

SAI BABA - THE SAINT OF SHIRDI

(by Mani Sahukar)

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Guru's Invitation

It is man's privilege that he has been endowed with the capacity to experiment with Truth and to achieve in that process a new orientation of his personality. The pathos of life with its unstable vicissitudes and frustrations leads man at last to seek for the light that is not dimmed, the light that liberates man and gives him a taste of a higher existence and a more nearly divine perfection of his whole being. Tired with the limited assurances of mere intellectualism and dry academic knowledge which seems still to leave his personality deeply disintegrated, tired also of his endless oscillations from pain to pleasure and pleasure to pain- man craves for wisdom, and craves even more for that peace which passes all understanding.

This is the first step. But once this Divine discontent is felt, very often it serves as an incentive to further researches into unexplored levels of thought and experience. It is here that one begins to look for inspiration and unconsciously one's being hankers for the Master, the *Guru*, who alone can reveal to man his *sadhana* and help him to grow more and more in spirituality until he eternally abides in the Lord. One does not need to search for the *Guru*; the *Guru* finds his own and gathers unto himself the earnest with a vibrant compassion.

Almost from the dawn of her history, it has been the sole privilege of our *Bharat* to give birth to these supermen, these *maharishis*, and it is the exalted spiritual culture which these realized souls have taught from time to time that India has the privilege of bestowing as her unique contribution to the world. Swami Vivekananda said: " Like the gentle dew that falls unseen and unheard and yet brings into blossom the fairest of roses, has been the contribution of India to the thought of the world. Silent, unperceived, yet omniperceived in its effect, it has revolutionized the thought of the world." Poets sometimes, and sages even more than poets, are alone capable of substituting enlightenment for knowledge, for they have some mysterious source of inspiration, and drawing from this source they are able to touch the mainsprings of human endeavor. Lowell has stated this thought aptly in *Columbus* except that I would substitute the word "sages" for "poets".

... And I believe the poets: it is they who utter wisdom from the central deep, and listening to the inner flow of things speak to the age out of Eternity.

One such *maha purusha* was the Saint of Shirdi-Sai Baba, as he is popularly and lovingly called by his innumerable devotees-my Master and *Guru* to whose grace I owe an unspeakable debt of gratitude, at whose lotus feet I find my only refuge.

It was in the year 1942 that I first got to know of Sai Baba, when the revered Narasimha Swami of Madras, perhaps one of the oldest living devotees of Sai Baba, came to my house through the kind offices of a friend. Singling me out from among the six or seven persons who had assembled for his darshan, Narasimha Swamiji took me aside and presented me with his books on Baba and lovely photograph of the Saint with a benediction and words of encouragement and hope. This is my first contact with the Guru. It seemed then to be an accidental contact; but, it appears nothing happens without the consent of the Divine, and very often there is some deep purpose underlying these seemingly coincidental contacts. Strange that this old and illustrious Swami should have come all the way to Bandra during his brief sojourn in Bombay to visit an insignificant and an unknown being, who at that moment had not even conceived of any spiritual values, but lived engrossed in the illusory preoccupations of wordly pursuits! and yet not strange when one recalls the almost peremptory saying of the Master: "I bring my men to me from long distances under many pleas. I seek them out and bring them to me. However distant, even thousands of miles away, my people might be, I draw them to myself, just as we pull birds to us with a string to their feet. "

How little I did guess at that time how pregnant with deep possibilities this meeting with Swamiji would prove for me ! To yield or not to yield to the call of the Guru, we are no more free than the ebb and flow of waves; but when the realization of that contact becomes conscious in one, then one is thrilled; then one's spiritual sadhana is really said to have begun. True, there are many failures and setbacks, and at times for long periods, losing sight of the high ideal, one even slips back to old grooves of thought and habit; often there is a deluded sense of progress through a projection of one's confused self as the ideal- in short, there are many pitfalls and obstacles. But, shouldn't these difficulties be necessarily there, seeing that the ideal one has set oneself is the highest? And besides, the awakened "Self" in one now no longer allows any failures. Once ignited it draws man's whole being irresistibly onwards until the tiny spark becomes a flame.

The many thousands of devotees of Sai Baba will bear me out when I say that Master's peculiar characteristic is that he clings tenaciously to his devotees as much as he expects the devotees to cling tenaciously to him. Rarely has there been a Guru who has had the same insistent attachment for his people- though attachment is not perhaps a very happy word- as Baba showed for his flock, when he was alive, and continues to do even now almost 60 years after his *maha samadhi* .

It all began with a vision that was vouchsafed to me soon after I acquired Baba's photograph. Somehow one feels loath to speak of an experience so intimate as the initiation of oneself by the Guru. It is sufficient to say

that happily for me the Saint of Shirdi elected to cast his spell on me and awoke me to the realization of a higher rhythm and a deeper purpose of life. Man's subconscious and unconscious are gravely unilluminated regions which give rise to chaotic thoughts and impressions and to the all too well known complexes of fear and frustration. But, somehow also lies hidden infinite treasures of the Spirit. How shall these be unearthed? The Master hints at *complete surrender to the Divine* .

Throwing out all fear from one's consciousness, for fear is the greatest of enemies, he compassionately exhorts his devotees to "Cast all your burdens on me and I will bear them." Such gift is a gift. We must, therefore, cultivate it and cultivate too a receptivity and a capacity to open to the *Guru's* force, for only so can his Divine grace work satisfactorily in us. Has not the Master said again and again-"Look to me and I will look to you ?"

May his infinite grace shine upon this humble effort to pay homage to his resplendent life and teachings.

Sai Baba Comes to Shirdi

Sai Baba came to Shirdi- that seems to be the starting point. From where he came, where he was born, the time of his birth, who his parents were, and what his creed and religion-all these important facts, important from a worldly point of view, are shrouded in complete mystery. It was a mystery which Sai baba took delight in perpetuating. To the many queries that were put to him from time to time regarding his birth and parentage, the Saint of Shirdi returned evasive replies; at best, he sometimes spoke in parables which if taken too literally, resulted in a mass of contradictory beliefs and theories, each set of people believing what they wanted to believe. The Hindus thought him to be an *avtar* of some Godhead; the Muslims said that he was a *pir* sent by Allah to liberate men. To one man he was the *avtar* of Dattatreya; to another he was Akalkote Maharaj incarnated. Each individual saw in this unique Saint the personification of his own favorite deity, and incarnation of his own chosen ideal, and worshiped him as such.

Through all this maze of contrary beliefs, Baba lived unperturbed with perhaps a glint of humor in his eyes for the perplexity which these unimportant speculations about his caste and creed roused in those who surrounded him. For Baba was full of keen sense of humor. Though he had attained to the highest kingship in the realm of the spirit, he was not like many another *yogi* absorbed in the contemplation of his blissful state. He always walked, talked, and laughed with his many devotees. He loved fun and loved to poke fun at the discrepancies of human nature, though his humor was always tempered with tenderness. His *darbar* in Shirdi in those glorious days when he was in the body was a veritable abode of joy, and in no sense did it resemble a gloomy cloister bereft of laughter and sunshine.

The Saint of Shirdi baffled his admirers. No one definitely knew whether he was a Hindu or Muslim. He dressed like a muslim and bore the caste marks of a Hindu! he celebrated with the same childlike eclat the festivals of both the communities! If the Hindu protagonists felt a pride of possession in the thought that true to their customs Baba was always burning the sacred fire, or *dhuni*, before him, they were also reluctantly compelled to admit that after all he lived in a *masjid*. He quoted the *Koran* and delighted his Muslim worshippers and then made them look askance at his profound knowledge of the Hindu *sastras*. He called himself a *fakir*, and on his lips reverberated constantly the incantation *Allah Malik*. But, then, he called himself a pure Brahmin too and showed a remarkable proficiency in all yogic practices. It was a magnificent tribute to his luminous presence that the most orthodox members of both the communities prostrated themselves at his feet. Perhaps, such a phenomenon is yet unknown in the history of this vast and bewildering

country of ours when the same veneration and with mutual toleration of each other's mode of worship. Sai Baba in his infinite wisdom saw how imperative it was to harmonize people, for he grievously hated all dissensions and was never so hurt as when he found people arguing and quarreling. That Rama (the God of Hindus) and Rahim (the God of Muslims) were one and the same was his constant counsel to his followers. In Shirdi in those days a remarkable spirit of love and brotherhood prevailed, for all communities had found a common and unifying interest in the Divine personality of Shri Sai Baba. Could this not be one of the important reasons why Baba set about deliberately baffling his followers whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim ?

So, who is Sai Baba ? people ask to this day, and to those who seek for a superficial classification of the Saint as subscribing to this or that creed there is still no satisfactory solution to this problem. But those few who have assimilated the teachings of the great Master realize that "Sai is not this three and a half cubic feet of visible body residing in Shirdi," as Baba himself was fond of repeating, but a glorious being who had transcended the limitations of time and space to become one with the all-absorbing and all-loving Divine. To such a one, what did it matter how and where he was born, or what his nationality was.! Once in reply to this same query Baba said: " I have no residence. I am an attributeless absolute. By the action of *karma*, I got embroiled and came to a body. My name is embodied *dehi*. The world is my abode. *Brahman* is my father and *maya* my mother. By their interlocking, I got this body." "Those who think I reside at Shirdi do not know the real Sai," he chided, "for I am formless and everywhere."

Like the late Sage of Arunachala, Bhagavan Ramana, whose life is yet another saga of spiritual magnificence, Baba also constantly encouraged enquiry into true Nature of the Self. The similarity of approach between these two great teachers is significant. Bhagavan Ramana's "*Who am I ?*" has become the pivot of his teachings. Sai Baba six decades ago never got tired of telling his followers to think who they were. He often said "Who am I - Whence ? Night and day think on this." This was one of the most important injunctions of the Master and will be developed further in another chapter.

