

Swami Atmajnanananda

(Revered Swami Atmajnanananda is the spiritual head of the Vedanta Center of Greater Washington, DC. As a part of the 40th year celebrations of Vidyapith, Swamiji was invited to visit Vivekananda Vidyapith to give a talk on November 12, 2016. Swami Atmajnanananda gave his blessings in the morning assembly and in the evening he spoke on the "Teachings of Holy Mother". The following writeup has been prepared for publication from a video recording of the Swamiji's lectures.)

Teachings of Holy Mother

It is very nice to be here again. Uncle wrote to me a couple of days ago asking for something for introduction. When I told him to just introduce me as a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, there is no humility there, but just pride. For me, this is a dream that I can hardly imagine. No other introduction can build me up any more than that.

We had a retreat in Ridgely just a few days ago and we were talking about inner peace. So naturally some of the ideas of the Holy Mother came up. I will just say a few words about the final message of Holy Mother. You all know this message. It is a very well-known message. Since this is her final message we should take this as something special and give some extra thought to it. Sometimes we find things simple and straightforward, but a great deal of thought has to go into understanding what she meant by it. Holy Mother was very ill and one woman devotee came to visit her. At that time, Holy Mother said to her, "My child, if you want peace of mind, then doesn't see the faults of others." How we take this is up to us. There are different ways of understanding this. She uses the word "Dosha". This word, in my opinion, is better understood as "defect." I would even say that "defect" is a little bit too strong. Language plays a large part in our understanding of things. For example we now say "children with special needs," but earlier we used to refer to those kids as "children with handicap" or "invalid." Just look at the judgmental nature of the emotional layer we add to it, saying "invalid," as if they are "untrue." But "special needs" brings a different way of understanding those children.

I am a wood worker. When I go looking for wood, I look for certain kinds of grain variations that look nice and smooth. Someone might say that a piece of wood has a defect in it, meaning that its color may not be the same and consistent, while another person may say how beautiful the grain of that piece of wood is, and will make it the center piece and build everything around it. So, a lot of it is the way we understand things. When Holy Mother says not to find faults in others, I take it as not to be too judgmental. I would like to substitute the word "*guna*" with the word "*dosha*," meaning it is the *characteristic* of a person and not a *defect*. See how everything changes in the way we understand the expression now. We think non-violence is good and violence is bad, but look at the animal kingdom. Some animals have to kill other animals for food. Is this a *dosha* or is this a *guna*? Is this a characteristic in the animal

kingdom or is this a fault or a defect? Do we have to be judgmental and say some of the animals are bad ones and the others are good ones?

I always tie this with two things: first, with the story of 'A Saint and a Scorpion' and second, with the verses from Bhagavad Gita. This is a story that Swami Brahmananda tells. He heard it from a wandering sadhu when he was traveling in Gujarat. There was a holy man who was meditating by a river. As he was meditating, a scorpion came and stung him on his hand. Reflexively, the hand went up and the scorpion fell in the water. The scorpion was drowning. The holy man, with great compassion, scooped the scorpion out of the water to save its life. The scorpion stung him again. His hand went up again and the scorpion went back into the water; he again scooped it up and again the scorpion stung him. When it fell in the water third time, the holy man scooped it up and took it away from water so it would not fall in it again. There was someone sitting on the riverbank watching this whole play between the holy man and the scorpion. He went up to the holy man and asked him: "I don't understand your whole behavior. You kept helping the scorpion and it kept stinging you. Why did you try to help the scorpion repeatedly?" The holy man said in reply, "Look, the nature of the scorpion is to sting. And it is the nature of a holy man to be compassionate. Why should I change my nature because of the nature of the scorpion?" You see in this story that the holy man was not judgmental about the scorpion or its nature. In Sanskrit for the nature of a person there is a word called "*swabhava*."

The Gita talks about how we all behave based on our nature. We see that some people get angry very easily, or some have tendencies to tell lies, or some people have a tendency toward violence. We can be tough on ourselves if we have those tendencies, but we can take a charitable attitude towards other people if we notice those same tendencies in others by saying, "Poor fellow, he cannot help himself. That seems to be his nature." When we see someone who has become a robber or a killer and if we see how that person has grown up in an environment where there was no education, people used drugs all around and committed crimes, and then we say to ourselves, "He had a rough upbringing in the environment of drugs, abuse and crime. That is why that poor fellow grew up to be that way. If I were in a similar environment, I would probably be worse than him." This provides the charitable attitude to others' defects or characteristics or tendencies. This way we try to get out of the habit of judging others. This is what Holy Mother is telling us, not to be too judgmental. We are not giving a free pass here, but this will help us to develop a charitable attitude.

Holy Mother does not mean that we should be fools by not even recognizing others' faults. Instead she asks us to recognize the fault but to be charitable and still keep a distance from such individuals. We can worship such person from a distance, just as we don't embrace a tiger although the same God resides in a tiger as in a holy man. We have to be sensible, but at the same time we have to understand that we are all slaves to our own personality to a large degree. If we understand it that way, we won't be too judgmental. If we use that opportunity to introspect, we will have our individual personal growth. I will realize that I also have this tendency; I also have this little scorpion in me. Sometimes I like to sting. As soon as I recognize

it, I will start to change it and when I see that tendency arise, I will be able to stop myself. I will check myself and try to take the high road instead.

This was the first part of Holy Mother's message. Now, the second part of the Holy Mother's last teaching says, "No one is a stranger my child." That means everyone is our own. By this she is preaching that Oneness. The things that connect us are far stronger than the things that separate us. We all have different backgrounds, we come from different countries and we have different religions. The thing that connects us is so much stronger. Even if we don't have the highest idea that the same God dwells in all of us, at least we can feel some connection with people. We all belong to the same human family. The feeling does not come automatically. Holy Mother asks us to learn to do it, to learn to make the world our own. When we see someone that prays differently than us or speaks differently than us, we should go out of our way to be inclusive by saying that those are just superficial differences and that the underlying Oneness is the main thing. This final teaching of Holy Mother is so beautiful. If we want peace of mind, then we have to incorporate these teachings in our lives.

I will stop here and my thanks to all of you for the opportunity given to me to say a few words.