

SIVANANDA—THE FIRE OF SANNYASA

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

The Divine Life Society

Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

Website: www.swami-krishnananda.org

Swami Sivanandaji was known as Dr. Kuppuswamy in his purvashrama. He arrived in Rishikesh in the year 1922 when there was practically nothing in Rishikesh except a few almshouses (*kshetras*) and sadhus staying in isolated thatched huts. It was the year when there were unprecedented floods. Everywhere there was water and water alone. In all the rivers of India there was flood beyond limit. It was the biggest flood ever seen in Rishikesh. The next big flood we had was, of course, in July 1963, immediately after Swami Sivanandaji's Mahasamadhi, when it flooded Sri Gurudev's Kutir neck-deep. After that we did not have a flood of that kind. It was in that year 1922 that Gurudev H.H. Sri Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj, then known as Dr. Kuppuswamy, came to Rishikesh and stayed on the other side of the Ganga in Swargashram, which is an ancient institution. A few sadhus and Sannyasins were put up there, living on alms and practising their meditations. Perhaps the Swargashram *kshetra* was functioning in a small measure even then.

Two years afterwards, in the year 1924, he came across a great saintly person known as Swami Visvananda Saraswati, whom he met, as it is said, only for a few minutes, and from whom he received initiation into the sacred order of Sannyasa as Swami Sivananda Saraswati. This was on the 1st of June. This Swami Visvananda Saraswati is little known to the public and, perhaps, personally he was not even acquainted to Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj. It was a unique coming together of two personalities, as if ordained by God Himself, and Jnana Sannyasa, as it is known, was offered to Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj. Jnana Sannyasa implies Sannyasa without ritual. The ritualistic confirmation of this Jnana Sannyasa was subsequently performed by the great Sri Swami Vishnudevanandaji Maharaj of Kailas Ashram. Thus, Swami Visvanandaji Maharaj was his Diksha Guru, while Swami Vishnudevanandaji Maharaj was his Sannyasa Kriya Guru. But Swami Sivanandaji had equal regard for both.

From the year 1924, after he received Sannyasa, Swami Sivanandaji started a rigorous life of *tapas*, or austerity. People who had the blessedness to see him in those days described him as a fire of renunciation. There was an old Swamiji in the Kailas Ashram, who is now no more, who used to come to our hospital for medicine. He was a regular patient. Every day he used to come with some trouble or other. He had seen Swamiji in those days—1924 and onwards. He gave us an idea as to what Swamiji looked like, in what esteem he was held by people in Swargashram, what was the type of *tapas* he was performing to the astonishment of the other sadhus, and the great reverence

which he commanded from all the mahatmas in Swargashram.

The only two centres in Rishikesh which had a little population then were the Swargashram on the one side and the Kalikambalivala Kshetra in another place. There was nothing here where The Divine Life Society is situated now. This place, known as Muni-ki-reti, was an uninhabited forest. They say wild animals used to roam in these areas. When the land was dug up for some construction, they even discovered bones and skulls. No one knew exactly what the situation or condition of this area was. It was completely deserted, uninhabited by human beings. Such were the days when Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj entered the life of austerity in the Swargashram.

From the year 1924 till the year 1936—for 12 years—he was an incognito mahatma doing his own *tapasya* for a purpose which he alone knew. None of us were there, and no disciples were there. He had neither associates nor friends. What we hear from people who had seen him in those days amounts to this: that he wore little clothing and ate no delicious diet—which, of course, was not available at all even if he wanted. The only food that was available to mahatmas in those days was dry bread (*chapattis*, *rotis*, which had no ghee or oil) and *dhal* which also had no fat, neither ghee nor oil. People say that Swamiji did even not take the *dhal*; he used to take only the dry bread from the *kshetra* and drank Ganga water with it. You know what will happen if you eat only dry bread and drink Ganga water. You will have diarrhoea instantaneously in that atmosphere. Anyhow, he bore it. He was a doctor himself,

but he had no medicines with him. He continued to live that austere life with dry bread and Ganga water. There was no question of milk, or tea or coffee—not even *dhal*, not even pulse. Vegetables were out of the question. This went on for some years, and people held him in great regard for his tremendous renunciation which he held as his ideal of personal life.