To return once again to the question of his birth and parentage, it would not be amiss to point out that Baba is one of the very rare saints of whose birth and parentage there is absolutely no record. There has not been a single chronicler or individual who has ever been able to cast any light on these events. All that is known is that Sai Baba first came to Shirdi when he was a lad of sixteen and lived there for three years. Then suddenly he disappeared for some time and after a gap of four years appeared in the Nizam's state near Aurangabad, from where he again returned to Shirdi around the year 1858. After that he resided in the place of his choice for

an unbroken period of sixty years until he attained his *maha samadhi* in 1918.

But, when and where was this young lad of sixteen born, where did he come from? No one knew. Can it be that he was not born at all in ordinary human way ? Could he not be a *mahatma* , a great *avatar*, who willed himself a body because he wanted to fulfill a mission, because he wanted to "lad lakhs of people to the *subhra marga* [sacred path]" ? A daring conception, no doubt; but then one is justified in wondering why there is not a single solitary clue about the birth and parentage of the elusive Saint of Shirdi. Nor is the speculation a mere figment of the author's imagination. It is a well established fact of spiritual lore that when a *jiva* reaches *Nirvana* or attains liberation, he transcends his material body. No *yogi* dies in the ordinary sense of the word. His mission is self-alloted and springs from the source of his free and redeemed spirit. Such a one's passing from amongst us is said to be a conscious and voluntary act, so that when a liberated being leaves the world, he is not said to have died, but to have "given up his body." If, then, in the tradition of spiritual wisdom it is believed that great sages are not overcome by death but will themselves to die, it is not irrational to envisage not to go through the ordinary physiological process of birth. Shri Aurobindo, one of the greatest seers of our times, has hinted at the above possibility in one of his writings which is quoted below :

A soul wishing to enter a body or form for itself a body and take part in a divine life upon earth might be assisted to do so or be even provided with such a form by this method of direct transmutation without passing through birth by sex process or undergoing any degradation or any of the heavy limitations in the growth and developments of its mind and material body inevitable to our present way of existence.

The question of the birth of Sai Baba cannot, however be profitably solved now. It is sufficient to come within the orbit of his radiant influence, which shines as effulgently today as it did 60 years ago, when he was alive and residing in Shirdi. The master taught by precept and practice and by the power and glory of his mere presence the way of life that leads to a radical transformation in the inward man. True, he taught only through the medium of the spoken word in the age-long tradition of many of India's old *gurus* but that spoken word had in it the luster and the strength to pierce through the limitations of time and distance and has spread far and wide, even to the remotest recesses of our villages. Sai Baba's teachings and life have especially captured the imagination of Maharastrians and South Indians among whom alone there are millions of devotees at the present day. But even in other parts of India there is no dearth of Sai *bhaktas* .

Curiously enough, the influence of this *maha yogi* is growing and spreading more and more, instead of waning with the passage of years.

Though himself a great *jnani* and an able exponent of metaphysical subtleties, Baba was preeminently the savior of the poor and the simple and the so-called ignorant mass of humanity. Shri Aurobindo talks of divine love that is also personal. "It is not like the ordinary personal human love depending on any return from the person, " he says. "It is personal but not egoistic; it goes from the real being in the one to the real being in the other." This is the kind of love that Baba has for humanity. He is even today actively burning with compassion for the misery and the sorrows that seems to have found an asylum on this earth. A glance into his eyes, and somehow one seems to hear the Christlike utterances of intense compassion echoing back through the passage of years: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Surrender to The Guru is the only Sadhana

It is very interesting to observe and analyse the oriental concept of the *Guru* and the relationship he bears to his chosen disciples. This relationship is in sharp contrast to the mere external and causal link that exists between the teachers and the taught in the Western countries. According to the occidental idea, the Master serves as a medium for imparting knowledge or truth which is the final goal. As Aristotle said, "Dear is Plato, but dearer still is truth." But in India truth and the *Guru* are completely identified. There is no truth apart from the *Guru*, and to know and serve the latter with whole-hearted devotion is also to serve the cause of truth. In India, in particular, the *Guru* has almost become an accepted axiom of spiritual progress, and as such, the relationship he bears to those whom he guides is unique. Random would seem the road to heaven until the *Guru's* grace paves the way for mortals to follow. Nor need we be denied this grace if our quest is sincere. We have certain assurance that even as we strive we shall rise and arrive.

The problem of human relationship is a very acute one. There is not a single relationship on the human level which does not at some time or another strike a reflective man as being based on egoism and mutual exploitation of those that are related. A mother's love for her child is perhaps in some rare cases the nearest approach to the ideal, but even that is not perfect. A relationship without a flaw - is that possible ?. This is what is sought to be embodied and has indeed been successfully concretized in the beautiful bond which is established between the *Guru* and his devotee. The beauty and wisdom of India's spiritual literature is enhanced by the tribute that is paid in poetry and prose to this unique fusion of the *Guru* and the bhakta. Innately mystical as the Indian temperament is, it is no wonder that the goal is always to achieve a direct union with God. The Sage of Shirdi recognized this and felt that the very ethos of the nation could be found in this enduring and supreme association of the *Guru* with his followers. A firm and unfaltering faith in the *Guru*, according to Sai Baba, is the highest sadhana. "Trust in the *Guru* fully," he reiterated. "This is the only sadhana." Baba averred that the secret of a successful approach was to give oneself, not to demand or desire. The more he gives himself, the more power to receive does a sadhaka develop, and in the measure in which the surrender to the Master is complete, in that measure shall the initiate reap the fruits of the spirit.

Human relationship, as stated before, is always based on an instinct of possession or appropriation. But the disciple's attitude is one of voluntary giving of himself unspoilt by any demands untainted by any spirit of barter. In return the *Guru's* grace is just as spontaneous and unstinted, in that the *Guru* takes up the entire being of the chela to prepare him in the way the *Guru* thinks best for the life of fulfillment and perfection. Baba himself once

poetized this idea by likening the disciple to lump of plastic clay from which the master potter fashions fascinating pieces of pottery. In this remolding of the aspirant, the *Guru* as it were fulfills himself too; and in some subtle way his strength seems to be made perfect in weakness.

However, despite the great emphasis he laid on the need of a *Guru*, Baba did not deny the possibility of attainment without one. He even allowed that since to know oneself is the essence of spiritual growth, there was indeed a possibility of self-realization by growth from within and not necessarily through the *Guru's* intervention. This, however, he said, was very rare. For the majority of sadhakas the *Guru* was a paramount necessity, and he believed that with the *Guru's* radiant guidance the way could be made not only easier but more inspiring.

To a question once asked by a simple devotee at Shirdi, Baba's reply was as characteristically simple and direct - for it may be mentioned here that Baba suited his teachings to the needs and capacity of the seeker; he never confused an unsophisticated mind with unnecessary flights of metaphysical subtleties. The devotee wanted to know how far a *Guru* was needful to show the way. "The way is rugged," was Baba's response. "There are tigers and bears on the route, but if one has a guide with him, there is no difficulty. Then the tigers and bears move aside. If there is no guide [*Guru*], there is the danger of falling into a deep yawning pit," he said. And then again, "If one makes the *Guru* the sole object of one's thoughts and aims, one attains Paramatma." Close contact with the Supreme Master ensures a protection which seems to envelop the disciple like an aura, helping and guiding him, and although the *Guru* may not necessarily throw aside all sufferings and stumblings, he invariably carries the seeker safely across all obstacles. That is what Baba meant when he said, "If one devotes his entire life to me, he need fear nothing for body or soul."

It is the *Guru* who guides the faltering step and forces the wavering will and the straying gaze to find their impassioned focus on the face and form of the radiant Master, until the devotee looks- not to look away, but looks on with unabated ardor. Then indeed does the disciple's mind become completely silent and can be likened into a flame protected from the wind, burning steadily without either being ruffled or extinguished. This is concentration of the highest sort, and Baba spoke of it as being conducive to meditation and samadhi which in their turn lead to complete freedom.

Baba often, and without any reserve, spoke of his own *Guru*. Indeed it is amazing to read and hear of the simplicity and utter lack of reticence which Baba displayed in talking of his own highest experiences. Before him sat a mass of mediocre humanity, most of them immature and full of faults and shortcomings, all of them mere sadhakas groping for the Light-

and he the peerless Siddha spoke to them as if they were his equals. "My Master told me to give bounteously to all that seek and ask," was one of his illuminating charters, so he gave bounteously of material benefits, as well as spiritual gifts, to his children. His treasury was indeed always open.

"Trust in the *Guru* fully - *Guru* is all the Gods" is, therefore, Baba's favorite text, and he would have us base our seekings on this great and simple foundation. His references to his own *Guru* are replete with tenderness.

Baba once told his disciples how he met his *Guru* - whether this reference was to some immediate past or a remote one belonging to some other incarnation is not clear; nor is it certain whether the experiences Baba described were symbolical or literal. It was enough that the utterances of this *Yogi* were like some deep prophetic reverberations that gave a powerful impetus of richness to the thoughts and lives of all those who came within the orbit of his radiance.

Baba described how he once roamed about in a forest seeking for truth with three other young men. They discussed amongst themselves the right way of reaching their goal. One of them said that self-reliance was the way; another favored self-control of the mind to free it from thoughts and desires; and the third man cast his vote in favor of always doing vichara distinguishing between the nitya and anitya (the changeless and the changing). But Baba was content even at that stage to feel that surrender of the body and the soul to the *Guru* was the best way. Debating thus, the young men lost their way, for they disdained to take the help of a vanjari who offered to feed and guide them. Baba however felt a twinge of conscience and returned to this kind guide who had offered to help him. It was then that the *Guru* came! In order to arrive at some version of the transforming and profound allegiance that the Master expected of a sadhaka, one cannot do better than quote here Shri Sai Baba's words as rendered by Narasimha Swamiji.

