

SWAMI ATMASTHANANDA



Ramakrishna Math

Belur Math

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It was the time of pre-independence. Both India and the world at large were turbulent: India was experiencing the upheavals of the freedom movement, and the world was aflame with the Second World War. During this time of destruction and social unrest, the Ramakrishna Math was coming up on a small piece of land situated on the western bank of the holy river Bhagirathi, now a place of pilgrimage by virtue of the spiritual practices of many holy men.

During that time, Swami Achalanandaji, one of the Vice-Presidents of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, was living at the Math. One day a boy, desiring to see him, arrived at the Math. Swami Achalanandaji was staying in a building known as the Leggett House at Belur Math. Enquiring about him, the boy found his way there. But he found only a thin monk wearing a *kaupina* (loin cloth), strolling on the verandah of the house! The young boy asked him about Swami Achalanandaji. The monk stared at him for some time. The young boy could now understand that this monk himself must be Swami Achalanandaji – popularly known as Kedar Baba, and so he offered his respectful pranams and got acquainted with him.

Suddenly, Kedar Baba put his hand on the young boy's shoulder and said, 'Many lives have gone by. In this birth, offer your life for the work of Swamiji'. This sudden appeal of the old ascetic startled the boy and entered into his heart. Kedar Baba's call attracted him further towards spiritual life, which was developing inside him and he could see clearly the enlightened path of the future. In later years, this boy became Revered Swami Atmasthanadaji Maharaj, the 15th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

The pre-monastic name of Revered Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj was Sri Satykrishna Bhattacharya. He was born on 21st May 1919 in the house of his maternal uncle at Sabajpur, near Dhaka of East Bengal, now Bangaldesh. It was the holy *Buddha*

PurnimaTithi (lunar day). His father was Sri Ramanarayana Bhattacharya Tarkatirtha, the court-pundit of the Raja of Dinajpur, and a resident of Kshetripara in the town of Dinajpur. He was a famous Bhagavata pundit, and taught Sanskrit in Dinajpur and Rajsahi. After Partition he taught at the Berhampore Girls' College, Murshidabad. His mother, Nanibala Devi was also a very devout lady.

Two unique spiritual traditions of Bengal came together like a confluence in this family. His father Ramanarayana was a descendent of Gadadhar Pundit, a companion of Sri Chaitanya Deva. And his mother belonged to the family of the great Vaishnava *sadhaka* Advaita Acharya of Shantipur, and was as well the niece of Vijayakrishna Goswami, the great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. In this family Narayana was worshipped as Dadhi-Vamana. Therefore it is not surprising that such a family would give birth to a great successor of a powerful spiritual tradition! Several children of this family, in fact, gave up the traditional path of family life and embraced the path of renunciation. Revered Maharaj was the eldest of seven brothers and three sisters. His next brother, Jyotikrishna, later became known as Swami Yuktananda. Another brother, Sourindrakrishna, also was a monk of the Order and was known as Swami Gopeshananda. Manindrakrishna, another brother, took *atma-sannyasa* and became known as Swami Kalikrishnananda. One of his sisters, (Arati), was a nun of Sri Sarada Math and was known as Pravrajika Achyutaprana. Having grown up in such family surroundings, they naturally developed feelings for spirituality. Revered Maharaj himself always loved external worship. After growing up, he performed the Durga-puja as a brahmacharin.

After passing the Entrance examination from the Dinajpur Zila School, he joined the Cotton College at Guwahati, Assam, in Intermediate Arts. Meanwhile, another incident took place in his life that brought him towards the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideal. It was summer vacation and he was spending his days at home, when he fell sick with malaria; the disease became aggravated with a lot of complications. Then one day his father attended a programme in a nearby school to deliver a lecture. Present at the function was Swami Gadadharanandaji of the

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Dinajpur. Sri Ramanarayana had some acquaintance with him from before. Having seen the morose appearance of Sri Ramanarayana, Gadadharanandaji enquired about its reason. Sri Ramanarayana informed him about the illness of Satykrishna. Hearing this, Gadadharanandaji expressed his willingness to see Satykrishna, which Sri Ramanarayana welcomed gladly. Later, Revered Atmasthanandaji said, '...I found a monk placing his hand on my head and chest—and to my surprise, and everybody else's, all problems were soon over! He also spoke in such an affectionate and loving manner...' This incident, as it were, changed the direction of his life and led him to a definite path in the years to come, unknown to others.

Having recovered from his illness, Satykrishna wanted to know from his father about the monk. After gathering information he reached the Dinajpur Ashrama, along with some of his friends, to meet Swami Gadadharanandaji. The Swami was very happy to see them, and took them to the temple and offered them some *prasad* (food offered to God). He asked them to come again. Satykrishna started frequenting the Ashrama.

One day during this time, Gadadharanandaji handed him a copy of Swamiji's book *Bharate Vivekananda* (the Bengali version of *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*). The Swami asked him to perform *puja* and *aratrika* in the Ashrama during one such visit. As instructed by him, Satykrishna sometimes did so.

In the mornings after *mangalarati*, Gadadharanandaji used to walk on the bank of the river Kanchana. At times he would ask Satykrishna to accompany him. During one such morning walk he suddenly asked Satykrishna, 'What are you thinking as you walk? Always think of Him, of God (and say) "May your name become my refuge, may your name become my refuge."' Sometimes while walking he would sit in a nice spot on the bank of the river and start meditating. Seeing him, young Satykrishna also would try to meditate, closing his eyes. Later Revered Atmasthanandaji said, 'Seeing him I started meditating, but in the process I discovered that something was happening within.' Being invited by Gadadharanandaji, now and then he would stay

in the Ashrama at night. Thus remaining in contact with this holy man, Satyakrishna collected inspirations for his future life.

Completing his studies at the Cotton College, he took admission in the B.A. (Philosophy Honours) class in the Scottish Church College, Kolkata. He began to stay at Oglive hostel. Then he came to know about the Ramakrishna Mission Calcutta Students' Home at Gouripur, Dum Dum, and shifted there. Later, leaving the Scottish Church College, he took admission to the Presidency College. After completing his B.A.(Philosophy Honours), he took admission in the M.A.(Philosophy Honours) class at the University of Calcutta. Famous professors like Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Dr. Nalinaksha Brahma, Dr. P.B. Dutta, Dr. Surendranath Dasgupta, Dr. P.B. Shastri and others used to teach there at the time. Through their guidance he was doing well in his studies. But the life of Satyakrishna was predestined towards a different direction.

While staying at the Students' Home, he came to the Belur Math to have the *darshana* of Srimat Swami Vijnananandaji Maharaj, a sannyasindisciple of Sri Ramakrishna. This incident has been recorded in his reminiscences. Jokingly he said, 'I came away very much disappointed and frustrated! I thought, is he a direct disciple of Sri Sri Thakur! Swamiji used to love young boys so much and draw them so close to himself, make them his own and entertain them. And this person didn't even look at me once! Only sitting like a ghost!' Returning to Gouripur Ashrama, he expressed his mental impressions openly to Nirvedanandaji Maharaj (Anadi Maharaj). Anadi Maharaj made no comment; he only gave a little smile and remained silent. Young Satyakrishna further gave vent: 'We would have had so much joy if Mahapurush Maharaj had been there; he was so captivating. I didn't like this at all. What kind of great man is he!'

Thereafter an incident occurred which shook the inner world of this young spiritual aspirant. In his own words, 'That night I had a dream, which continued just like a real happening. A dream is a dream; even then, sometimes a dream awakens man's mind like the state of awakening. The appearance of a tiger in a dream is false. But the fear of the tiger, which continues even after

waking, is true. It happened to me also. I dreamt that I was massaging the feet of Revered Mahapurush Maharaj in his room. And then I see that at times he is converting into Vijnana-Swami. This moment I see that I am massaging the feet of Revered Maharpurush Maharaj, and the next moment I see that I am massaging those of Vijnana-Maharaj. It went on happening alternately. For a long time I did this *seva* (service) and saw this happening! When I awoke from sleep, I was filled with joy. All my conflicts disappeared. In my dream I realized that Mahapurush Maharaj and Vijnana-Maharaj were the same. I became restless, thinking that I did not show respect to Vijnana-Maharaj yesterday! What was the way out now? When I narrated everything to Nirvedanandaji, he asked me to go to Belur Math and to tell Vijnana-Maharaj what had happened.'

That very day he left the college and went to meet Revered Vijnananandaji at Belur Math. Entering his room, he found Vijnana-Maharaj a different person – a benign smile on his face – and he called the boy. All conflicts now disappeared from young Satykrishna, and the direction of his spiritual life became fixed. The supreme affection and kind blessings received from Swami Vijnananandaji – like the holy river Ganga flowing in the form of the ideas and ideals of Sri Ramakrishna – took him along towards the great life that was to manifest in the future.