From another little information that we gathered from Swamiji himself during his later years, we understood that he used to go to the other side of the Laxmanjhula Bridge. His *kutir* was somewhere directly opposite the Darshana Mahavidyalaya of the present day, and he used to be put up there. But he did not stay in the *kutir* for most of the daytime because of fear that people would frequent him. He was a worshipful figure, even from the very beginning of his life in Rishikesh and Swargashram, on account of the distinguished life of austerity that he led. It is difficult to live a life of austerity. Only if you live that life will you know what it is. It is like death itself. You may even prefer death to a life of that kind. So it was a terror to see him leading a life of that kind, with no clothes on his body. Who would give him clothes? There were no charities of any kind in those days.

As I have already said, he used to absent himself from his *kutir* to avoid frequentation by visitors and other mahatmas by going to the other side of the bridge. It was then some kind of a rope bridge. Now we have a modern iron bridge. There is a sandy bank which can be seen even now, and Swamiji used to sit there during the night and do his oblations and austerities. During the nearly 26 years of

life that we led, physically, with him, I did not get even an inkling as to what sort of meditation he practised, what was the *japa* he did, and what was the purpose for which he meditated. He would never say anything about these things, nor were we in a position to get any information about them. This is all we knew: that he was staying on the sandy bank on the other side of the Laxmanjhula Bridge during the larger part of the day and night, and he would come to the Swargashram for his *bhiksha* at the appointed time.

The calibre and austerity of the life of Swamiji began to be known by people who had occasion to come to Badrinath and Kedarnath. In those days there were no motorable roads as we have now. From Haridwar onwards pilgrims had to walk on foot, as there was only a footpath. There was a possibility of coming by vehicle up to Haridwar only. I used to hear, in my younger days, that Haridwar was a place full of ice. Perhaps in those days it was very cold, colder than it is now, and people had to carry fire with them to keep themselves warm. Such legends were in vogue then. People who used to go by the footpath to Badrinath had to cross the Laxmanjhula Bridge and walk through what is called Phul Chatty, and other wayside halting places. It was all jungle throughout. Swami Sivananda was then known as the great mahatma of Swargashram. There was neither The Divine Life Society nor the Sivananda Ashram, even to dream of. He was familiarly known as the great saint of Swargashram—the Virakta Mahatma of Swargashram.

One of the pilgrims who happened to go to Badrinath, and who was a lover of saints, heard of the name of Swami

Sivananda. He was a teacher in a high school in Nagpur, and his name was Hari Ganesh Ambekar. He later on joined this Ashram and took Sannyasa. He was our *gurubhai*, Swami Hariomananda Saraswati, and he was one of the earliest disciples, if we could call them disciples. They were disciples not in the sense of students who sat at the feet of the Guru, but in the sense that they admired the saint and wanted to keep him in their memory. Swami Hariomananda Saraswatiji—Hari Ganesh Ambekar in his *purvashrama*—used to send a money order of one rupee per month. That is what we have heard from Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj himself. In those days, one rupee was a very big amount. Those were the days when one kilogram of rice used to cost only one and a half annas or nine paise. So, you know the value of one rupee. He was one of the donors.

But this one rupee, Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj never used to spend for himself. He purchased some medicines or a cup of curd—not for himself, but for a neighbour who was sick, suffering from dysentery. We know very well that dysentery was quite common among sadhus, as they were compelled to eat a diet without any fat or anything soothing to the walls of the stomach and intestines. Illness was very common, especially diarrhoea and dysentery. They were the common illnesses of having a dry stomach, without any lubrication. Swamiji used to purchase a little curd and a little medicine and then started his philanthropic activity in a meagre way, which culminated in a small dispensary in Laxmanjhula called Satya Sevasrama. It became a government hospital, and it was functioning until recently. Now it is closed. Thus he commenced his ministry of

humanitarian and spiritual service which continued simultaneously, or side by side, with his life of austerity, till the year 1936.