How can I describe his [Guru's] love for me ? When he was dyanastha [in love trance] I sat and gazed at him. We were both filled with bliss. I cared not to turn my eyes upon anything else. Night and day I pored upon his face with an ardor of love that banished hunger and thirst. The Guru's absence even for a second made me restless. I meditated on nothing but the Guru, and had no goal or object other than the Guru! Unceasingly fixed upon him was my mind. Wonderful indeed the art of my Guru! I wanted nothing but the Guru and he wanted nothing but his intense love for me. Apparently inactive he never neglected me, but always protected me by his glance. That Guru never blew any mantra into my ear. By his grace, I attained to my present state. The four sadhanas and six shastras are not necessary. Trusting in the Guru fully is enough

So under the cool shade of the neem tree where Baba first came and sat like a fakir gradually drawing unto himself thousands of disciples by the dazzling immensities of his personality, no less than by the brilliant miracles he performed, today there stands an epitaph consecrated to the memory of his *Guru*. For in this spot, according to some of his devotees, lies the samadhi of Baba's *Guru*, and they maintain that Sai Baba himself pointed out the spot saying his *Guru* lay buried therein. But there are others who strongly repudiate this story and deny any reference Baba made to his *Guru's* samadhi. We need not, however, let this controversy worry us or make us lose sight of the central truth. The important thing is that Baba did create an idealization of what a *Guru* should be, and it is enough if we remain loyal to that creation. Shri Krishna and Christ are not any less real and inspiring for all the controversy which centers around the authenticity of their existences, and it is enough too that we know that our perfect Master, so consummate in his sainthood, so accomplished in philosophy, revered by the age wherein he lived, his name and memory preserved with increasing veneration by the present age, is daily resurrected in the lives and the visions of those who place their entire faith in him.

The Glory of Shirdi

It is possible even now 33 years later to recapture vividly the wonderful *leelas* of this master artist. The dynamics of his personality, the versatility of his accomplishments, the works and miracles he wrought from day to day, the peculiar mysticism attached to his birth and death and deeds can be composed into a story that reads like a romance yet is unsurpassed in the annals of biographical literature.

A visit to Shirdi is an experience in itself. An insignificant village lying almost on the banks of the sacred Godavari River, Shirdi has nothing much to commend in the way of natural scenic beauty or civilized amenities, save for a profusion of sugar cane plants, from which it derived its name. The name is, however, symbolically appropriate, for the mystic who chose this spot as his abode did indeed fill it with the aroma of his sweet and gracious presence. The exterior of the *ashram* is unimposing too, but as soon as one enters the precincts of the Holy Shrine where the mortal remains of the seer lie interred, an unspeakable thrill of ecstasy passes through one's being and there is almost an instant awareness of a living presence. This illusion, or should we not rather term it a supreme truth, that Sai Baba is alive and actually present in some part of the *ashram*, is one which many devotees have experienced. A strange expectancy hovers about the atmosphere, as if just there around the corner we would inadvertently come across the familiar and lovable figure.

From the many descriptions of the Saint and the remarkable likenesses that the camera has reproduced of him in his many moods and poses, it is possible to create him anew! A tall loosely built physique, long and shapely limbs- one can visualize him sitting in the *masjid* distributing *udhi* (ashes of the sacred fire that perpetually burnt before him) to all those who went to him. An arresting appearance, the olive complexion set off to advantage his handsome features. But the chief attraction lay in his deep, brilliant, and penetrating eyes-they were the eyes of mystic half drunk with secret nectar, and yet capable of reflecting the many changes in his moods. When his gaze fell upon a devotee, the eyes seemed to be probing into the devotees innermost recesses, and yet no one seemed to mind this, for the expression in those eyes was one of habitual compassion. This was the mystic of Shirdi, as he is described by some of the veteran devotees who saw him, and as his photographs and portraits reveal him to us.

So whether it is in the main hall of the Shrine, or in the *Lendi* gardens where Baba meditated for two hours every day, or in the Dwaraka Mayi (*masjid*) where he lived and assembled his *darbar* and where he spread his loving protection over devotees far and near, the feeling of his dynamic presence and nearness persists, and there persists too a sense of an all-

pervading peace, despite the very voluble and frantic worship that is poured out by the *pujaris* and by the incessant chain of visitors who throng into the *ashram* from the early hours of the morning. Not in Shirdi is there any of that atmosphere of dignified calmness. No, here there is a perfect catholicity of worship untrammelled by any rules or restrictions where each man, woman or child just unburdens his or her heart in perfect spontaneity. The Master's compassionate sanction is there: "Cast all your burdens on me, and I will bear them."

In spite of all the din and noise, the place is imbued with the holiness, and the peace which belongs to it is of another world, and it seeps into one's innermost self almost surreptitiously. It was the same when Baba was alive and resided in the *ashram*; it is the same now, three decades later—a sudden discovery of the true silence within the heart amidst all the noise and liveliness without; a coming upon the quintessence of one's being—this is an experience which many devotees gratefully share. It is as if the Master were saying again, as he was wont to say then, that true solitude springs from the wells of the *atma* and comes as the result of an inward purification. Not by any external or physical isolation but by the difficult process of making the mind quite does man's consciousness open to the forces of the Divine. As a matter of fact, Baba often decried the practice of renouncing the world and running away from it, for he feared that such an escape into isolation or solitude very often gave rise to a false sense of smugness in the *sadhaka*, and made him insensitive to a keen spiritual awareness which is the prerequisite of any successful *sadhana*. For, said Baba, so long as the six elemental passions of *kama*, *krodha*, *lobha*, *moha*, *mada* and *matsara* had not been sublimated, so long as the mind continued to chatter, so long would it be futile for the aspirant to seek solitude, for in the very act of alienating himself from the world he might miss a true perspective of his inner preparedness and progress. So Baba usually cautioned his devotees to be in the world and not of it.

This process of inward purification starts almost at the very instant in which a contact with the Master is established. It is immaterial whether or not a person has actually had the sage's *darshan* in the flesh. Baba has his own mysterious ways of electing his disciples—through a vision, through a dream, through a strange call like the fervid love whisper in the dusk, and a power like the pull of a mastermind—and if by some rapport with his seen or unseen presence the contact is once assured, then the fate of the fortunate one is sealed. His destiny is thereafter in the custody of a *maha yogi* who makes it his business to pull the struggling soul out of the rut, and slowly but surely to set his tired feet on the path of spiritual rejuvenation. This is a characteristic that is eminently peculiar to the Saint of Shirdi.

Rarely, if ever, has there been among the world's realized souls one who has so consistently gone out of his way to bring the straying sheep into his compassionate fold. Shri Sai Baba labors-more actively now after his death, for has he not promised that he would be active and vigorous from the tomb also? - for the struggling humanity which he loved so much. And with a doggedness all his own he goes on badgering the recalcitrant novice until all barriers are broken and light is enkindled in the seeker's heart.

Shri Sai Baba is a master artist because, like a true creative genius in any phase of art, he does not surrender his medium until he fashions from it a thing of exquisite beauty. And if the purpose of art is the revelation of the beautiful, then Baba is an artist par excellence, in that his creations belong to the eternal verities of existence and surpass the transient achievements of the ordinary artist however great he may be. Contact with such a master gives a powerful impetus of richness to the thoughts and lives of those who are spiritually awakened.

So it happens that all sorts of people are attached to this Master *Yogi*. The ignorant and the erudite, the meek and the well-placed, the weak, the sinning as well as the strong and pure are drawn to him. People from all walks of life flock to Shirdi even today and find solace and fulfillment in the pilgrimage. And, what is more, all kinds of prayers are addressed to the Master. Devotees pray to him for health, wealth, progeny, and even for the recovery of the lost possessions among other material benefits! And Shri Sai Baba who himself has attained *nirvikalpa samadhi*, which is accounted the highest type of realization, does not disdain to hearken to the cries of the ordinary man to whom the eradication of worldly misfortunes is more real than the conquest of some remote spiritual light.

With a compassion that is all embracing and an acute understanding of the reality of human miseries and cravings, Baba invites his dependents even now to go to him for all their needs. We are put in mind of the gracious Nazarene who centuries ago walked the earth healing the sick, casting out error, and setting at liberty those that were bruised; and through the passage of centuries also comes echoing that intimate, powerful assurance: "Ask and it shall be given unto you!" The Saint of Shirdi too gives today the same blessed assurance to his ever increasing number of disciples, though he is not present in the flesh.

No craving is too insignificant, no problem of the human heart too trifling to be brushed aside. To this Master *Yogi* in his supreme state of consciousness, all wants are real, for do they not partake of the hidden and merciful Divine? It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that in answer to the remonstrations of a certain devotee who objected to people going to Baba for temporal benefits, Baba gave his characteristic reply: "Do not do

that. My men first come to me on account of that only. They get their hearts' desires fulfilled, and comfortably placed in life, they follow me and progress further."

In the last line of the Charter quoted above, however, lies also the clue to the better understanding of Baba's methods. It is true the name of Shri Sai Baba has become famed through out the length and breadth of the country for the countless blessings he has poured on his devotees out of his boundless love for them. But behind all this concession to the ordinary mortal's lowly needs are hidden deep and far reaching effects. It is as if Baba were launching on purpose a strategic campaign to win over his adversaries to his side. Once a man goes to Sai Baba, he keeps on going irrevocably until the surrender is complete, for, with each approach to the Master, there is a corresponding process of purification in the seeker's heart; at first it is barely predictable, then it is conscious and deliberate.

This is the secret behind Baba's wonderful *leelas*; this is the purpose for which he encourages people to ask for the good things of life. Not to acquiesce in the shortcomings of the earth-bound man, but on the contrary to draw him gradually away from the world's *maya* is his ultimate purpose.

Unlike most *yogis*, therefore, Baba actively encourages the practice of going to him for material favors. Indeed he even chides those who refrain from asking. His attitude is that of the Universal Mother whose business is to tend and fulfill all the wants of her children. But Baba knows too that a time will soon come when the person himself will cease asking and will crave only for union with the beloved *Guru*. In his incarnate person Baba embodied the conception of Divine motherhood.