He had his spiritual initiation from Revered Vijnananandaji in the year 1938. After that, Swami Nivedanandaji blessed him and said, 'One day you will give spiritual initiation'. The utterance of this great monk came true, which is proved by the later history of the Ramakrishna Math.

Revered Atmasthanandaji was fortunate to be present at Belur Math on 14 January 1938, the day that the Sri Ramakrishna Temple was dedicated. He had not yet joined the Order. Later he used to remember the dedication with great emotion. He saw how Vijnana-Maharaj was so filled with divine spirit that he could not move as he took 'Atmarama' (the sacred remains of Sri Ramakrishna) on his head from the old temple. Keeping the sacred container on the head of Sankaranandaji and touching him, he walked slowly on the red carpet and installed Sri Thakur in the new temple.

After consecrating the temple, young Satyakrishna went to Vijnana-Maharaj's room and asked him, 'Swamiji told you that he would see from above. Did you see it? Vijnananandaji replied, 'Yes, I saw all the brother disciples – Swamiji, Raja Maharaj, Baburam Maharaj, Sarat Maharaj, Sashi Maharaj – they were all standing inside the temple with folded hands.'

We have already heard about the extraordinary inspiration that Satyakrishna received from Revered Achalanandaji, a disciple of Swamiji. Sometimes when he would read the *Ramakrishna Kathamrita* to Kedar Baba, the latter would enquire, 'Today, how much japa, have you performed?' Once at Belur Math some special refreshments were arranged. When he informed Kedar Baba about it, the Swami asked, 'How many Rasagullas have you taken?' When Satyakrishna replied that he had taken two, Kedarbaba retorted, 'What! You have taken two Rasagullas? And you want to become a monk, you want to make Swamiji your ideal? See, those who want to remain very pure in life have to eat very less at night and they have to be very careful about taking sweets.' In later years, remembering this incident Revered Atmasthanandaji commented, 'He was a terrific inspiration.'

Incidentally, it may be mentioned here that in his childhood Satyakrishna had seen Swami Akhandanandaji, another sannyasindisciple of Sri Ramakrishna. The boy Satyakrishna played marbles with the childlike Maharaj. Later, during his college days, he met Swami Abhedanandaji, another sannyasin disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Math in Kolkata. He also got the opportunity to have the holy company of a few senior monks. Special mention can be made of Revered Madhavanandaji and Revered Santanandaji, among others. Through association with these monks having higher levels of spiritual attainment, the path of Satyakrishna's life became fixed. Inside him reverberated the call of Revered Achalanandaji – the call for dedicating this life for Swamiji.

Meanwhile, along the lines of the Gouripur students' home, he himself started a students' home for poor students, free of any charges, at Surya Sen Street, near Shraddhananda Park in Kolkata. But in his mind a different tune rang incessantly. On one side, Kedar Baba was asking him to drop his M.A. studies and join the

Math. And on the other side, Madhavanandaji was telling him to complete his M.A. and then join the Math. One night he saw in a dream that Kedar Baba was wielding a whip in his hand, beating him severely, uttering, 'It is only from your mouth that you speak of becoming a monk; but you are not able to relinquish your M.A. studies!' Waking from sleep he felt pain in his whole body. That very moment he decided the course of his life.

Without disclosing anything to others, he gradually handed over all responsibility for the activities of the students' home to a faithful assistant of his. Then he went to Swami Madhavanandaji and expressed his noble desire. Madhavanandaji knew him from before, and knew him to be an intelligent student also. He learned that Satyakrishna had not completed his M.A. studies. Expressing his objection, he asked him to come after completing his studies. But the boy, who had left hearth and home propelled by the inspiration of renunciation, did not want to return home. Falling at the feet of Madhavanandaji weeping, he narrated everything to him and prayed, 'Maharaj, kindly accept me.' Astonished, Madhavanandaji approved. In later years, one day Madhavanandaji blessed the boy and said, 'You will do many great works of the Sangha'. A senior monk of the Order commented that these utterances of Madhavanandaji, a Brahmajñani (knower of Brahman), indicated the boy's future as Sanghadhyaksha (head of the Sangha), to which the later history of the Sangha bears witness.

Thus Satyakrishna joined the Ramakrishna Sangha (Order) on 3 January 1941, the birth-tithi of Srimat Swami Saradanandaji Maharaj. He was 22 years old. Before that, he had met his father for receiving his consent. Devout and conversant with the scriptures, his father declared very clearly, 'Why should I be an obstacle if my son wants to embrace the life of a monk?'

Another boy known as Srikanta joined the Order with him. Following the then traditions of the Math, they both had to stay in the visitors' room. Later on, Srikanta became known as Swami Vishuddhatmananda. Having joined the Order together, they maintained great friendship throughout their lives.

After joining the Order, he was first sent to Deoghar Vidyapith.

Swami Jnanatmanandaji was there at the time. After some time, the Belur Math authorities asked him to proceed to the Mayavati Advaita Ashrama. At the time, Revered Swami Gambhiranandaji Maharaj was Editor of the monthly magazine *Prabuddha Bharata*, and Satyakrishna started as the Assistant Editor under him. Sometimes he felt that some changes were needed in the language of Swami Gambhiranandaji's writings. Whenever he drew Swami Gambhiranandaji's attention to such changes, he received his permission to carry them out; Gambhiranandaji had such faith in his writing style and scholarship.

During this time he wrote a few articles and reviewed some books also. He now learned Hindi very attentively from one Mohanji living there. It was the custom at Mayavati in those days that every day some one of the sannyasins or brahmacharins of the Ashrama would cook something. One day Revered Atmasthanandaji decided to prepare Rasagulla for all. Having gathered all the materials, he began. At one point in the process it was seen that the rasagullas were not coming out properly; the syrup and the cheese (panir) were separating. So he thought that they could not be served to the monastics. But, hearing everything, Gambhiranandaji said that they could indeed be taken; and everybody ate them happily.

Again there came the call for a change of place and work. Revered Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj, the then President of the Order, asked for him to be one of his attendants (sevak). At first Madhavanandaji did not want to take him away from Mayavati, but honouring the desire of Revered Virajanandaji, Brahmachari Satyakrishna was finally sent as his attendant. He was initiated into the vows of *brahmacharya* by Swami Virajanandaji in 1945, and was named Shanti Chaitanya. In 1949 he was initiated into sannyasa by Revered Virajanandaji and received the name Atmasthananda.

In the company of Revered Virajanandaji, he spent a long time in the Shyamlatil Ashrama, situated on the peaceful and serene lap of the Himalayas. He would stay in the room adjacent to Virajanandaji. He developed great skill in performing all tasks, adjusting to the minute details of Virajanandaji's daily routine.

Satyakrishna Maharaj had astonishing presence of mind. Understanding the needs of Virajanandaji, he would keep appropriate things ready for him. As a result, Virajanandaji also would depend on him. Later, he had the responsibility of writing many letters for Virajanandaji.

He could easily and lovingly mix with Revered Virajanandaji, who was like a child. Once, in the Shyamlatl Ashrama Virajanandaji decided to feed everybody with *singara*. Arranging everything, he himself prepared them and began to send them, one after the other, to the monks. But no one liked them, yet nobody could say so! Virajanandaji called his attendant Satyakrishna and enquired how the monks were enjoying the preparation. Satyakrishna said honestly that the monks were complaining, 'These are all rotten.' Hearing this, Virajanandaji kept quiet. After some time, again he prepared *singara*, adding chili, onion, etc. This time the monks liked them. Satyakrishna was given the responsibility of giving the report to Virajanandaji, which he did. Hearing the report, Virajanandaji remarked sarcastically, 'Rotten! Rotten!' Such was their sweet relationship.

Once, while staying at Shyamlatl, Swami Virajanandaji's heart problems became much aggravated. In those days there was no doctor nearby; one had to go near Mayavati to find a doctor. But it was not possible for Virajanandaji to make such a trip. So his fearless attendant, Satyakrishna, came forward to solve the problem. In those days, there were many deadly risks on the way to Mayavati. But not caring, Satyakrishna set out on foot to search for a doctor. He traversed the whole way and returned to Shyamlatl with a doctor.

In later years, he remembered with great respect his affectionate and purifying association with Revered Virajanandaji. As he was attracted by the contemplative life of Virajanandaji, so in the field of work he was filled with inspiration by Virajanandaji's steadiness and attitude of worshipfulness.

After his initiation into sannyasa, Atmasthanandaji spent some time in spiritual practices, having received Revered Virajanandaji's consent.