It is very unfortunate that we have no information as to what transpired between him and his Guru, his austerities, and what sort of meditation he practised. His reply to queries from his disciples was: "You do not bother about what I did, but you do what I say." From the attitude he held in regard to life, till late in his life, we could gather by reading between lines that he was a combination of the heights of Vedanta philosophy and the pinnacle of austerity or *tapas*. He used to define *tapas* as "flaming like fire by sense-control". One day he put a question to me: "What is *tapas*? Can you define it?" But, before I could say anything, he himself gave the definition: "Tapas is burning like fire by sense-control." I remember this definition even today. Tapas is the heat that is produced in our spiritual body by the control of the senses, as their outward movement depletes our energy and makes us the weaklings that we are. Can we dream or imagine for a moment that the status and the spiritual dignity which this Institution commands today is the efflorescence, the flower and the fruit of his *tapas* and his spiritual stature? All success is the result of *tapas*. This is his teaching. There cannot be a saint without *tapas*. There is no spirituality without *tapas*. And *tapas* is the same as Sannyasa. It is not wearing an ochre-coloured robe. It is neither an order of life, nor a stage into which one enters socially. But, it is an entry into the dedicated life of austerity and control of oneself.

Today, being Sri Gurudev's Sannyasa anniversary, we should contemplate on the spiritual spark that blazed itself forth as the great Swami Sivananda Saraswati whose presence and *tapas*, whose spirituality, goodness and large-heartedness became the nucleus and the seed for this large institution which vibrates today in the hearts of many people in the world—not as buildings or constitutions, not as visible bodies or institutions, but as spiritual aspirations, noble longings for God-realisation, charitableness in nature and a conviction that the realisation of God is the only goal of life. “God-realisation first, everything else afterwards.” This was, is and will forever be the teaching of this saint. Everything else follows automatically from this great surging longing of the heart. There are very few who could so forcibly proclaim this most unpalatable of truths that God-realisation is the primary aim of life. Many like to dilute this concept with ‘plus world’, ‘plus humanity’ and so on. They say, “God plus world”, “God plus humanity”; but here was one who would not add anything to God or God's Perfection to make it complete. As a matter of fact, to add something to God would be to diminish the Perfection itself. God's presence and the recognition of Him is the primary objective of all human activity, human longing and desire of every kind. There is no such thing as adding something to God's perfection, because God is another name for Perfection itself. Can you add something to Perfection? No, for then it would cease to be Perfection. That is Perfection, to which no addition is necessary, and also Perfection is of such a nature that one cannot subtract anything from It. That Perfection is God.

Most of his earlier writings began with this proclamation: “The goal of life is God-realisation.” He would commence his work—be it a book, or an essay, or a message, or even a lecture—with the sentence, “The goal of life is God-realisation.” Slowly, this concept is becoming more and more academic these days, i.e., it is accepted only by the intellect as a logical conviction and a rational acceptance of spiritual values but has little bearing on the practical life of people. But to saints of the type of Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj, it was a calling of life and not a mere intellectual conviction or a rational acceptance. When we say that the goal of life is God-realisation, we have said everything that needs to be said. *Vairagya*, renunciation or *sannyasa*, spontaneously flows from the acceptance, from the heart, of the fact that the goal of life is God-realisation. It follows as a necessary consequence. We need not make another statement about it. *Vairagya*, or *sannyasa*, is the necessary result that follows spontaneously and logically from the acceptance of the reality that the goal of life is God-realisation. If the goal of life should be God-realisation, God should be the Reality, because we cannot regard an unreality or a lesser reality as the goal of life. Only that which is Real can be the goal; the unreal cannot be the goal of life, nor can a partial reality be the goal of life. It is the full Reality that alone can be the goal of life. So, God has to be the fullest of realities. And that which is fully Real has to exclude everything else that is tagged on to it externally by associations temporarily contrived by the weaknesses of the flesh. So the Sannyasa of Satgurudev Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj was an inner spiritual fire which burnt forth in his

practical life and in his teachings, and in the instructions which he gave to his disciples.