It is because of this idea that Baba called the *masjid* where he was wont to sit and preach by the name of Dwaraka Mayi. "Highly merciful is this Dwaraka Mayi," he said; " She is the mother of those who place their entire faith in her." This spot too in Shirdi has become a holy landmark.

Perhaps it is the light of the Spirit that glimmers in its precincts waiting for its hour to reveal itself fully to those who can assimilate it, that gives to this *darbar* an atmosphere of intense sanctity. This sanctity is not only acquired but somehow innate in the place itself. Baba often emphasized the importance of Dwaraka Mayi and spoke of its purity as if the hall were something apart from his own spiritual kingship. But it is in this spot that the Great Master lived and passed away; it is here that he preached his deathless gospel and performed his wonderful miracles. No wonder that the atmosphere has absorbed all the glory of those sixty years of peerless *guruship* when he inspired thousands to rise up in their own strength and freedom, to conquer, and to create.

This *darbar* remains intact, the same simple construction it was in the days of the Master, a priceless legacy from him to us who revere him. In the center of the hall where Baba used to sit is built a small wooden throne like seat on which there is a life-size portrait of the *Guru* done in oils by one Mr. Jayakar of Bombay. A brief reference to this beautiful picture of Sai Baba is unavoidable. Mr. Jayakar is not an artist of any great recognized international fame, but in this portrait of the Saint of Shirdi he has produced a masterpiece, not in any strict academic sense however, because it is quite possible that from a technical point of view, the painting is full of flaws, and the art critic may find in it many shortcomings of line and perspective and color tones. Nevertheless, the painting is a masterpiece, for in it somehow the subject has come alive!

The picture assures almost a three-dimensional reality, a hammering, insistent presentation of the Soul, not a mere thing of canvas and oils, but a creation that manifests the supermental touch. The eyes have the luster, brightness and the compassionate moisture which is seen only in life., and the smile, curiously resembling the smile of Mona Lisa in Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece, is no less real and vivid. "It is not a painted smile," was the outburst of a devotee. "It is not static, but alive and real, a thing of flesh and blood." That could be said of the whole picture. It is not some static likeness of the Saint that has been reproduced on canvas; it is as if the Master had himself descended into the picture and made it real and immortal! It is very interesting to record that the painting was done when Baba was actually present in Shirdi, and when the inspired artist showed his work to him, Baba hugged the portrait to his heart and is reported to have said, "This picture will live after me." This prophecy has come true. In Dwaraka Mayi, with this immortal portrait at one end, and the sacred fire which has not been allowed to be extinguished since well nigh a hundred years at the other end, one can find anew the infinite splendors of his supernal light!

Shirdi has become immortal today as Brindaban in the days of yore. And in the all-embarrassing panorama of historical truths, posterity will deem it an abode of the Divine.

Shri Sai Baba's Leelas

How shall humanity rise and awake to that supreme vision of Truth which alone gives a meaning and purpose to life and its leelas? This life as it is lived on the material and physical level is barren and unproductive until it finds its focus in the Eternal; then alone does it burst forth into a grand symphony, for its creative energies are loosened by this contact with the light "that shines forth from beyond the darkness."

The assumption of imperfection by the perfect is one of the most extraordinary leelas of the Divine as He manifests himself in the Universe. How the Divine reconciles and unites in itself all the variegated and even the opposite and opposing faces of its manifested being is a secret known to the Divine itself. We can only call it a leela and accept it as we accept many other fundamentals of existence.

Among the many wonderful miracles of Shri Sai Baba-and truly the amazing and supreme quality of these miracles has not yet been duplicated since the days of Christ- the most profound and important miracle is that of his very being and existence on earth. With the recognition of this fact we are inevitably led into a closer analysis of the distinction between sainthood and avatarhood.

It is necessary to discriminate between these two concepts before we are able to declare that Sai Baba was not merely a Saint but also an avatar. Clearly, since the purpose of life is the liberation of oneself from the thralldom of the ego, in an infinity of release and freedom, the individual who achieves this ineffable state commands our homage and we rightly call him a saint. All realized beings-and happily our world can boast of many such-are our saints, but not all saints, not all those sages who have attained self-realization are necessarily avatars. Avatarhood has a deeper significance.

Avatarhood is a concept peculiar to the Indian scriptures, grounded as it is on the Vedantic concept of Brahman, other than whom and different from whom there is not, nor can be anything else. So that whereas other religions have talked of God sending prophets or saints to redeem the world, the Hindu Shastras have gone beyond this in exclaiming that God himself comes sometimes to the earth to sport with his devotees. These special incarnations assumed by the Supreme Being in order to help the processes of evolution are termed avatars. As declared in the Bhagavadgita, "The Lord manifests Himself as a human being and acts like a human being, in order to bestow His grace on jivas, so that hearing of his sports they may attach themselves to Him."

A further elucidation of how, though the Divine is unborn and infinite in its own true nature, it can yet assume finite existence by supreme resort to the force of his self maya, is contained also in the following pregnant line of the Gita: "Standing upon my own nature, I am born by my self maya." This, as hinted before, is the Divine's most significant leela or miracle. The Divine takes birth in human shape and form with all the limitations common to humanity, as one of us, so that he can fulfill his self-allotted mission within some particular self-allotted period of time. Whenever there is the fading of dharma and the uprising of evil, then the Divine looses forth Himself into birth. This is of course no ordinary birth into ignorance as we understand it, but the descent of the illumined Light with all the semblance merely of ignorance and finiteness. But though the Divine does so limit itself, it does not at the same time get entangled in the inevitable mechanism of karmic laws known to ordinary births. The very word avatar itself means a descent: " A coming down of the Divine below the line which divides the Divine from the human world or status."

Now the purpose of such a descent is twofold. Not only does the Lord take birth in human form to uphold dharma, but he further so arranges that by impact with His presence on earth, man also becomes conscious of his Divinity and seeks to ascend to the Godhead above him. So that with every birth of the avatar into the world, millions of people are born anew in the sense that they are made actively conscious of their Divine potentialities. It is only an incarnation of this type that declares himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life," and holding forth before man the example of his pure and blameless life on earth can inspire him to adopt and assimilate it.

Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi was no ordinary saint, but an avatar even as Christ and Krishna and Buddha were. His sayings and charters are replete with the assertion of himself as the supreme Godhead. This is proof enough of his Divine descent. He often identified himself with Vithoba, with Dattatreya, with Laxmi Narayana, with Shri Krishna, and many other avatars known to the Hindu scriptures. Not only was this identification verbal, but it has been the experience of many devotees that Baba often took on the form and appearance of several avatars. In fact, to assume the very image and likeness of that particular Godhead for whom a devotee had veneration was Baba's favorite method of effecting the devotee's transformation. He often enough declared that he in his visible human form and the supreme invisible Lord were one and the same Divine Purushottama. " I am in Gangapur, Pandharpur, and in all places. I am in every bit of the globe. All the Universe is in me," he said. On one occasion when a devotee named Uddhava asked him from which purana he should study, Baba replied significantly, "From that in which I have already spoken to you," and it transpired that he was referring to the Bhagavadgita.

It is abundantly clear from all these declarations that Baba was no ordinary saint or prophet, but Divinity itself made manifest in order to mold the thoughts, feelings and actions of man according to his shining example. For it is not given to ordinary realized beings, great souls though they are, to speak of themselves in the absolute vein, nor indeed have they ever been known to do so. These supreme declarations are the prerogatives only of those Divine Incarnations who are termed avatars.

Shri Sai Baba's Divine avatarhood is a certain conviction in the minds of each and every one of his devotees. This conviction is based not only on the declarations of the Master as cited before, but also on the wondrous quality of his deeds and doings. Not the least among these are the miracles of Sai Baba, the experiences of devotees in all walks of life, super skeptics among them. Wonderful as these experiences are, it would be more profitable to view them calmly and in their proper perspective. For when these miracles of Sai Baba assume a sensational value in the minds of devotees, they are apt to confuse these persons and make them forget the great perpetrator of the miracles in the unusual character of the miracles themselves. If the Master's miracles become more important than the Master himself, then surely they defeat their own purpose. These miracles, these experiences, should rather be evaluated as signs of the great Guru's omnipotence and as sure proof of his Divine descent. They should act as an incentive to a further understanding of his Divine nature and message. Even so it is also equally true that to reject this phase of Baba's manifestation is to limit oneself and arrest one's spiritual growth. A gathering together of all these wonderful miracles of Sai in an integral understanding of the Master is the correct approach.

In view of this understanding it would be in the fitness of things to substitute the word miracles by the more comprehensive term leelas. This exquisite denomination at once gives to these uncommon experiences of Sai bhaktas the correct touch of dignity which places them far above the trivialities of a soothsayer or even above the lesser miracles of a prophet who is not an avatar. The Divine Leela is one of the most aesthetic aspects of religious philosophy. It lies in nature of the supreme Purushottama to reveal Himself in the way he does. His leelas are His manifestations, and since the Lord is all in all, there can be no miracles from the point of view of the eternal. Sai Baba therefore does not perform any miracles in this sense. He simply manifests his leelas in order to sport with his devotees.

Nevertheless, from our limited level of comprehension the marvelous experiences of many of Baba's cherished devotees are miraculous enough. Quite a collection of these marks of the great Master's grace, have been compiled in the excellent volumes of the revered Narasimha Swamiji, and the authentic efforts of "Hemadpant" in his Sai Charitha. All

the same, it would not be amiss to mention here a few of these remarkable instances of Baba's great powers. The story of how the Master once lit his wick-lamps by feeding them with water instead of oil is a very well-known testimony of many of his devotees who actually saw the miracle.

Baba was in the habit of borrowing oil from the shopkeepers of the village for his little lamps which he kept burning the whole night, both in the masjid and the temple. Once these merchants who were wont to supply him with oil gratis took it into their heads to refuse this little service to the Master. Quite unperturbed, the Saint filled his lamp containers with water and lighted the wicks-and lo, they started burning, and kept burning all throughout the silent watches of the night as if in defiance of the ungracious behavior of the shopkeepers who later repented and became his disciples.