Revered Virajanandaji entered into *Mahasamadhi* in the year 1951. After this, Revered Atmasthanandaji spent some time in spiritual practices and austerities at the Dehradun Ashrama. During this time, Srimat Swami Jagadanandaji Maharaj, a disciple of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, was at the Ashrama. Getting this opportunity, Atmasthanandaji now studied scriptures under the revered senior monk who was also a great scholar. While reminiscing about Revered Jagadanandaji in later years, he said, 'He was a living embodiment of the spirit of Vedanta.' At the time of the old Swami's passing away, Revered Atmasthanandaji was beside him. Narrating the beautiful incident with great emotion and respect he said, 'The doctors had declared that there was no hope of recovery and that he would collapse very soon. His legs were turning ice-cold. The doctors asked us to massage his legs with brandy. While I did that, he suddenly looked at me and exclaimed in his native Sylhet dialect: "*Kita Karo? Kita Karo?* What are you doing? What are you doing?"

""Your legs are turning cold, so I am massaging them a little."

""Massaging them a little!" he retorted. "*Satchidekam brahma!* Brahman is Absolute Knowledge and Existence! Have you understood that, or not? *Sarvam khalvidam brahma.* All this is verily Brahman. Know and hold onto this!" And he was gone!' This incident left a deep impression on his life.

During this period of spiritual practice in Dehradun, he received the call again from the Belur Math for engaging himself in the service activities of Swamiji. This time he had to go to the Tuberculosis Sanatorium at Ranchi as its Assistant Secretary. Swami Vedantanandaji Maharaj was the Secretary of the centre. Through the initiative of Atmasthanandaji, the hospital advanced greatly in its services to the needy; new departments like an Operation Theater, a pathological laboratory, a separate ward for monks, a general ward, a cottage, etc, were set up. He had to put forth great effort. For setting up of the Operation Theater, he consulted Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, then the Chief Minister of West Bengal, and he collected many items left by the British after the World War. He used to get operations done by Dr. A. K. Pal, bringing him from Kolkata.

Having observed the scarcity of water in the area, the visionary Swami Atmasthanandaji planned for a permanent solution to the problem. He was acquainted with a senior and experienced engineer named Madhavan whom he brought to Ranchi. Having consulted him, Maharaj had a water reservoir constructed. From the present perspective, his work to solve the water problem in the area was a significant step forward.

When the ailing Revered Swami Santanandaji arrived at the T.B. Sanatorium, Atmasthanandaji had a cottage constructed for him. After many years, when Maharaj visited the T.B. Sanatorium as the Vice-President of the Order and saw the dilapidated condition of the cottage, he arranged some funds for its renovation. Now known as Santananda Kutia, the renovated cottage remains even today a secluded place for the spiritual practices of the monks and novices.

In 1958 Atmasthanandaji was called again by the Headquarters for shouldering a greater responsibility. In those days, there was a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission in Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar), which ran a hospital. He was now sent there as the Secretary. Within a few days, he was deeply engaged in the development of the hospital. Through great effort, he was able to develop and expand all the departments of the hospital, and it became the best hospital in Burma. Through his encouragement and initiative, arrangements were made for Cardiac Surgery. He installed a fine statue of Swami Vivekananda on the premises. He brought Revered Madhavanandaji and Dayanandaji to Rangoon, and he also brought Revered Yatiswaranandaji there and arranged for spiritual initiation.

The then Prime Minister and other high-profile officers of Burma knew him well. Side by side with such VIPs, however, he developed a very close relation with the common people as well. He learned the Burmese language well enough to converse in it, and he could even read Burmese handwriting. As a result, the common people of Burma looked upon him with deep love and respect. During his time in Rangoon, the present eminent leader of the country, Aung San Suu Kyi, was a small girl and would often call on him with her mother. Maharaj used to give her

lozenges. When Burmese people would leave the hospital after recovering from their illnesses, many times they would donate gold for the development of the Ashrama.

Unfortunately this phase of outstanding service activities started by him did not continue for long. After military rule was introduced in the country, all activities conducted by other religions were prohibited. That included the Ramakrishna Mission, which was ordered to return to India, thus ending all its service activities there. Maharaj insisted on removing the statue of Swamiji, and finally was able to send it to India. Later the statue was re-installed on the premises of the Ramakrishna Vidyashala, Mysore. Maharaj, accompanied by all others, returned to India by steamer.

For some time after this, he visited a number of pilgrimage centres in India. The knowledge and thought-currents associated with those pilgrimage centres—representing the core of India's eternal spiritual traditions—became a great treasure to this untiring Karma Yogi. A few days later, he was called again to plunge into Swamiji's Karma Yoga. He was given charge of the Ashrama at Rajkot, Gujarat. Revered Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj had been in charge of this Ashrama, but he was now called to Belur Math to become Assistant Secretary, with Atmasthanandaji as his replacement.

After taking charge of the centre, Atmasthanandaji made various plans for the overall development of the Ashrama. He developed deep bonds with all those who had been closely known to Revered Bhuteshanandaji, and he contacted the initiated devotees of Revered Swamis Vishuddhanandaji Maharaj and Vireswaranandaji Maharaj in the area. Mention should be made of the family of Rashida Ben Marchent of Bhavanagar, a Muslim family that became very close to Maharaj. All the members of this family have been spiritually initiated from the Ramakrishna Math.

During his stay at the Rajkot Ashrama, Atmasthanandaji initiated major relief operations. The relief and rehabilitation work conducted by him in Surat drew a lot of attention. Later, after his appointment as the Vice-President of the Order, he visited the place again.

The relief and rehabilitation work done at Dhaneti, Kutch, is remembered by all. Famine broke out in the village of Dhaneti. People had no access to food. Help from other places was not coming to the extent needed. Carrying food for them, Maharaj started from the Ashram. But, other problems arose after reaching Dhaneti. The people of the area declined to accept any food brought by Maharaj from the Ashrama, asking how they could accept food brought by the monks. Even after much discussion and pleading, the people would not give in. The Ashrama people were at a loss. At this critical moment Maharaj addressed the villagers and said that if they did not eat, he too would not take anything: he would remain fasting. Whatever Maharaj said, he did, and so he remained seated there. Now the villages understood that this presented another danger before them. If a monk fasts before them, they would incur sin. So they finally agreed to accept food brought by Maharaj. In fact, it was Maharaj's attitude of love and service that defeated the villagers.

Here Maharaj conducted extensive rehabilitation work. People of the area loved and respected him like God. Maharaj, too, had genuine, enduring affection towards them. When he was the Vice-President of the Order, he came to Dhaneti more than once. Once, when he reached Dhaneti, many villagers came there to see him. They gave him a reception also. A lady member of the Panchayat (village administration) in her speech said in moving words: 'As the people of Ayodhya were delighted at the return of Sri Ramachandra, we too have the same feeling today after getting Maharaj back to our village'.

In fact, making the Rajkot Ashrama his centre, Revered Maharaj conquered the hearts of the people of Gujarat. He learned the Gujarati language well. In fact, in time he learned it so well that he could deliver lectures in Gujarati.

Many dignified persons used to visit the Rajkot Ashrama in those days. An interesting incident happened during this time, demonstrating his quick intelligence in executing a task without hurting others. It was observed that many of the dignified people visiting the Ashrama would, after eating *prasad*, rinse their mouths out on the plate itself. Nobody could tell them anything directly. Maharaj was informed. He instructed them to remove the plates

immediately after people finished eating so that they would get no chance to use the plate for rinsing their mouths. Then they would be shown the place outside for washing, and that would suffice. The problem was actually solved thus, and nobody noticed anything.

Maharaj had a great desire to construct a beautiful temple at the Rajkot Ashrama. Revered Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj, the then President of the Order, gave permission, and agreed to lay the foundation stone for the temple with one condition: that *anna-bhoga* (cooked food) would never be offered to Sri Ramakrishna in the temple. Revered Atmasthanandaji accepted his condition, and Revered Vireswaranandaji Maharaj accordingly laid the foundation stone of the temple.

An incident took place during the construction of the temple that moved him greatly. Daily, after attending the *mangalarati* and performing his spiritual practices in the old shrine, he used to go to supervise the progress of the construction work of the new temple. In this way, he was going round the construction site one day when suddenly a night guard of the Ashrama came running up to him. Maharaj stood still. The night guard fell at his feet and, embracing them, started weeping bitterly and requested Maharaj to release him from the work immediately. Maharaj repeatedly asked him why he wanted to quit his job. After long persuasion, the worker said that the previous night he was sitting on the temple under construction and smoking to get rid of sleepiness. Suddenly he saw Mother Kali there, standing with Her sword in hand. She told him, 'Now itself I will cut you to pieces.' He understood why Mother wanted to punish him. Therefore, he did not want to work there anymore, and without listening to Maharaj, he left the Ashrama, relinquishing his job.