He had no disciples, and he never said that he had any disciples. On the other hand, he positively used to say, "I have no disciples." He also used to say that he had no organisation or ashram. He was the same Swami Sivananda who came to Rishikesh in the year 1922 under the name of Kuppuswamy, the same Swami Sivananda who lived through the life of Sannyasa and spirituality and service to mankind, and it was the same Swami Sivananda who attained Mahasamadhi in the year 1963 without any change in his attitude to this world.

Such are the sparkling ideals that he set forth before us. Every first of June, we celebrate and observe the anniversary of this momentous event of his entering into Sannyasa, many years back. And no greater homage could be conceived to this saint than a sincere determination to lead the life that he himself intensely led, and to develop a similar attitude towards life as a whole: that the whole world is enveloped by the Presence of God. The Isavasya Upanishad says, "*Isavasyamidam sarvam, yat kincha jagatyam jagat.*" Whatever is moving or unmoving, *sthavara* or *jangama*, whatever is visible or invisible, all this is indwelt by the Supreme Being of God. The Upanishad also says, "*Tena tyaktena bhunjithah.*" Here is the seed of *vairagya* and *sannyasa* at the very commencement of the Isavasya Upanishad. It says, "Renounce and enjoy." Enjoy by renunciation, not by possession. The enjoyment that comes by renunciation is more intense than the enjoyment that comes by possession of the things of the world. That

satisfaction or pleasure or enjoyment which seems to come to us by the acquisition of the objects of sense is a pain that comes to us in the guise of satisfaction. But that joy which comes to us by renunciation is a real and permanent joy. Why is it so? It is because renunciation is the relinquishment of false values, the abandonment of falsity in our attitude to things, which brings about a spontaneous inflow of God-consciousness and the substance of Reality into our hearts. When our substance or being commingles with our consciousness, there is a manifestation of delight, *ananda*. But, in possessing things, in grabbing objects and in coming in contact with the temporary, fleeting values of the world, we do not come in contact with Reality, rather we flee from Reality. The more we believe in the reality of objects, the farther we are from Truth or Reality. The more we come in contact with things, the more also are we unwittingly running away from the Reality of God. The more we ask for pleasure from the objects of the world by sensory contact, the more is the pain that we invite from them, because all sensory contacts are sources of pain, for they have a beginning and an end. Contact with objects is the opposite of contact with Reality because while objects are external, Reality is Universal. So the more is the contact with objects, the lesser is the contact with Reality; and, consequently, the greater is the pain that we suffer in this life. So, “*Tena tyaktena bhunjithah*”: Renounce the false values of the world on account of which you have a craving to come in contact with the transitory values, and enjoy the bliss of that union with Reality, the Supreme God indwelling all things. The Isavasya Upanishad adds: “*Ma gridhah kasya svid-dhanam.*” Covet not the things of the

world. Do not ask for things which do not really belong to you. The things of the world do not belong to you, because they are unreal. How can unreality belong to you? Therefore, do not ask for the things of the world, which are untrue. Renounce all false values with this awareness that God indwells all creation, both movable and immovable. This is, in some way, the quintessence of the gospel of Divine Life which inspired the teachings and the writings of Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj.

To him we pay our obeisance by directing our thoughts and contemplating on these eternal values, and by proclaiming once again, in the same tone and intensity of feeling and fervour, that the goal of life is God-realisation. Everything else follows in the wake of this acceptance, as a shadow follows the substance or, as they say, the tail follows the dog. One need not separately tell the tail to follow. All the things of the world and all values that are regarded as covetable in life will come in abundance and in plenty, if we accept from the bottom of our hearts that the goal of life is God-realisation, for which ideal Sri Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj lived and sacrificed all his life. Such is his Sannyasa, such is his Vedanta, and such is his teaching for our practice. May his Grace be upon us all!