Instances abound too of Baba's control over the elements. Christ like he could command the winds and the rain and the lightning to obey his behests. One evening there was a terrible and destructive storm at Shirdi and the little village was flooded with incessant rain. The many local deities were sought to be appeased but in vain. At last people flocked to the masjid and prayed to Baba to quell the storm. The great yogi came out to the edge of the masjid and ordered the storm to cease. At once the winds and the rain and the lightning obeyed his sweet will and became still.

These wonderful miracles have not ceased to take place today though the Master is not visibly present. The curative impact of his personality on the sick and the ailing and even on those suffering from so-called incurable and grave maladies are too well known and too many to recount in this little volume. Under the aegis of our beloved Guru the lame have indeed walked, the blind have recovered their sight and the deaf their hearing, and in his infinite mercy he still goes about healing the sick and giving succor to those that are otherwise bruised and unhappy.

Baba's ways are indeed inscrutable. Only those whom he wishes to accept as his own are able to reach him or to go to Shirdi. In those days some visitors were summarily dismissed by the Master; others who had gone for a short visit out of mere curiosity were made to stay on until they became his most devout followers.

It is interesting to record one more experience of a living devotee as an example of one of the most extraordinary leelas of the Shirdi Saint. Dr. Rustomji, a homeopath who is now engaged in selfless work in the homeopathic dispensary recently opened in Shirdi, tells us of this wonderful miracle. It appears that the doctor was owing a sum of 300

rupees to a certain party in Bombay. The doctor came down to Bombay and made out a check for that amount and passed it on to his friend, telling him he could cash it when he liked. On returning home, however, the doctor found much to his dismay that his passbook showed that he had not that much balance in his account. The thought that his check might be dishonored, and what his friend would think about him in consequence, upset the doctor very much. In the predicament, with his usual implicit faith in his Guru, Dr. Rustomji pleaded with Sai Baba to get him out of the impasse. His prayer was answered in a strange manner.

A couple of days later a casual acquaintance called on the doctor and asked him if he could keep a small packet for him which he would come and claim after three months. Dr. Rustomji was surprised at this unusual request and asked the man what the packet contained. "It contains a sum of 300 rupees," was the amazing reply! "Do you mind if I use the money?" asked the doctor promptly. The gentleman said he did not mind what the doctor did, so long as the money was returned to him when he came to claim it after three months. One can imagine the doctor's reaction! Surely this was Baba's leela, he felt. He rushed to the bank with the amount, and after ascertaining that his check had not yet been presented, he paid the amount on his account with a sigh of relief. His honor was saved.

Three months passed by, but the man who had given him the money to keep did not turn up. Nor did the doctor know of his whereabouts. After six months, Dr. Rustomji suddenly saw his benefactor walking down the road. The doctor at once went up to him and after greetings were exchanged said, "Why did you not claim your money all these months? You can take it back now." But the man so addressed looked blank and said he hadn't given any money to the doctor. Thinking that the man was joking, the doctor tried to press the packet of notes into his hand. But that gentleman would not have it and vehemently denied having visited the doctor or ever having given him any money at all! It was then brought home to the spellbound doctor that this was the extraordinary sport of the Divine, incarnate in the person of the unassuming fakir who had lived in Shirdi 60 years ago.

We have described these experiences in full detail as examples, typical of the kind of miracles the Master performed, for such miracles have taken place again and again in the lives of many other devotees, and what is more, continue to occur even today. Among the Sai bhaktas, it is perhaps the pure in heart who are blessed with the vision and the grace of the Guru-God. Many a man of humble origin with a simple and unsophisticated mind gets similar marks of the Master's favor. Perhaps Baba like men to be simple and childlike in order that they may enter the kingdom of heaven.

What is the rational explanation of these miracles? Is there a duplication of personality? Does Sai himself enter into the physical semblance of a soul? One cannot say. But one can say with utter conviction that these are no ordinary miracles. Such marvels can only spring from a Divine source-and they establish beyond all doubt the supreme avatarhood of the Saint of Shirdi.

Although such uncommon wonders occur in the lives of some bhaktas only, each and every devotee is blessed with some concrete token of the Master's protection and love. Such inner vision and psychic experience are important avenues of Divine help. Through these means Baba is able to create that intense longing for the Divine which nothing can damp- neither delays, nor difficulties, nor disappointments.

Together with these inspiring instances of Baba's innate Lordship may also be recounted the unique phenomena of what is known as Baba's *anterjnana*, or omniscience. Baba himself, at the close of noon arati one day, made an avowal of this power which he possessed thus: "Wherever you may be, Whatever you may do, remember this always-I ever know whatever you do or say." No matter with what secret thought or desire or doubt an individual confronted him at Shirdi, Baba could read him like an open book. Sometimes he exposed those thoughts as much as to rebuke them: "Oh those of little faith," he seemed to say, "wherefore do you doubt?" At other times he started replying to the half-formed questions of the casual visitor; often he solved the problems of those who had not even had the time to speak of their needs. This *anterjnana* was not limited to those who were in his actual presence. Baba could express the thoughts of persons, thousands of miles away, foresee events and reveal the past, present, and future as if space and time had shrunk into an all-revealing point of eternity in front of this omniscient and omnipresent presence in Shirdi.

Endlessly could we go on recounting the leelas of the Blessed One. Perhaps hearing of his consummate deeds which out-flash all religious theories and rituals, thousands will come within the ambit of his gracious influence opening to the children of men the gates of immortality.

How the Master Lived: *Dakshina*

Over a century ago one *maha purusha* in the form of a young boy of 20 appeared in the unobtrusive little hamlet of Shirdi. Dressed in a long *kufni* with a begging bowl as his sole possession this young and handsome lad, appearing from nowhere as it were, came and sat beneath a neem tree. He soon lit a fire in front of him which he always kept burning. When he felt hungry he went off and begged for his crust of bread. To all intents and purposes he might have been just an ordinary *fakir*, a little touched in the head, so some people of the village imagined at first when they heard him mumbling to himself. But soon the glory of his *atma* began to attract mortals to him as bees are attracted to a hive.

Somehow, to man is given by the Almighty's grace a kind of super-sense, as it were, which enables him to recognize the greatness of the holy ones by mere contact with their presence. No doubt we have, and we will always have, in our midst the unbelievers, those men of little faith, the philistines who, due probably to their *Karma*, are not prepared to receive the grace of *sadgurus*. But, on the whole, there are not many amongst us who are not strengthened by this contact with a saint and who do not come to recognize in time the sweetness of a life of righteousness. Wherever a *maha yogi* chooses to install himself, around him there grows an atmosphere of sanctity, and thousands of pilgrims are ready to take refuge in him, in his *dharm*, and in the glorious *Satsang* which he keeps open in his infinite mercy to the rich and poor, to the great and humble alike.

So it was with this great *yogi* too. He had no pretensions, he assumed no titles. He called himself a *fakir* and accepted the simple name of Sai. He sat under that immortal tree and later in the adjoining mosque for 60 long years, and around them imperceptibly there grew the *ashram* as it stands today. Gradually the fame of the enigmatic one began to spread. No one seemed to know who he was or where he came from. Some spoke of his compassionate bearing, others raved about his healing touch, and some related stories of his remarkable all-knowingness. If he went to beg for food, he was like no ordinary beggar. One day he astounded a lady who refused him charity by gently rebuking her thus: "Mother, you have such and such number of *chapatis*, so much rice, [naming the exact quantity], why do you refuse a crust to the poor *fakir*?"

Slowly but surely the influence of the strange being spread far and wide. Although in a very short while money began to flow into his coffers and he could have lived like a prince, he still chose to beg for his food, and every morning the sweet and lovable figure would be seen going out with the begging bowl to four or five of the neighboring houses from where he collected his ration of food. Much later he relaxed this severe discipline

and would partake of the *naiveda*, food given as offering by any of the visiting devotees. But this he did more as a concession to the feelings of those who loved and worshiped him.

Nor did the Master ever change his mode of dress. A long loose robe reaching to the ankles and a piece of cloth tied around his head completed his attire. He did not possess a wardrobe and it was useless to give him any clothes for he immediately gave them away ! The *kufni* remained on his body until it was torn and tattered or until some devotee forcibly took it off him and made him don another. Even so the great one would sometimes sit with a needle and thread repairing the torn garment with an incorrigible obstinacy!

But it is these habits that caused him to be loved so intimately. Veteran devotees still recount with tears in their eyes some of these very human and humble traits of the Master. He did indeed descend from his heavenly abode to be as one of us, and, what is more, to be akin to the poorest among men so that he might with greater understanding and assurance relieve their sorrows and wants. Though he could have lived in a magnificent palace he showed *vairagya* for material things by living in a hut with few or no wants, at one time with only a shaky, rickety plank for a bedstead.

It was characteristic of the Master , that although he lived in such austerities, he neither preached to his men nor allowed them to practice any sort of physical mortification. Indeed he was against austerity for the sake of austerity. He never forbade anyone to refrain from eating flesh or other palatable food. He sometimes even forced the orthodox to eat onions against their will; and on occasions he is reported to have cooked meat and distributed it to all. This the Master did because he sensed the danger of men forgetting the spirit of the *dharma* in the mere letter of its formal rituals. No amount of physical and external *vairagya* would serve any purpose if the man who practiced it remained impure in mind and heart. Therefore Baba cautioned his devotees not to make self-mortification an end in itself. Austerities are a means only to inward purification, and if they do not promote this effect, they are not only useless and unprofitable but even dangerous, he preached.

Baba did not deem it an evil to satisfy the natural wants of the body, and if devotees undertook a penance fast, Baba always pointed out the uselessness of their endeavors until these erroneous ideals of self-affliction which chilled their hearts melted away under the gentle warmth of the Master's persuasion. How can anyone be free from self by leading a wretched life if he does not succeed in quenching the fires of lust and greed ?