The construction of the temple was completed according to the plans of Maharaj, and even today it is witness to his wonderful imagination and untiring Karma Yoga, which were the results of his tremendous spiritual *sadhana*.

While staying in Rajkot, he travelled to Fiji, Singapore and Malaysia for spreading the message of the Holy Trinity. At this time he was a member of the Relief Committee of the Government of Gujarat.

In Rajkot a young man who had been swayed by various questions regarding life came to Maharaj, and he requested Maharaj for shelter in the Ashrama and permission to join the Ramakrishna Order of monks. After observing him for a few days, Maharaj instructed him to return home, saying that he had greater work to accomplish in life. Time passed, decade after decade. But the words uttered by the wise and farsighted monk came true. That young man became great in a different path of life. From the field of Gujarat he has come now to the greater field of India Herself: the young boy became Chief Minister of Gujarat and is now Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Before being elected Prime Minister of India, he visited Belur Math one day and met Revered Maharaj who was by then the Revered President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. His meeting with Revered President Maharaj was like the reunion of Guru and disciple. Narendra Modi said to him that day, 'Whatever I become in future, know that all credit is yours, because, had you not turned me back home, I would never have travelled in this path.'

But we are getting far ahead of the narration. While staying in Rajkot, in the year 1973, Swami Atmasthanadaji was appointed a member of the Board of Trustees of the Ramakrishna Math and a member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission. And in the year 1975, he was once again called by the Order, this time to join the Headquarters at Belur Math as an Assistant Secretary of the Order.

Thus began an important chapter in the life of Revered Atmasthanadaji. For the next forty-two years he lived at Belur Math, holding higher and higher offices in the Order. As Assistant Secretary, besides handling various responsibilities, his greatest contribution was in the field of relief and rehabilitation. He shouldered the responsibility of this department for many years. It is through his initiative that the permanent resources for conducting regular relief activities grew. Lots of contributions started flowing in. The permanent fund for relief work also increased. He started extensive relief activities during this time. The rehabilitation work done at the Divisima colony of Andhra Pradesh, is one of the memorable projects. The relief and rehabilitation works at Bally-Dewanganj of Arambag, Malda,

Gaighata and Odisha are remembered by many even today. After the devastating earthquake in Nepal, relief and rehabilitation work was started immediately through the Lucknow centre.

During the flood that devastated parts of West Bengal in 1978, Revered Maharaj showed remarkable initiative and enthusiasm in steering the relief operation. Once it was reported that Malipanchghara was inundated with flood water, and the people of the area had taken shelter in a school. No relief material had reached them, not even food. The Durga Puja festival was approaching. Revered Maharaj informed the then President, Revered Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj, about everything. It was decided that whatever rice and pulses had been accumulated for the worship of Mother Durga would be used for the service of those afflicted by the flood. The monks themselves cooked *khichudi* and reached Malipanchghara with it. Thereafter, a big relief operation was conducted in the area through 14 centres.

Once the terrible flood was over, it was found that the land in the area of Bally-Dewanganj was now covered with heaps of sand. Fertile land would not be available in the area now as it had been in the past, and as a result, cultivation would not be possible. The flood waters had receded, but the people of the area had to carry still the curse of the floods on their heads. This news reached Maharaj, who had connection with the management of M/s Excel Industries. Maharaj called them and asked that they explore methods to remove this miserable condition from the people. This institution was expert in developing methods for cultivation in fields mixed with sand. The farmers of the area were shown a particular method for cultivation; and following that method, the farmers cultivated their lands and the distressed population once again found a way to live.

There was once a flood in the State of Tripura. Having surveyed the area in the first phase of relief, the monks collected relief materials for distribution. Revered Maharaj, too, arranged to send materials by air. In the second phase, after a survey of other areas, he was informed through letter of the necessity of relief operation there also. But for some reason or other Maharaj's reply to the letter was delayed. In this situation, the monks who were looking

after the relief work decided that if no relief materials came from Belur Math, they would beg the necessary materials for serving the flood stricken people. Maharaj received this information also; and thus having come to know of this wonderful attitude of service, Maharaj informed the monks, 'You continue the relief work. Whatever is needed, I am sending everything.'

Revered Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj, the 10th President of the Order, envisaged and planned the Pallimangal Project for making village people self-reliant. All responsibility fell on Revered Atmasthanandaji to translate this into action. Along with this, through his initiative a Mobile Dispensary and Eye Operation program, free of cost, were started. These projects are still going smoothly. At the Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha, adjacent to the Belur Math, a department known as Samaj Sevak Sikshana Mandira was started to train youth in various projects to make them self-reliant. Maharaj infused active inspiration in this work also.

Maharaj showed great interest and initiative in tribal development work, starting a centre at Narainpur, Madhya Pradesh, for working among the tribes of the Abujhmarh area, and setting up a new centre at Itanagar for working among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. During this time, he planned to construct a building known as Arogya Bhavan at Belur Math for accommodating the old and ailing monks of the Order. Having received permission from others, he collected the necessary funds for its construction. He also arranged for the construction of a similar building for aged monks at the Ashrama in Ulsoor, Bangalore. The old age homes at Varanasi Sevashrama, meant for accommodating elderly monks and devotees, were constructed through his inspiration as well. Moreover, Maharaj had a great role in constructing the old age home at Barisha, Kolkata. The construction of the big guest-house (Yatri Nivas) at Kamarpukur is another important achievement. His role in the expansion of the two guest-houses at Belur Math, meant for Indian and foreign devotees, is known to all. He collected funds through his own initiative for the construction of temples at the Maths in Contai and Guwahati.

He took an active interest in the maintenance work of the Sri Ramakrishna temple at Belur Math. He had a grill gate fixed in front of the store room, and through the help of Swami Adiswaranandaji, he imported bullet-proof glass from America for placing in the front doors of the Sri Ramakrishna temple's *garbha mandir* (sanctum sanctorum).

To give relief to the devotees and visitors to Belur Math, particularly during the summer, he arranged for *jala-satra* (drinking water seva). The first drinking water used to be stored in clay pitchers.

In reality, Revered Maharaj was a crisis manager. As a leader, he would always be at the front on every occasion. In a centre in the Northeastern region, a difficult situation once arose in connection with the sudden accidental death of an inmate. The authorities at Belur Math gave him the responsibility of settling the problem. Accompanied by another monk, he started out by air. He reached the Ashrama, travelling the whole night from the airport in a Maruti van. Having talked to all concerned, he slowly brought the situation under control. His special characteristic was to present himself courageously in front of any dangerous situation, which charmed all the monks around him forever.

During this period of his life, Revered Maharaj would attend various youth conventions as a speaker. He was the Chairman of the Accommodation and Reception Committee during the Devotees' Convention in 1980 and the Youth Convention in 1985, both held at Belur Math. Later, when he was General Secretary of the Order, the All India Tribal Conference was held at Belur Math. His efficiency in managing the affairs attracted the attention of all.

Having received approval from the then General Secretary, Revered Swami Gambhirananaji, he started at the Headquarters in 1976 a Pre-Probationers' Training Centre (PPTC) for the new comers (brahmacharins) intending to lead a monastic life. Maharaj always gave intense attention to developing the spiritual life of those who would come to the Belur Math for joining the Order, and to any who would embrace the monastic life in general, as this was the very first phase of their monastic life and hence extremely important in their future development.

In 1992 Swami Atmasthanandaji was appointed General Secretary of the Order, the highest administrative post. He continued in this capacity for five years. His leadership of the Organization during this period is worth remembering. The effort to take possession of the ancestral house of Swami Vivekananda had spanned many years. Having taken up the responsibility as the General Secretary of the Order, he gave responsibility for this work to two efficient monks in an effort to give new impetus to the project. Besides, he appealed to various places for the collection of funds for this work. The collection of funds was initiated in this country and abroad. The best response was received from the students of various schools and colleges. Some students of different schools sent money for helping this work by saving from their tiffin expenses.

It was through his intense eagerness that two houses in Gujarat, one at Limdi and one at Porbandar, both associated with the memory of Swami Vivekananda, were acquired. It was also because of his expressed wish that in 1997 Ridgely Manor in Upstate New York was acquired, a place sanctified by three visits of Swami Vivekananda as well as the visits of three other direct disciples.

Revered Atmasthanandaji Maharaj became one of the Vice-Presidents of the Order on the Buddha Purnima day in 1997. After that, in 1998, he went on a tour of the branch centres in America, Canada, Japan and Singapore, and inspired the devotees there in spiritual life. They too felt blessed having received the company of a disciple of one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. He visited Bangladesh also and blessed devotees there with spiritual initiation.

