into a new life, and the power that he transmitted to me that day is still working within me.'<sup>17</sup>

Another striking incident from the life of Devendranath Basu, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, indicates the remarkable nature of the spiritual power working through Maharaj. Some time after the Master's demise Deven busied himself in a managerial job. One day he happened to meet Swami Akhandananda who took him to Maharaj at Belur Math. Seeing Deven after a long time, Maharaj entertained him with great affection. After he left, Maharaj said to Akhandananda: 'O Gangadhar! What has happened to your Deven? His walk, attitude, and behaviour—everything seems to have changed. Has he forgotten the Master and all of us?' When Akhandananda narrated these remarks to Deven, there was a tremendous reaction in his mind. He went again to the Math to meet Maharaj, terribly restless. Maharaj put his hand on Deven's chest and remaining silent for a while said: 'What has happened, Deven Babu? Everything will be all right—remember the Master.' This brought about a great transformation in Deven. After offering his salutation to Maharaj, he said: 'Maharaj, all my restlessness has gone away. What a state I had been reduced to. Now, by your blessings and kindness, there is no more any sorrow or conflict within me.'<sup>18</sup>

It has been said that Maharaj would not initiate anyone with a mantra unless he received the vision of the Chosen Ideal of the disciple. That was probably one reason why some aspirants received their mantra immediately on approaching him, while there were others who failed to get their spiritual initiation even after visiting him for six years. According to Swami Jagadananda, in the case of one aspirant Maharaj got the vision of the Chosen Ideal but did not know the mantra of the deity. He initiated the aspirant only after he had confirmed the mantra from the *Tantra-sara*. Then there were others like Mahamaya Sarkar and Chinmoy Basu who were initiated by Maharaj of his own accord.<sup>19</sup>

### A Mart of Spirituality

Maharaj took great care in building the spiritual lives of young monastics. He would himself get up at three in the morning and ask others to come and join him in meditation. Once he said to Swami Shyamananda: ‘The Master could give us everything, there was nothing that he could not give. Even then he would wake us up at night and make us meditate. He would say, “If you eat during the day and sleep at night, then how will you realize God?”’ (48). Shyamananda recalls:

Maharaj would get up from sleep at around three in the morning every day. I would offer him tobacco and sit down on the floor in front of him. He would ask me to chant a kirtan comprising the divine names of Krishna: ‘*Hari haraye namah, krishna yadavaya namah, yadavaya madhavaya keshavaya namah*; salutations to Hari and Hara, to Krishna, Yadava, to Yadava, Madhava, Keshava.’ I would chant in a tune that he had taught me and he would listen as he smoked. As he did so he would lose outward consciousness and the pipe would drop from his hand. If I happened to pause, he would say, ‘keep going, keep going.’ I would keep chanting. There were days when he would become very quiet, as if he had stopped breathing. At such times Swami Premananda would occasionally come over from the adjacent room and offer him pranams.

Maharaj used to tell me: ‘Get intoxicated chanting the holy name. Whatever you do—it be meditation, japa, prayer, or any other spiritual practice—let it be between you and the Master. Do not worry at all about others hearing or watching, or about making mistakes. Be totally intoxicated, be absorbed’ (48–9).

A remarkable spiritual atmosphere was created in the presence of Maharaj. Swami Mukteshwarananda’s recollection confirms this:

Maharaj used to provide great encouragement regarding meditation, prayer, worship, and scriptural study. ... He would often repeat: ‘Tapasya, tapasya, tapasya.’ He could also be heard saying: ‘One should perform intense meditation and japa when one’s devotion is still fresh. You have come

**A Spiritual Presence** · Brahmananda did not have the eloquence of a Vivekananda. He inspired people by his silences quite as much as by his words. It is said that he could change the psychological atmosphere in a room, making the occupants feel talkative and gay and then inclining them to silent meditation, without himself saying anything. For the most part, his teachings were very simply expressed. ‘Religion is a most practical thing. It doesn’t matter whether one believes or not. It is like science. If one performs spiritual disciplines, the result is bound to come. Although one may be practising mechanically—if one persists one will get everything in time. ... And if you go one step towards God, God will come a hundred steps towards you. ... Why did God create us? So that we may love him.’

—Christopher Isherwood,  
*Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 330

here leaving hearth and home—what are you doing? Immerse yourself in the ocean of His holy name! Pray saying: give me love, give me knowledge. If you do not do something now, you will have to repent later.’ I remember how at one time an intense storm of meditation, japa, prayer, and study blew over Belur Math. At that time Maharaj used to provide great inspiration to each one of us. ...

There was no end to our physical labour. ... Maharaj kept instructing us to undertake meditation and japa along with work. He would also keep watch to see if we were following his instructions (50–1).

Maharaj could even give the experience of samadhi, but he recognized the need for preparing one’s spiritual nerves through sadhana. Swami Shuddhananda once asked Maharaj: ‘Can you provide the experience of samadhi?’ Maharaj was pacing to and fro at that time. He said: ‘Yes, I can. But it would be difficult to hold. Even as one rises up [rapidly], one risks falling down. It is better to have it through one’s own effort. Holy Mother [Sri Sarada Devi] can give this with ease’ (59).




But sadhana under the guidance of Maharaj was obviously a unique experience. Mukteshwarananda's description transports our minds to Belur Math and into the heavenly reaches of a divine realm. We can imagine what deep vibrations of spirituality were generated in the presence of Maharaj:

It was not yet dawn. A deep silence pervaded everywhere. The entire creation appeared to be absorbed in the meditation on Brahman. Swami Brahmananda said to us, 'Please sing this song: "Look, there exists the abode of bliss—exceedingly beautiful, effulgent, and beyond the ocean of worldly existence!"'

We sang mostly Brahma-sangeet after our meditation hours. When we sang the line, 'O we know not how many saints and sages are absorbed in the deepest meditation in that abode of bliss' with great enthusiasm, we felt inspired by the deep, spiritual mood of Swami Brahmananda. Our voices reverberated all around, saturating the whole atmosphere, and we were transported to a domain of exceeding bliss.

I hear that particular song being sung even today, but I don't experience that heart-enthraling bliss that we experienced when we sang it together in the presence of Swami Brahmananda. Whenever we sang the song 'Meditate on His feet resting on the lotus seat of thy heart; behold the

unparalleled beauty of His countenance with thy eyes soaked in love!' I saw, to speak the truth, the 'lotus seat' of my heart quite empty! But when I looked out and saw Swami Brahmananda's face, I was amazed to see the wonderful transformation that had come to it. His face shone with a kind of divine light. His gaze was indrawn and steady, and his eyelids didn't blink! ... And in wonder I couldn't take my eyes off his peaceful and grave countenance.<sup>20</sup>

The blazing life and profound spiritual teachings of Brahmananda remain with us as a great example—inspiring monks, devotees, and lovers of God. That great spiritual dynamism that we see in his life can alone liberate sincere seekers of God from ignorance of the Self and the bondage it entails. 

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