In Baba's *ashram*, therefore, there was no dearth of good and plenty of food. He himself sometimes indulged in cooking. A huge vessel was placed on the fire in which Baba poured ghee, and then all manners of vegetables and rice and spices were thrown in and cooked in a mighty hotchpotch! Out of this magnificent repast Baba himself served out the food to all those who were in the *ashram*, and it is said that no matter how many people came forward to eat there was enough food to go around.

As a matter of fact, the atmosphere in the whole *darbar* used to be delightfully informal and happy, and , as pointed out elsewhere, did not in the least resemble the puritanic atmosphere of a monastery.

The great *Guru* was always approachable. Men, women and children could go to him at any time without fear of being rebuffed. Most of the time Baba sat out in the *masjid* ministering to his people. Whenever an opportunity offered itself, he gave a discourse on moral and philosophical issues and brought home to the assembly the futility of lives absorbed in material pursuits. The rest of the time he busied himself in solving the problems of the ordinary householder, healing the sick, and restoring hope and comfort to the afflicted. People came to him for all their wants and sorrows. They had but to ask, and it seemed to be Master's business to give to all those who asked, provided in his wise estimation they did not ask amiss.

Sometimes, however, the compassionate one wistfully waited for people to ask for the real treasures of the spirit. "No one cares to listen to me or the wisdom I can give, " he sometimes sorrowfully complained. And if in the assembly there were a few who showed a thirst for eternal values, Baba felt radiantly happy and sought in every way to guide such seekers to the right source.

The Master's knowledge of the *sastras* , the *puranas*, the *Koran*, the *Gita*, and other scriptures was phenomenal. He could quote from *Skanda* verse and line to show where a particular truth was embodied, much to the amazement of the *pandits* and scholars who went to him, and his interpretations and elucidations of the difficult passages were extremely revealing and inspiring. Such was Baba's *darbar*.

There was never a dull moment in the Sage's presence. On the contrary. Baba always made the proceedings lively and interesting by his wit and charm. Due to his extremely cordial and friendly demeanor, no one stood in awe of the great Saint. People both loved and revered him. He was generally very sweet-tempered and tolerant, and he allowed people to take all manner of liberties with his person, in that they adorned him with flowers or sandal paste and vermilion and performed all kinds of rites and

pujas on him. He submitted to all this with the true meekness which only the great ones possess.

But there were times when Baba got into a towering rage and raved and shouted like one possessed. This show of temper would last for a few moments, and then Baba would again melt into tenderness. Devotees sometimes were at a loss to understand such manifestations of wrath. It must be added here that the anger which realized beings exhibit is not of the same quality that ordinary men indulge. When saints get angry, they do so for the good of those who are so chided. The *Guru* only appears to be wrathful, but there is no scar in his heart which is always full of love for his children.

Every morning for a couple of hours Baba retired to the *Lendi* gardens where he remained alone and undisturbed. At that time too his aspect was forbidden and stern. Indeed, he looked so very awesome and terrific in those two hours that devotees could not go anywhere near him. It seemed as if he assumed at times the third and most awe-inspiring aspect of the *trimurtic* conception of the Divine. As Shiva the Destroyer, no less than as the Creator and Preserver, did the *maha yogi* manifest himself. But soon after his return from the gardens the Master would relax again and become his sweet and gentle self. His ways were indeed sometimes mysterious!

Before we close this chapter giving these few glimpses of the habits and temperament of the beloved Master, it is necessary to give an explanation of the strange giving and taking of *dakshina* which was a practice peculiar only to Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi. There were certain devotees from whom Sai Baba always extracted money, and the huge amount of wealth he collected in this way, it was his practice to distribute among other devotees. His allotments were peculiar too. People used to get fixed allowances every day, ranging from 4 annas to 100 rupees. This was not some crude form of socialism which Baba sought to put into practice, for he did not invariably collect money from the rich to distribute it to the poor. There seemed to be a deeper purpose behind this strange giving and taking *dakshina* which is difficult to understand from our level of consciousness.

The ways of Almighty are not all the time comprehensible, but nevertheless they have their own mysterious functions in the entire pattern. Once when Baba was asked why he took so much money, he replied: "I do not ask of everyone. I ask only from those whom the *fakir* [God] points out. But in exchange I have to give that man ten times the amount which I have taken from him." And this proved to be true in every case. Whenever Baba took away either money or valuable articles from anyone, that man was not impoverished. On the contrary, in some

mysterious way he got back what he paid ten times over in the shape of a sudden fortune or gift or through a rise in his salary. Baba often demanded *dakshina* from a person who could ill-afford it, but only to pay it back to him in this manner. It was, therefore thought to be a greater privilege to be asked for *dakshina* than to receive it. Moreover, this asking of *dakshina* might also have been a powerful means of promoting *vairagya* for wealth and worldly possessions. Probably Baba sometimes felt that attachment to money was the only weakness that delayed the spiritual growth of certain devotees, and this was his way of curing the weakness. In the same way, if Baba found that a person had collected money which he did not merit, he took this exact amount away on the pretext of demanding *dakshina*. Likewise did he denude that man of the amount which in some amount he had promised to give away in charity if his wishes were fulfilled, but conveniently forgot to do so now that he was prosperous.

The trouble was that nothing was hidden from this *mahayogi*. No matter how deeply embedded even in subconscious a devotee's thoughts and desires were, Baba always knew! *Dakshina* had therefore both a literal and a symbolic meaning and value. Every morning Baba started his day as a penniless *fakir*. As the day advanced he would amass a fortune which even princes would have envied; then again, before eventide, his treasury was once again empty! This too was one of the *leelas* of the Saint of Shirdi.

These are some interesting glimpses of the habits and temperament of the beloved *Guru*. We can understand from these significant details of his life that in all that he did and said Baba clearly revealed his transcendental origin. When the Divine descends into the earth consciousness, he has no need to learn and acquire knowledge. Knowledge and wisdom are imminent to him, for is He not from which all knowledge, all wisdom emanate? Is He not the fountain source from which springs all beatitude and goodness? Why need we go to any other source but this! But the Divine is also all-merciful, and to enable the priceless gems of wisdom to be grasped and assimilated by mortal men, He chooses thus to embody himself in a shape and form which men can worship and cherish and understand more readily than an abstract ideal of the Godhead. That is why to millions of Sai *bhaktas* the Master is the resurrection and the life, and that is why Baba often said: "Those who come to me reach their *Chaitanya*, their God." " Simply say Sai-Sai," he pronounced. "I care not for show of respect and forms."

What The Master Taught

Again and again during his eventful pilgrimage on earth, the Master exhorted his devotees to spend all their time, energy, and thought in knowing the Self. Steady and disciplined inherence in the Self was what

he always advocated. After all, the most fundamental thought in the mind of every individual is the thought of "I" and "Me". Therefore, it is only through a concentrated self-enquiry that one can arrive at the Truth- thus taught the Master. That is why he repeatedly said, "Who am I? Think, always think about this." "We have only to see the Self," he said once to a devotee," and the rest becomes revealed."

It used to be the custom in those days at Shirdi for devotees to go to Baba on particular occasions, each with a religious book in his hand in order to invoke the Sage's blessing on that particular work which the devotee found inspiring. On one such occasion a certain devotee went empty handed. Instead of rebuking him, as was expected by those present, Baba on the contrary turned to this devotee with a radiant smile and told him that he was wise, for it was not by reading pages and pages of the shastras that a man could assimilate wisdom- true wisdom lay concealed in one's own atma. Even in order to understand what meditation is, one must first and foremost understand the meditator. If man is a mass of contradictions and conflicts internally, how can he assimilate anything from the outside! The impressions of a confused person, of an unintegrated one, would necessarily be confused and unreliable also. This was one example of the Master's teaching.

Such preoccupation with the Self leads one in time to realize that the Self is identical with God. Baba meant that by constantly regarding oneself as God, the importance that one unconsciously gives to the changing and mutable qualities of the jiva would be given up. Man's attention would then be focused on that which is changeless. According to Sai Guru, this process of identifying oneself with the Supreme Being can be greatly strengthened by contact with saints.

Whenever people quarreled and fought, Baba's favorite method of chiding them was by asking them a counter question. "Who is quarreling with whom?" he asserted. "Just think of that." What the Master wished to emphasize was that if we see God in every place and in everyone, then we would have no scope left for hatred and dissension. "Therefore, let none hate and let none forget that I, you, and all the world are parts of the Lord," said Baba .

But the blessed Master did not merely stop at giving this injunction. He showed ways and means whereby this could be put into practice. It was all very well to advise men to conduct an enquiry into the true nature of the Self. How was an ordinary mortal to set about this difficult task of knowing himself ? After all, it was not given to every one to be introspective, nor was it possible for the majority of human beings to grapple with abstractions. Baba knew that what people needed was practical guidance and help. It would not be of much use to give wise metaphysical formulas

if the common man could not assimilate it. Baba's practice was to elaborate his injunctions by constant references to practical modes of approach.

The best way of giving effect to this process of knowing oneself was, according to Sai Baba, through a complete surrender to God. Ideas of what God is vary widely. Those who believe in a personal deity as embodied in the form of a Guru, for instance, can get a tremendous push forward in the evolution of their spiritual growth. Surely, to be able to call upon a power like this which is the master of all material conditions is to have the "pearl of great price", for which we may well work, and pray.

It seems then that the Sage of Shirdi did favor the bhakti marga to salvation. Once when comparing jnana and bhakti, the Master likened the former to ramphal and the latter to sitaphal. The pulp of ramphal is difficult to comb out, but the sitaphal is sweet and its pulp is easily accessible. If the jnani falls, there is a danger of his remaining in that state, since he may not be able to help himself, but the bhakta always has the compassionate succor of his master to support and reinstate him. Perhaps Sai Baba felt that the crying urgency of this kali yuga was bhakti .