On 3 December 2007 he was appointed as the 15th President of the Ramakrishna Order.

Outwardly Maharaj appeared very firm in his interactions with people. But inside, his mind was gentle. Not only that, his great heart endeared him to many. Whoever came in contact with him was blessed on getting acquainted with his marvelous, sensitive mind. Once a brahmacharin who had joined the PPTC a few days earlier came to Maharaj to get his signature on an important record

book. Suddenly Maharaj saw that one of the boy's eyes was red. Immediately he enquired why. Hearing everything, he instructed the young novice, 'Consult a doctor immediately.' As it was his responsibility to get the record book signed by Maharaj within a fixed time, the brahmacharin was hesitating. But Maharaj said emphatically that he must first get his eyes examined by a doctor and then the record book would be signed. That newly joined brahmacharin is now a middle-aged monk, and he remembers this incident even today with great respect.

Many such reminiscences of his genuine affection remain scattered among the monks of the Ramakrishna Order, especially among those who joined under him at the PPTC. A boy had once just joined the Order. It was summer, and there was no fan in the room. Naturally the weather was very hot. Due to the effect of prickly-heat, his body was burning. The simple brahmacharin went straight to Maharaj and appealed to him for some powder which could pacify the burning sensation. Hearing this, Maharaj became angry and told him sharply, 'Powder etc. are not available. You have come to become a monk; practice austerities. If necessary, sit there and smear ash on your body.' The brahmacharin came back silently. A day after this incident, some of the boy's relations came to see him at Belur Math; among them were his elder brother and elder sister. They met Revered Maharaj also. Having come to know about their relation, he said, 'What kind of elder brother and sister you are? Your brother is in so much distress due to prickly-heat and you did not even bring powder for him?' They were surprised to hear it, but thereafter when they came to meet their brother, they brought Nycil powder with them. Maharaj was present in this huge Order with such an affectionate and sensitive mind, even if covered with an apparent firmness; he became a place of hope and faith for many.

And how much keen attention he had towards the development of these boys' monastic life! On the Mahashtami day of Durga Puja, before going to his office, he called the brahmacharins and enquired, 'As I instructed you yesterday, are you all fasting, even without drinking water?' They all said that they were following his instructions meticulously. Yet he kept banana for them so that they could eat something.

There was a brahmacharin that he would sometimes call for some work. But when the brahmacharin came, Maharaj did not pay him any attention. Several times the brahmacharin came, waited for a long time, and then went back; again he returned and stood there. Then once Maharaj called, and while doing some work said, 'Did you have to wait for a long time?' To instill a great treasure of monastic life, namely patience, in the lives of newcomers, he would examine them in this way.

A brahmacharin had been posted to a centre from Belur Math. When he came to Maharaj, Maharaj explained to him very patiently how he would have to lead his life there, etc. Finally he commented, 'Know the head of the centre as the representative of Sri Ramakrishna. Conduct your activities according to his instructions.' This teaching helped in shaping a wonderful monastic life in many monks of the Order. Even today they remember Maharaj with profound respect.

Throughout his life he showed great respect to the ideal of serving people, looking upon them as embodiments of Shiva, as taught by Sri Thakur, Sri Sri Ma and Swamiji. The vow he took regarding dedicating his own life for the good of the people, influenced others as well. Once it was being decided in a discussion that, because the dispensary at a centre was not running properly, the work should be discontinued. When the proposal was about to be accepted unanimously, Revered Maharaj suddenly said, 'What's this! At least some people are benefited by this. And you all want to close it down?' Suffice it to say that in the small comment of this realized *sadhaka* dedicated to the welfare of humanity was hidden the indication of what was needful, and it was not difficult for others to get the hint.

He was insistent that the employees of the Ashramas should not face difficulties. Once a Principal of a Mission college in Kolkata informed him that, on the way to the Treasury Office, fifty thousand rupees had been stolen from the bag of the monk who was going to deposit the amount in that office. It was the contributions of the employees to their Provident Fund accounts. The Secretary of the Ashrama was at a loss. The Principal of the college sought advice from Revered Maharaj. Maharaj instructed very clearly that first the amount would have to be deposited to

the Treasury Office by taking a loan from the Ashrama fund so that the employees would not lose even one day's interest, and thereafter the necessary steps according to the law were to be decided.

In the field of every work he used to take special care for perfection. He would keep his clothes properly arranged. Once, seeing the untidy condition of the clothes of one attendant, he commented, 'Why are they kept like this?' The attendant informed him that an iron was not available, so what could be done? Hearing this, Maharaj replied, 'Why, properly fold them and keep them under your pillow.' He would keep the screens nicely arranged and would see that the photo-frames hanging on the wall did not get tilted. That is to say, in every work of his there was an inherent effort to manifest beauty, and it was a part of his *sadhana*.

Whoever worked with him, remembers even today that to work in this fashion was, as it were, an adventure. He had great faith in the division of labour, and showed great wisdom in how he depended on others. Whenever he gave responsibility to someone, he showed full faith in him; but he would also keep watch to see how much the person could do and how much he could not.

When it came to public speeches, such was his technique that, by the time he stopped, the listeners would have received some practical instruction or proposal to accomplish certain ends, for which he had appealed to them in his lecture. He would rarely prepare any notes for his lectures, but would speak spontaneously from his heart, and through his words he would reach the listener. His strong personality would always disseminate the bright glow of manliness. A mumbling manner was never liked by him. He could cook well, the techniques for which, it came to be known, he learned from Virajanandaji. He showed disinterest in electronic gadgets and foreign travels, to some extent.

His food habits were simple. He preferred Sattwika (pure) food, and did not at all like food that was too spicy and oily. Wherever he visited, Maharaj had great devotion to offered food, or prasada. Another characteristic of his food habits was that the

list giving the order in which dishes were to be eaten must be followed rigidly; he never liked breaking this serial order. If it happened, he would not tell anybody about it, only he would not take that particular item. Generally, he did not like anyone standing before him as he ate. After the items were served, he would eat them slowly and get up.

He love towards his attendants (sevaks) was immeasurable. He would always pay attention to their happiness and sorrow. A food item that he liked he would keep for them separately. When he was Assistant Secretary, a newly joined brahmacharin from Gujarat visited Belur Math. Having learnt that the boy's health was not good, Maharaj called him. The boy was having digestion problems because of the change of water. Having known that his health was getting worse day by day, Maharaj called him to his room one day. Keeping some portion separate from his own refreshment, he gave it to the brahmacharin. Thereafter, for some days, this allotment of refreshment continued for the brahmacharin. He is now the head of a centre and a senior monk. Though this incident happened almost four decades ago, he told it as if it had just happened, visualizing it while narrating the incident. He remembers Maharaj's love and affection even today with great joy.

Revered Maharaj established contact with all classes of people in society. Through the unique charm of his personality he drew near him many industrialists and members of trusts for taking part in the service activities of the Ramakrishna Mission. By virtue of his powerful voice, surging waves of open laughter, affectionate and genuine openness, and direct way of presenting the ideas and ideals of Sri Thakur, Sri Ma, and Swamiji, he could bring them together for the welfare of the society and connect them with the organization in various ways. The Birla Group, the Bajaj Company, the Mumbai Samachar Group, M/s Arvind Textiles, the Peerless Group, Vijaya Ben Gandhi Ben family, M/s Excel Industries, Bhualka Trust, Anandabazar Group, etc could never forget the unique attraction of his personality.

Whenever any VIP would visit the Belur Math, it was his responsibility to entertain them. As a result, relations with many of them grew deeper. He had an extraordinary communication

with the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by letter. During early 1984, when Indira Gandhi was interested in creating the National Rural Development Fund, envisioning the idea of rural development, Maharaj wrote a letter to her encouraging her in the project. In his letter, he sent an English translation of the questions asked by Narada to Yudhishtira in the Sabha Parva of the *Mahabharata*, covering subjects related to cultivation and cows as embodiments of wealth and items in trade. Indira acknowledged receipt of the letter and thanked him.

After completion of the relief and rehabilitation work at Bally Dewanganj, when everything was to be handed over to the villagers, a programme was arranged, and to it he invited the then Chief Minister Sri Jyoti Basu and PWD Minister Sri Jatin Chakrabarty. Seeing the example of the wonderful work done by the Ramakrishna Mission, Sri Basu told Jatin Babu, 'Well, Jatin Babu, why cannot our departments perform in this manner?'

During this time, in the village Dightar in the same area, a school was razed to the ground due to flood. The Mission reconstructed the school building and got it inaugurated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

In one district in West Bengal, some special support from the Government became necessary for conducting the relief operation. But the Minister of the concerned department, owing to his political ideology, was not at all favourable to the Mission. Taking one of his brothers of his pre-monastic family, Sri Pritindra Krishna Bhattacharya, Maharaj presented himself directly before the Minister. After some discussion, he invited the Minister to Belur Math. The Minister replied that because of political obligations he did not want to go there. Hearing this Maharaj almost roared at him. Everyone present was shocked. But the person to whom he was speaking listened to everything silently, and confessed his limitations. Thereafter they spoke for some more time in a friendly manner. It was observed that the Minister became very near to Maharaj. In later years, that Minister visited one of our educational institutions adjacent to Belur Math. He also helped the Math and Mission in various ways.

At the University he had been a student of Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan. Once years later they happened to meet during some work. Seeing him, Radhakrishnan stood up. Revered Maharaj thought that Radhakrishnan certainly could not recognize his former student. The moment he tried to introduce himself, Radhakrishnan told him that he remembered him very well. Revered Maharaj asked him, 'Then why did you get up? You are my teacher, my Guru.' Radhakrishnan replied, 'When you were a student, I was your Guru, your teacher. But today you are a sannyasin (monk), you are a *Jagadguru* (teacher of the world).'

Maharaj had an everlasting connection of the heart with Gujarat. On Gujarati New Year's Day he used to greet senior Gujarati monks over the phone following the tradition of the state by saying 'Sal Mubarak.' The Limdi and Porbandar centres, both associated with the memory of Swamiji, were already acquired. After becoming Vice-President, he called the head of a centre in Gujarat, a senior monk, and told him in a sing-song voice like a childish whim, 'You bring the Dilaram Bungalow of Vadodara, hallowed by the memory of Swamiji, to me. I want to see it before leaving this world.' That meant that the Dilaram Bungalow, which was under the possession of the Government, would have to be brought under the Ramakrishna Mission and be developed as a branch centre.

That monk, with full inspiration, jumped into the work. He contacted the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Sri Narendra Modi, and told him the desire of Atmasthanandaji. Modiji agreed to hand over the building, but under one condition – 'Maharaj will have to come to Vadodara. I will hand over the building to him and not to you.' Following this appeal, Revered Maharaj was present there on 18 April 2005, the Ramanavami day, the day the Dilaram Bungalow was handed over. In the function it appeared as if Maharaj was unable to control his joy in the matter. He told Modiji, 'Come to Belur Math. I will feed you with prasad.' Modiji accepted his invitation, and he met Revered Maharaj in Belur Math in 2013.

The Sangha, its every monk and brahmacharin member, its every branch and all the service activities conducted through them—in everything he used to see the manifestation of Sri Ramakrishna. What wonderful faith he had in everything. To all the monks who were senior to him, he would prostrate for offering pranams. His respect towards the senior monks was exemplary for the juniors. If any senior would come to offer pranams to him, he would ask the juniors to stand at a distance. He deeply loved and respected the past Presidents, Vice-Presidents, General Secretaries, and other senior monks; and during discussions on many occasions he would reminisce about them. Later on as President, immediately after the evening arati, the office bearers of Belur Math would meet together in his residence for taking tea. So long as he was in Belur Math as President, this session continued uninterrupted.

During various dealings with others, his respect for the monastic life would manifest. Once he sat in an Ashrama with the monks for general interaction. His own slippers were near his feet. He asked a boy to keep them elsewhere as the monks would come there and sit with him. One of the monks of the Ashrama said, 'Maharaj, what is the necessity of removing your slippers from here? We will sit nicely by their side.' Immediately he said with folded hands, 'What do you say? Sadhus will come and I will keep my slippers before them? Should it happen?'

As he used to lay emphasis on the development of the monastic life of the young monks, side by side he would keep watch over their progress in this life. Similarly, he would pay attention to the health of the monks. He got many monks treated in good hospitals. However, he would not tell his own health issues to others. If his health was very bad and he could see that he was not able to take care of it himself, then only would he call his attendants. His attitude of bearing such difficulties is worth imbibing. Once he was visiting the Along Ashrama. One of the teachers of the school wanted to present him with very costly shoes. Maharaj at first gladly listened to him tell the details about the gift. But then he said that he was unable to accept the gift, because he wouldn't be able to use such a costly pair of shoes, as it would be harmful for his monastic life. And the devotee also should take care that such

an act does not do harm in any way. Everybody was astonished to hear this.

Now and then when he was the Assistant Secretary of the Order, there would be the manifestation of a childlike nature in him. Through its influence, everybody around him would enjoy pure fun and joy.

During the Public Celebrations at Belur Math, he purchased a funny looking doll and kept it secretly on the table of a senior monk. Seeing it, the monk at first was not happy. He started searching for the person who had done it. He went on calling this person and that, and scolded them a little. But Maharaj was sitting quietly, enjoying the fun. After sometime, he himself informed the senior monk that he was the main culprit, and also gave an appropriate reason for doing it. Having heard all this, the concerned monk and all others burst into laughter.

Once during the Durga Puja, while performing the evening arati (vespers) with camphor, the Pujari's (worshipper) hand got burnt with the molten camphor. After the arati, everybody was busy attending on him. After offering pranams to the Divine Mother, while passing through the store room Maharaj said in a grave voice, 'Don't worry. You have almost followed the words of Swamiji. He said that the Diving Mother would be worshipped with blood. Altering his idea a little, you have worshipped the Diving Mother by burning your hand.' Everybody burst into laughter.

Once he had a little cold. The attendant had served him with chilled tender coconut water, and perhaps that is why he caught cold. But Maharaj, like a small child, would not accept that reason. His own reason was very funny. He said that there was an insect in the tender coconut water. After drinking the water with the insect, the insect first went into the stomach; and thereafter it came back up and was tickling his throat. Hearing this, the attendant started rolling in laughter.

Once two monks from Bangladesh, came to Maharaj. After prostrating before him, they offered four packs of Fox lozenges in his hands. These were very dear to him, so he was delighted to receive them. Then they offered a packet of juice, a foreign product,

to him. Taking it in his hands he asked, 'What is this?' They said that it was such a thing that, even if taken by a coward, he would become fearless. Making his eyes big, Maharaj asked them, 'Does that mean I am a coward?' With folded hands, the monks replied that they, at least, thought so, as small children become afraid. Revered Maharaj asked immediately, 'Why?' They replied, 'Maharaj, don't you want to visit Bangladesh, even though afraid?' He accepted their words and told them about the political situation there. But the two monks were unrelenting. Finally, laughing like a child, he asked them to contact his private-Secretary to finalize the programme.

Once a middle aged and hard-working monk met with an accident twice while going out by rickshaw for propagation work. On both occasions his injury was serious. But being inspired by the ideal of Swamiji and without being disheartened, he again met with an accident while going for the same work a third time, this time getting slightly wounded. Later Maharaj told him over phone, 'Hello, how many times does an experienced person repeat his mistake?' Though Maharaj told this humorously out of care for the monk, he was in fact cautioning him for the future. Now a senior member of the Order, the monk even today remembers with great respect Maharaj's affectionate advice to him.

One of his attendants had one of the names of Krishna. One day calling the attendant, he asked, 'Where is the flute of this Krishna?' When the attendant showed him the mobile phone, he commented, 'That is a mobile phone. How can it be a flute?'

Once the head of a centre in the Northeast arranged for a helicopter for Maharaj's visit. Having boarded the copter, he expressed his joy like a child. He said repeatedly that he had a long-standing desire to fly in a helicopter, and was happy to get that desire fulfilled. In fact, for this he blessed the monk abundantly.

He had a great attraction for youth. He could easily attract them to himself. Once when he was Assistant Secretary, the National Youth Day (12 January) was being celebrated at Belur Math. Part of the programme featuring songs, recitations, speeches, etc. was completed. Much time had passed and the

students were getting restless. Finally, Maharaj stood up for his presidential address. There was a lot of noise in the audience. Suddenly Maharaj asked them, 'My children! Are you all feeling very hungry?' They all together replied, 'Yes.' Maharaj replied instantly, 'See, I am also feeling very hungry, but they are not allowing me to leave. See how they have confined me on this platform by making me sit on this chair.' Nothing more was necessary; the whole audience expressed their happiness through clapping. Then for about fifteen minutes proceeded a wonderful meeting, as if Maharaj was conversing with that huge gathering of young boys and girls. Where was the noise now, where that restlessness? Everybody's eyes and ears got focused on Maharaj.

A student of the Vidyamandira used to meet Maharaj very often. As the institution was closed, he could not come to Maharaj for a number of days. Maharaj enquired about the boy. When the boy came again one day, he saw that Maharaj had kept a plate of food arranged separately for him. This display of love and affection, he can't forget even today. Perhaps it was this attraction that impelled him to renounce his hearth and home.