The first and most fundamental requisite is of course a strong desire for moksha, a hunger and thirst for the Divine which no material conditions can ever assuage. Wealth, kith and kin are all transient. So long as material attachments occupy a vital part of man's thoughts, he cannot go far. Equipped with this burning desire for union with the Lord, if a devotee has complete faith in His mercy and surrenders all to His wisdom, then his task becomes less arduous and his ultimate success is assured. Not only this, but bhakti, even if not practised very thoroughly, is still a powerful weapon of purification, in that it gradually leads the bhakta to a greater and greater concentration of worship; that is to say, if one may so express it, even a casual bhakta is transformed into an ardent one sooner or later. Only a beginning has to be made; the rest is taken care of. How reassuring this thought is. We cannot take the wrong path if we keep conscious of the light .

Baba, therefore, gave great importance to all those practices that aid concentration in the Divine. He greatly favored the use of japa, repetition of the Guru-God's name either audibly or mentally. Such repetition, Baba said, may seem mechanical at first, but it slowly draws the mind into the vortex of a one-pointed concentration. From a practical aspect its aim is to cultivate emotional and mental stability and thus prepare the soil for the realization of Brahman.

It is important at this stage to make a clear distinction between the kind of bhakti that Sai Baba enjoined his followers and the undisciplined

emotionalism that sometimes goes by the name of bhakti. Baba gave bhakti the highest place in the sadhana, but he wanted this emotion to be purified. The emotion must not be allowed to degenerate into mere sentimentalism which has not the same poise and balance. True bhakti can be easily distinguished from mere hysterical emotionalism. For in the latter there is ever a sign of incompleteness, a hankering, and an exhaustion due to overspent and misspent energies. The lower type of bhakti is a kind of deluded extension of self-love. It has its roots in the ego; that is why it is impatient for returns. But the bhakti that Baba enjoined is bhakti plus yoga-bhakti that is shorn of all selfish considerations, bhakti that is also a rigorous discipline. In the giving of such devotion there is a feeling of completeness and fulfillment and a total conserving of one's energies, so that the true bhakta never has a sense of frustration, nor is he ever exhausted.

There is no doubt that Shri Sai Baba was the apostle of love and his predilections lay more in the direction of the bhakti way to salvation. Not once but several times did he emphasize the great value he attached to devotion and surrender. " I am the bond slave of my devotee. I love devotion. If one ever dwells on me in his mind and will not even taste food before offering it to me, I am his slave- so also if hungers and thirsts after me and treats all else as unimportant." Such was the illuminating language in which the sage gave predominance to the function of Love. Shri Sai Baba's followers, therefore, have so to elevate their understanding as will enable them to realize the living beauty of love, its Divine energies, its health-giving properties, its power to demonstrate immortality.

The Master revealed himself to be a true and sensitive psychologist, in that he always recognized that the need and the desire to adore is inherent in man. Bhakti is a natural state of the human heart; one does not have to acquire it or be initiated into it. It is there, and to ignore it is to ignore one of the most vital traits of human nature. Like any other innate gift, however, bhakti has to be developed and chiseled into the right shape before it can yield any creative results, before it can effect an opening for the Divine to enter.

Baba did not in any sense belittle the supreme value of knowledge. At the same time, he did not make it incumbent upon every sadhaka to grasp the subtleties of fundamental truths with the intellect. It was enough if a devotee earnestly inspired in the silence of his heart to become one with the Lord. To such a one is given infinite protection and guidance, and ultimately the bhakta necessarily becomes a jnani too. Knowledge comes of itself by an instrument that is far more potent than the mind. Bhakti brings in its wake knowledge that is both spontaneous and effortless.

Those seekers who have a purely intellectual bias sometime wonder why Shri Sai Baba tolerated and even fostered external forms of worship. But Baba deliberately encouraged rituals and ceremonials and held them to be the outflowing expressions of the inner devotion. Symbols are the very source and support of life. Man thinks in terms of symbols. Why then should there not be symbols in the adoration which man seeks to express for the Divine?

Besides, the mass of men do need physical and concrete outlets for their emotions. They cannot realize anything except through visible and tangible symbols. The symbol of the crucifix and the attendant ceremonials commemorating the life and events of the Christ are powerful assets of the Christian faith. They have a dynamic appeal to man's imagination, and as such they play no small part in keeping the religion alive and potent; so do many of the colorful religious rituals of the Hindus. Certainly, the danger of rituals and ceremonials being misused and even abused has to be reckoned with; but for all that, one cannot deny them their value, nor their significant place in the religious impulse of man.

So long as these external expressions of worship were an index to the inward spiritual aspiration, Baba treated these with respect and allowed the devotee to pursue unhampered all the outward forms of worship which were dear to his heart. But whenever the sage found that these pujas and ceremonies were just subterfuges used in order to conceal false pretensions of piety, or when Baba felt that they were just empty customs practiced through sheer force of habit, then he either ruthlessly destroyed them or discouraged them .

The sadhana of devotion prescribed by Shri Sai Baba has a warm appeal to all those whose aesthetic sensibilities are predominantly developed. The sensitive and the artistically inclined are lured by the prospect of a union with the Divine which combines in it so much ecstasy and beatitude. The way in not cold and austere, but replete with the intimate fullness of loving and being loved. The perfect Master of Shirdi is also the perfect artist, and he beckons to those who are temperamentally capable of emotional transportation. The way he outlines is colorful, warm, and vigorous, and sweet-scented with love's distillations.

The Master's message is the message of love raised to its acme of perfection, and since love is not a mere abstraction, it is natural that the soul of the bhakta should turn to some living embodiment of the Divine. That is why in the sadhana of Shri Sai Baba's choice the Guru becomes the Supreme Reality. To a living, palpable image of God alone can the love-smitten disciple pour out his devotion in all the fullness and warmth of his ardor; and the beloved can be sought by any and all of us. We are now in a position to realize why Sai Baba laid such overwhelming emphasis on

the dependence of the sadhaka on the Guru by whose grace and contact the seeker can advance very rapidly. Therefore, to the man or woman who puts his or her hand in the hand of the omnipotent God-Guru like Sai Baba, the outlook can never be dreary.

Sai Baba Speaks: His Charter and Sayings

The sayings of a *sat purusha* are self-validating. There is no need to explain them; nor it is necessary to comment on or interpret these few intimate charters of the great Master. They have come down to us as the priceless heritage of spiritual wisdom, happily preserved by his devoted and loyal disciples. We owe a debt of gratitude to these bhaktas for giving us these cherished maxims in their original form, particularly to the great Shri Narasimha Swamiji and Shri Annasaheb Dabolkar from whose works these maxims have been culled and reproduced.

Shri Sai Baba did not give any sermons, nor did he write any spiritual thesis, though his scholarship was profound and he could surpass the knowledge of many pandits (Hindu learned men or priests) and moulanas (Muslim spiritual teachers) who often came to him for elucidation of the texts. The source of Sai Baba's mastery over the scriptures of all religions was as unfathomable as his entire personality was enigmatic. No one knew how this incredible avatar was able to amass so much knowledge, and that too in all its immaculate details! Sai Baba had settled in Shirdi at the tender age of 20, and after that no one saw him either studying or reading a single book. In him was manifested the innate genius who had fathomed the profundities of that luminous Reality, knowing which everything else becomes self-revealed.

Just as Baba was Guru Incarnate, he was also Knowledge Incarnate. Sai Baba, however, preferred to transmit knowledge and teachings through the spoken word in the age long tradition of Bharat. Not only spiritual but venerated teachers of classical nritya (dancing) and sangeet (music) preferred this method of transmitting knowledge in the ancient past, and many of them do so even now. Like the rishis of old, Sai Baba also believed in a close and intimate association of the teacher and the taught. Each sadhaka's spiritual and material problems were peculiar only to him; therefore, Baba preferred a very individual transmission of grace and instruction to his flock of disciples. He neither gave any formal talks nor wrote any books.

Shri Sai Baba's conversation and sayings were not delivered with the purpose of dazzling a handful of intellectuals with technical discussions of philosophy; his aim was to rouse the moral insight of the average seeker. Often employing analogies and similes drawn from experiences that are common to all men and women, the Master was able to carry conviction and inspiration to those who came to him. Using simple stories and clothing great truths in simple parables as did Jesus Christ, Baba was able to create a pyramid of perceptions in the listener.

Somehow, when a *sat purusha* speaks, subtle forces are at work, and the words of these great Masters acquire a strange power, which perhaps is not inherent in the words themselves. Even the familiar stock-in-trade of ethical admonishments and moral reflections assume a compelling power which again is not inherent in them, for the same words issuing out of the mouths of ordinary men would sound commonplace and platitudinous. Hundreds of disciples, however, would listen to Baba's words in rapt wonderment, which soon changed to conviction. This is because one knows the truth uttered by realized persons have been actually experienced by them; their words consequently carry authority and conviction. One Mr. Francis Brabazon in an introduction to one of avatar Meher Baba's brochures very succinctly confirms this in the following sentence: "The words of [ordinary] men are like candles which burn out leaving both the speaker and his audience in darkness; but the message of the Divine Incarnation, both at the time of utterance and for posterity, is a sun which never sets and is always available if one will but pull up the blind of prejudice and partake of its light."

Some of Sai Baba's sayings reveal the hunger in his heart for true and selfless adoration. The Master's yearning for the love, friendship, and understanding of the bhaktas who belonged to him was a touching and lovely facet of his relationship with his disciples.

As a matter of fact, Sai Baba often hinted that he had not come to teach but to awaken. He sought to bring about this awakening through the impact of his love. Through centuries men have read volumes of philosophy, but so long as there is no integration between thought and practise, sadhakas do not grow in spiritual grace. Sai Baba, therefore, simplified his teachings so that bhaktas may get down to the sheer practice of spiritual sadhana. As the Master repeatedly told his followers, all great work for God is done first in the individual soul of the worker.

The Saint of Shirdi was one of the most compassionate of avatars. He accepted all the self-imposed limitations, restrictions, and sufferings that the ordinary human body is heir to, so that he might inspire men by the example of his magnificent life. He descended from the eternal abode of peace to embroil himself in the affairs of men. This was his supreme act of redemption for humanity which he loved so tenderly. The living thoughts of a saint who has entered samadhi have constantly to be restated, reinterpreted, and reassessed, and thus to use Plato's lovely words, "restored to youth and beauty."