Congratulating a young man over the phone after he had taken a job, Maharaj said, 'I want you to be a born executive. Think in such a way that people will say fifty years from now that nobody could think that way but you.'

Another young man used to come to him who was also a volunteer at Belur Math. When Maharaj learned that he had passed his B.Com. Examination, he put his hand on the boy's back and blessed him by saying, 'My happiest congratulations.' The young man is now a monk of the Order, and cannot forget that affectionate touch even today, and says: 'I feel as if that hand is still there on my back.'

Being attracted by his personality, many young boys joined the Order and developed their spiritual lives according to his instructions. He had the same influence on young girls also, as result of which many of them joined Sri Sarada Math, embracing the life of renunciation. As a Vice-President and then President of the Order he would keep separate schedules for initiating young boys and young girls. Swami Atmasthanandaji came forward as

a powerful influence for the awakening of youth power, in which Swamiji had placed his hope and faith. That is why Revered Maharaj kept close association with Akhil Bharat Vivekananda Yuva Mahamandal. He would inspire those young boys who came to join the Order, by saying, 'You are soldiers of Swamiji. You have to keep yourselves prepared for all kinds of works.'

All senior monks of the Order accept that he had a special ability to identify people of ability. Sometimes it was observed that a young boy would come to join the Order, and many thought that he would be able to continue in this life. But Maharaj opined that he wouldn't, and his observation came true. Regarding what work was to be allotted to whom, he had extraordinary proficiency. His selection of two efficient monks for looking after the project of Swamiji's ancestral house in Kolkata is still remembered by many with admiration. Everyone acceded to Maharaj's decision when it came to selecting an editor for the monthly magazine in Gujarati when it was being launched in Rajkot, and in time it was found that Maharaj had placed the work in able hands.

Maharaj was a true bearer of the spiritual tradition of the Ramakrishna Order. The vast inheritance of spiritual treasure he had received in his life by coming in contact with the great monks of the Order has been distributed by him for posterity, as is proved by each of his teachings, interactions, and conversations. Devotion to God was personified in him. Since he began imparting spiritual initiation to devotees, there was a unique manifestation of *Guru-sakti* (power of the Guru) in him.

Wherever he would go for spiritual initiation, he would have the Ashrama arrange for special Puja and offer *bhoga* (cooked food) to Sri Thakur in the temple. He would take that *prasad* (offered food) and make them distribute it to others. Before he started the initiation procedure, there would be the chanting of Stotras (Sanskrit hymns) and the singing of a few songs on Sri Thakur and Sri Ma. And on completion of the initiation procedure, the song 'Ramakrishna Saranam' would be sung. Maharaj added 'Jai Ma, Jai Ma' to this song, and that also used to be sung in the same tune. This image got deeply imprinted in the minds of the devotees initiated by him.

In one place, the initiation procedure was completed when suddenly it was seen that a lady devotee was crying. On enquiry it was learned that the mantra which she had just received from Revered Maharaj had been received by her earlier in a dream.

An airport officer in Silchar had a great desire for initiation. But he could not find an appropriate time. Anticipating his eagerness, Maharaj called him into his room and initiated him there.

In 2001 he visited Tripura for an initiation programme. A candidate for initiation, Sri Makhan Chakravarty of Agartala, was suffering from cancer. First Maharaj told him that he would initiate him separately. Later on he said that when there would be some leisure time, he would initiate him. Thereafter, one day early in the morning he said, 'Inform him, I will initiate him at his house.' There, in a tin-roofed house, sitting on its floor, Maharaj graciously initiated the devotee. Later, whenever the head of the local centre came to meet Maharaj at Belur Math, he enquired about that devotee.

Maharaj was very eager to initiate tribal boys and girls. He has many initiated devotees at Ranchi Morabadi, Sakwar (under the Mumbai Ashrama), Narainpur, Guwahati, Shillong, and other places. Once, a 4th standard student at the Shillong Ashrama earnestly appealed to Maharaj for initiation. Understanding the boy's eagerness, he initiated him.

In the beginning he would give initiation by enrolling 30 candidates in a group. Later on, he was compelled to increase the group size. Generally he preferred to initiate husband and wife together. The total number of devotees initiated by him comes to a little more than 67,000. Among the candidates initiated by him, many have joined the Ramakrishna Math or Sri Sarada Math. When he used to sit on his seat (asana) during initiation, he would become transformed into a different person. It was as if the external world disappeared from him. It used to be truly felt that at this time, an extraordinary manifestation of the Guru-power was being disseminated through him.

He used to tell the monks and devotees time and again, 'Hold Thakur in one hand, and with the other do the works of *Samsara*

(this world).’ Again, some other times he would say, ‘Hold Thakur with both your hands.’ He gave tremendous emphasis on japa. He wouldn’t agree to any negligence in this matter. That is why he would say again and again, ‘You must practice japa two times a day (morning and evening), otherwise you will incur sin.’ He would especially instruct the devotees, ‘Always try to keep contact with Belur Math.’

He laid great emphasis on studies. In his own daily routine, he used to read the *Ramakrishna Kathamrita* at night and the *Gita* in the morning. So long as his eyes were all right, he used to read the books that would come to him. After his eye problems started, the attendants would read books to him. He would repeatedly instruct visiting monks and devotees to read the *Gita* and the *Ramakrishna Kathamrita*.

In his whole life, he never took leave from work, though he spent some time in spiritual practices in seclusion. He used to do a lot of japa while staying at the Kishanpur (Dehradun) Ashrama. When he was in solitude in Kalimpong, there too he did a lot of spiritual practices. He visited many pilgrimage centres and used to feel the greatness of such places. He would convey this idea to the monks also, but he never liked wandering around: he would ask the monks to go on pilgrimage.

One morning when he was visiting an Ashrama he saw a monkey defiling the unprotected temple and the image. Immediately, he called the head of the centre and instructed him to clean the temple and re-consecrate the image.

It is through his initiative that the photographs of the direct disciples have been placed in the temples of many branches.

As much possible, he would try to follow the customs of the pilgrimage centres. He would love to bathe in the Ganga in Kashi, Kankhal and Allahabad. Once he went to the Ganga at Haridwar after the Kumbha-mela and drank a little of the water, which tasted sweet. He told others present there, ‘If the water after the Kumbha-mela tastes sweet, know it for certain that a spiritually elevated holy man has taken bath here.’

When he used to go to the Dakshineswar temple, he would take a lot of fruits etc., and when he would look at the Divine

Mother there, his face, full of devotion, was a sight to behold. It would be felt as if he was standing there having complete and supreme dependence on the Divine Mother.

There is a Mother's temple in the king's palace in Tripura, not much known to the common people. But Maharaj had known of it for a long time. Once when he was in Tripura, he asked others to enquire whether the temple was still there or not. On enquiry it was learnt that the temple was indeed still in existence. Maharaj said that the Divine Mother had asked him to perform Her worship with sixteen items. Following his instructions, the puja was performed there.

The sight of his offering pranams to Sri Sri Thakur and Sri Sri Ma was permanently imprinted in a golden frame in the hearts of the devotees. The Narada Bhakti Sutra says: having known Him the devotee 'matta bhavati, stabdho bhavati, atmaramo bhavati' – 'becomes intoxicated, becomes stunned in ecstasy, and delights in the Supreme Self.' The attitude of Maharaj while offering pranams in the temples was a definite and living testimony to these words of the scripture. He would stand in front of Sri Thakur for a long time with folded hands, fixing his eyes constantly on Him. The attendant might try to take him back slowly. But he wouldn't go. Once he would go to the left and then to the right. There would be a feeling as if a lot of conversation was passing between him and Sri Thakur and that without finishing it he couldn't leave. The devotees remember his way of offering flowers at the feet of the Divine Mother during the Durga Puja. Repeatedly thinking of these incidents in our minds would intensify our devotion to God. Repeating the offering mantra once would not suffice, it had to be repeated thrice. Then there would be an offering with *siuli* flowers (Nyctanthes). Then there would be an offering of pranams with folded hands. Such in-depth immersion into this attitude by an aspirant is bound to awaken his spiritual consciousness. Through Maharaj's presence in the place of worship and his self-surrender to the Divine Mother, the whole atmosphere would become surcharged with a wave of spirituality.

While travelling to a place, he would always enquire whether everything had been taken or not, and whether his bag had been

taken or not. Both 'everything' and 'bag' had special meanings. He had a bag, and inside it he would keep his *japa-mala*. 'Everything' indicated the *japa-mala*, and 'bag' indicated that small bag in which he kept his *japa-mala*. When visiting any centre, he would keep the *japa-mala* under his pillow. When he would go out, the room would be locked.

After becoming Vice-President, for a long time he used to attend the morning and evening Aratis at the temple at Belur Math, sitting straight with others. He would be absorbed in japa and meditation. That appearance, even today, remains an inspiration to many. While visiting in other centres, there wouldn't be any change in this routine. He would learn the different timings of that centre.

One morning when he was visiting the Narainpur centre, he sat for japa. He was to start after sometime. But as his watch had stopped working, he was unable to understand the time to start. So remaining fully absorbed, he continued his japa. He felt as if there was still time before he had to start. Later, after calling him a number of times, others had to get him up from his seat.

All through he had a routine life. After becoming President also he would sit for japa and meditation around 2.30 a.m. Continuing this practice till dawn he would come out for offering pranams in the temples.

Once he returned from Seva Pratisthan. The doctor asked him repeatedly not to go to the temples for pranams for a few days. One day in the evening he asked his attendant, 'Can you take me to the temple? I won't go inside. I'll see from below and come away'. The attendant reminded him again and again of the doctor's instruction, but he wouldn't hear it. The attendant also remained firm. In the end, he said, 'Then, why did I come here from Seva Pratisthan? It would have been better if I had died there.'

One early morning he suddenly got up from sleep before 2.30a.m. The attendant also got up. Maharaj said, 'Maharaj went away.' Surprised, the attendant asked him, 'What's the matter, Maharaj? Who came?' Maharaj, remaining absorbed in himself, replied, 'Raja Maharaj came. I thought that I would offer flowers!'

Once in the Seva Pratisthan, he was lying on his bed. Suddenly, he put on his spectacles and gazed in front. The attendant called him, but even after calling him more than once, there was no response. Then he said, 'Here, I am seeing. Can't you see? Look straight!' After sometime, slowly, he fell asleep.

After he became Vice-President, a surgery was done in one of his eyes. Another surgery was done in 2008. Then a pacemaker was installed in 2009. Twice he had hernia operations, in 2009 and 2010. Even after all these procedures he was all right. But slowly his health was deteriorating. The attendants could see it. Once in 2013 he stopped giving initiation. From 2014 onwards he developed apathy towards taking food. On the birth-tithi of Sri Thakur in 2015, at night, he joined the ceremony for initiation into sannyasa as usual. After that it was observed that there was a discharge of blood with his urine. So the very next day he was shifted to Seva Pratisthan. But the condition of his heart and other parameters continued well regulated; the doctors were surprised – how could all his parameters be so good at this age! Both in 2016 and in 2017 he came from the hospital and took part in the sannyasa ceremonies; and as usual everything went well.

In the meantime, at regular intervals a stent would have to be replaced in his kidney. First it was changed after one year. Then it would be changed every six months. Then the medical board attending on him decided to change it again on 14 June 2017. The specialized doctors belonging to various departments – microbiology, anesthesia, urology, general medicine etc – discussed and finalized all the details in the matter. To prevent infection in the blood, advance precaution was taken by starting an antibiotic seven days before the procedure. It was decided that this time general anesthesia would be given. On 14 June the stent was changed and everything proceeded successfully. But on 15 June there was temperature. Maharaj's blood pressure also dropped. He developed a cough with phlegm. On 16 June the output of urine became very low, and an infection was detected in the lungs. His temperature rose to 102° /103°. Suddenly, the blood pressure shot up.

On 17 June the medical board decided that dialysis would be given for 6 hours, starting from 10 p.m. All arrangements were

made for this. But the heart rate was increasing slowly. Due to the problem of blood pressure, the dialysis could not be completed at night. After 3 hours he was again brought back to the cabin. It was decided that dialysis would again be attempted on 18 June. But the body temperature increased to 106°/107°. Around 5.30p.m., when the doctors were preparing for the dialysis procedure again, there was a massive cardiac arrest. Making all efforts of the doctors futile, Revered Maharaj returned to his own abode, in his own glory.

The news spread very fast among the monastics and the devotees. People started assembling at the Seva Pratisthan that night itself. The management of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission announced that for the darshana (offering respect) of Revered Maharaj by the monks and devotees his holy mortal frame would be transferred to the Cultural Hall at Belur Math, and the cremation would be done at 9.30 p.m. on 19 June. As the Chief Minister Ms. Mamata Banerjee was to start for her tour abroad, she came earlier to see Maharaj. In her condolence message she expressed great pain at losing one of her own. Expressing his condolence, Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi said that it was his personal loss. Around 9 p.m. Maharaj's sacred mortal frame was brought to Belur Math from Seva Pratisthan. Then the queue of devotees started to form for paying respects to him. All through the night, flowers in hand, innumerable people came to have his *darshana* for the last time. This continued the next day till evening.

As had been announced, at around 8.30 p.m. on 19 June, Maharaj's mortal frame was brought to the Old Temple courtyard from the Cultural Hall, carried by the monks and brahmacharins. After offering respects there, in the midst of the chanting of 'Hari Om Ramakrishna' by the monastics and the song 'Namo Sri Gurave' by the devotees, the procession proceeded towards the Ghat near Holy Mother's temple, via the temple of Raja Maharaj. After completing the traditional rituals at the Ghat, the procession passed via Swamiji's temple to stop in front of the main entrance to Maharaj's residence. According to the desire of the State Administrators, he was given a Gun-salute by the State Government. Then his mortal frame was taken to the cremation

ground adjacent to the river Ganga, and placed on the pyre. After going round his mortal frame, fire was set to the pyre. There was drizzling rain. Caressing the steps of the Ghat the holy Ganga flowed by. The assembled monastics started singing, the first line of the song being – ‘There! seen is the abode of joy’ etc. The flag of Vedanta which bears the spirit of Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda can never be lowered to half-mast due to sorrow!

Jatasya hi dhruvo mrityuh dhruvam janma mritasya cha – ‘For anyone born, death is certain; and for the dead (re-)birth, is certain.’ That is why one should not grieve over death, at least not for a spiritual aspirant. But the end of every life does not carry the same meaning in this world. Some lives have gathered a wealth of wisdom and spirituality which enrich this world for long years to come; their wealth is distributed to those who can receive it, and remains as a treasure even for future aspirants. The future collects and preserves the jewels of this treasure, helping others to live, to progress, and to make life blessed.

The life of Swami Atmasthanandaji is such a life, one above the ordinary. Those who worked with him felt him as their own, forever. Those who were trained by him, whether they stayed far or near, will preserve those teachings till the end of their lives. The devotees who received spiritual initiation from him will feel his presence in their approach to their spiritual ideal during their daily spiritual practice.

His life has followed that tangible spiritual tradition which he received from his Guru and from those holy men with whom he came in touch. With him a chapter in the history of the Ramakrishna Sangha has been closed. He is the last monk to become Head of the Sangha who was a disciple of one of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. But his life will radiate the light of that spiritual tradition for posterity.

Who can forget his wonderful form, absorbed in a deep mood of prayer! Who can forget his bright and smiling face, his eyes closed, immersed in himself, during the singing of the devotional songs! He loved songs and chanting of the Sanskrit hymns (*Stotras*). He was very fond of Kali-kirtan (songs dedicated to Mother Kali), and he was very appreciative of the songs composed

by Atulprasad, Rajanikanta, and Rabindranath. Remaining protected and unperturbed in the lap of the Mother, he used to sing a song so joyfully and with soundless clapping—‘Mother is there and I am also there’ etc. Sometimes looking at the photograph of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, he would sing, ‘My Mother, full of compassion.’ To him it was not just a song, but the serene and benign touch of the Mother Herself. Now and then the attendants could hear him at night while lying down on the bed, singing in a low voice—

O my Master, my beloved, you are the best treasure of mine—
Company of my eternal journey, entire life of mine,
All my satisfaction, discontent, liberty, liability,
The ultimate sorrow and happiness, life and death of mine!

Did he pray this for himself alone? It doesn’t appear so! A specially empowered person like him, whose life was dedicated to the welfare of the world, does not do anything for himself alone. So it appears that this tradition of prayer was left by him for future generations who understand the spiritual *sadhana* he practiced, and who engage themselves in realizing the same. The Ganga, purifier of all, goes on flowing. Likewise, the purifying stream of the *Bhava-sakti* of Sri Ramakrishna (the power of his ideals) also shall go on flowing, and many other streams yet to manifest in the future will also merge in it. They will be blessed and get peace, having come into the purifying touch of this stream. And looking up, they will see that great souls like Revered Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj are standing there with their adorable and realized spiritual life, like a friend to inspire and show light to all in the uneven path to eternity.