SAI BABA's CHARTERS

Dwarka Mayi

1. This is not just a mosque. It is dwarka [mercy]. Those who seek refuge here will never be harmed.
2. As soon as one climbs the steps of this mosque, sufferings due to karma are at an end and joy begins.
3. When one enters the Dwarka Mayi, his goal is achieved.

Sai Baba's assurances:

1. My eye is ever on those who love me.
2. Whatever you do, wherever you may be, ever bear this in mind that I am always aware of everything you do.
3. If one meditates on me, repeats my name and sings about my deeds, he is transformed and his karma is destroyed. I stay by his side always.
4. If one perpetually thinks of me and makes me his sole refuge, I become his debtor and will give my head to save him.
5. I am the bond slave of my devotee. I love devotion. He who withdraws his heart from the world and loves me is my true lover and he merges in Me like a river in the sea.
6. If you make me the sole object of your thoughts and aims you will gain Paramatma.
7. Look to me and I will look to you.
8. Trust in the Guru fully. This is the only sadhana. Guru is all the Gods.
9. Repeat my name. Seek refuge in me. But to know who I am, practice sravana [hearing the word of the Guru] and manana [reflection].
10. I shall be active and vigorous even from my tomb. Even after my *maha samadhi*, I shall be with you the moment you think of me.

The declaration of Divinity:

I am God. I am Mahalaxmi. I speak the truth sitting as I do in the mosque. I am Vithobha. I am Ganapathi. All offerings made to Ganapathi have

reached me. I am Dattatreya. I am Laxmi Narayana. Why go to Ganga elsewhere? Hold your palm at my feet-here flows Ganga. I am Maruti.

True Being

1. I am the attributeless absolute nirguna. I have no name and no residence.

2. I embroiled myself in karma and got this body. Brahman is my father and maya is my mother. I am formless and in everything. I fill all space and am omnipresent. I am in water, in dry places, in crowds and solitary wilderness. I am in the fire and in ether.

3. I am the Progenitor of God. Meditate on me as pure ananda nirakara [formless bliss], but if you cannot do this, then meditate on this Sai Body exactly as you see it.

4. I am not the body or the senses. I am the eternal Sakshi [Witness]

His wistful longing:

My Master told me to give bounteously to all that ask. No one asks with wisdom. My treasury is open. No one brings carts to take away the real treasures. I say: dig and search, but no one wants to take any pains. Be the true sons of the Divine Mother and fully stock yourself. What is to become of us? This body will return to earth, and the air we breathe will melt into air. This opportunity will not return.

The Passing of Sai Baba

The 15th of October of the year 1918 was a sorrowful and a fateful day for the little village of Shirdi. On Tuesday the 15th of October at about 2:30 in the heavy hours of the noon the beloved Master suddenly breathed his last breath. His self allotted labor of love was perhaps deemed by him in his inscrutable wisdom to have been finished. The all-too-brief span of sixty glorious years, the period that he had set himself for his messiahship, came to an abrupt end, as the Blessed one gave up his body on that eventful afternoon. Quietly and unobtrusively, without any fuss or complaint, Sai Baba released his last breath and let his head fall gently on the shoulders of a near disciple. The last words that he uttered were that he should be taken to an adjoining wada as he did not feel well in the masjid. But hardly were these words out of his mouth when the Saint of Shirdi passed away.

The news of his death spread like wild fire in the village of Shirdi, and soon the ashram was filled with men, women, and children who had been suddenly plunged into the throes of an agonizing grief. All the magic light seemed to have died out that formerly had given to those thousands of seekers so much courage and hope. In a moment all the chambers of the ashram seemed emptied of delight, and a strange desolation of spirit filled each heart.

But the great avatar of love and compassion did not forsake his suffering people even in the hour of the so-called death. The outflow of peace that radiated from his body soothed the mourners. The older devotees of the Saint - those who are still alive - tell us of the sudden calmness and beauty that seemed to descend on the atmosphere. For the devotees who had gathered there now remembered how Baba had always sought to give them a true perspective of death. Like worn-out garments the body is cast away by God, and what is made of earth returns to the earth; therefore why should anyone bemoan death or exult over a birth? True wisdom, true freedom lies in being unaffected by both these events which are eternal processes in the cycle of creation. "So-called death and life," said Baba, "are manifestations of God's activity; you cannot separate the two." But when a persevering self-search at last reveals to man who he really is, when man really learns to know, not merely because someone else tells him, but with that knowledge that comes of direct experience - then man ceases to identify himself with the body and is unaffected by the death of the physical form, which is not the reality of his being.

The real man is deathless and eternal. However, the flesh is weak, and to grieve for the physical loss of a dear one is common to the race. Sai Baba who was ever compassionately mindful of the frailties of human beings did not in the moment of his maha samadhi arrest his tender indulgence of

man's natural sorrows. On the very next day after his death Baba appeared to one of his devotees in a dream-vision, saying, "Jog thinks I am dead. I am alive. Go and perform my morning arati." Soon, other devotees also began to get unmistakable signs of the Master's deathless presence until almost each disciple was able to claim with conviction - "The Master is come again, he cannot die."

In the meantime, the physical body of the beloved Guru lay in quiet splendor. There was a dispute about how and where to dispose of the sage's mortal remains, but in the overwhelming serenity that enveloped the atmosphere, all disputes and controversy were incredibly smoothed out, without any untoward loss of temper. Hindu and Muslim devotees alike unanimously elected to inter the body of the Saint in the center of the Wada. The body had lain intact for 36 hours, and it is significant that though so many hours had elapsed, the body had lost none of its living luster and radiance. Indeed the rigor mortis so common in death had not at all set in. The flesh had so far retained its elasticity that the kufni of the beloved Master could be removed as easily and comfortably as from a living and supple body. The physical form of the gracious Guru was laid to rest in the central hall with all due formalities and obsequies, but his eternal spirit rose from the tomb to proclaim to his followers again and again the indisputable evidence of his resurrection and life.

The Master had often promised that his tomb would speak and move with those who made him their refuge, that even after his maha samadhi, he would appear the moment a devotee called upon him with implicit faith and love - and happily even today, though 60 years have passed away, these promises are abundantly fulfilled. The Master manifests himself in different ways to different devotees. His voice is not hushed. Nor is his physical presence lost to his devotees. Testimonials come pouring in from all quarters of the tangible reappearance of Sai Baba. In many cases the Master gives darshan in actual flesh and blood, not only to those who had been his close disciples during his lifetime, but also to many others who had not even seen or heard him. This deliberate choosing of fresh disciples and devotees by vouchsafing to them some kind of mystic experiences is very characteristic of the Saint of Shirdi.

Through such visitations the great yogi is gradually widening the scope of his influence and hold. It is as it were the Avatar of Shirdi still feels that a humanized symbol of Godhead, the meditating aspect of the Supreme, is the support that reassures. To make the vast spiritual joy intimate, living, visible, and possible to man is the Master's mission.

One is reminded here of Arjuna's plaintive cry when he saw Lord Krishna manifested in his supreme universal character. Blinded by this terrible vision, Arjuna cried out, "I would see Thee even as before crowned and

with Thy mace and discuss. Assume Thy four-armed shape, O thousand-armed, O Form Universal." And when the Mahatma resumed once more the desired form of "Grace and love and sweetness" Arjuna was consoled. Sai Baba is like Shri Krishna in this merciful aspect of a friendly deity, who both inspires and delights.

It is a pleasing sadhana that Sai Baba outlines for the eager aspirant - the longing for a Guru, the complete surrender to that Guru when he is eventually found, and once again through the Guru, a feeling of unity with all creatures. This sadhana of the feeling of unity with all creatures was advocated because in all life there is oneness with the cosmic Godhead whom the Guru represents.

Absolute love for God and His creation is the way to a spiritual transcendence of the troublesome ego which is at the root of all evil. And this contains in essence all those ethical principles which make human relationship a pleasant adventure, rather than an intrusion of bitterness and strife. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" - if he does not say so in so many words, it is the same commandment that Baba gives precedence to, above all other rules of conduct. "When man truly loves his fellowman, he loves me" Baba said. "And when one dislikes or fears or hates his fellowmen, any one or any class of people, he entertains actually the same feeling towards me, for all men are one in principle since they are bits of me."

So, although Baba was often indulgent of the other frailties of human nature, though he even condoned moral lapses of character, he was most miserable and unhappy when he found people bickering and quarrelling. We are told that a spasm of deep pain would shoot across his face whenever he heard of strifes and disagreements, and that he would use all his loving influence to nip them in the bud. He even disallowed heated debates and discussions of metaphysical problems, for he thought them futile and disruptive of one's inner harmony.

Perhaps it could be said that Sai Baba's teachings and precepts develop true individualism, even rugged individualism, for is not salvation individual? But this individualism thrives only if it is matched with a true spirit of true democracy and cooperation. Real freedom of life and action is possible only in and through a proper regard of one's neighbor. The absence of this sensitive solicitation of one's fellows leaves the door open for conflicts and friction. How can any man hope to progress deeply if his personality brings about this kind of disturbing reaction? Sai Baba is all for love which alone can bring about that unimaginable transformation of man.

This is but a brief resume of what has been outlined already in the preceding chapters. Writing of the life and leelas of this supreme Guru has been an extraordinary experience. The author is conscious of a curious pang of regret as the end of this little books looms in sight. It is as it were a separation from the Guru himself to cease writing about him. When the sage of Shirdi passed away on the 15th of October in 1918, the light was dimmed - but only for a brief second, for the rebirth and the resurrection ever keep pace and outlive the forces of death and destruction. Sai Baba is more alive today to his bhaktas than he was years ago when he lived in Shirdi.

Om Sai Sri Sai Jaya Jaya Sai