

# SWAMI GAHANANANDA



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Some monks were once going to the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama at Sarisha by car. On the way the car broke down. Everyone was anxious about reaching Sarisha on time as it would be two or three hours before the car was repaired. A monk got down from the car and quietly walked away, and soon disappeared beyond the green meadows. After the car was repaired, the monks went in search of him and found him seated quite unconcerned under a tree and talking to some villagers about religious life. Unmindful of thirst and hunger, he was doing the sanctifying work of preaching for about two hours. This monk was none other than Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, who later became the fourteenth President of the Ramakrishna Order.

The pre-monastic name of Swami Gahananandaji was Nareshranjan Roychoudhury. On Durga Puja Mahashtami Tithi in the year 1916, he was born in the family of Devaroy belonging to Bharadwaj Gotra, in a village called Paharpur which was under Baniyachang in the district of Sylhet (now Habiganj District in Bangladesh). His father was Rajkrishna Roychoudhury and mother was Sukhamayi Devi. They had four sons — Rakeshranjan, Sureshranjan, Bireshranjan, and Nareshranjan. From childhood, Nareshranjan was indrawn, of controlled speech, possessing an excellent personality and leadership qualities. The qualities essential for making a mark in later life were manifest in Nareshranjan from his boyhood.

Even when he was young, Nareshranjan exhibited a keen intellect, always passing the examinations in First Class at school. He studied up to Class VIII in Comilla and up to Class X in Narayanganj. While still a student, he showed a keen interest in studying books on the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. He was inspired

by the exemplary life of a few monks initiated into the ideal of Sri Ramakrishna. Special mention should be made of two of his cousins, Ketakiranjan (later Swami Prabhananda) and Pramodranjan (Brahmachari Pramod).

Ketaki Maharaj had plunged himself in the service of the tribal people of Khasiya and Jayantia hills. At the tender age of 38 years, Ketaki Maharaj died owing to the tremendous exertion of serving the tribal people in those remote areas. When Ketaki Maharaj returned to Paharpur after falling sick, Nareshranjan served him with great devotion.

Nareshranjan had a great desire to dedicate himself to the welfare of humanity. After schooling, he came to his brother at Thanthania where the latter had a shop. At the time of inauguration of his brother's shop "Svadeshi Shilpa Bhandar", it was Naresh who handed the first cash memo to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

He had the occasion to listen to Miss Josephine McLeod at the Albert Hall during the birth centenary celebrations of Sri Ramakrishna. At this time, he also saw, at Mechuabazar, Swami Abhedanandaji, a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

Around 1938, he visited Belur Math and Dakshineswar for the first time. In his own words, "I went to Belur Math on Vijaya Dashami day. The temple was still under construction. I did not get the acquaintance of Swami Vijnananandaji, another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, or of other monks. From Belur Math, we proceeded to Dakshineswar."

He could not apply his mind any longer to the business activities of his brother. Seeing the afflicted, the poor, the downtrodden and the sick, his mind would be filled with great agony. His brother, coming to know that Nareshranjan was frequenting Advaita Ashrama, which was then at Wellington Lane, told him, "If you want to become a monk, you must become a monk of calibre."

Inspired by Swami Vamadevananda of Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, he joined the Ramakrishna Math at Bhubaneswar taking the permission of his sister-in-law but without disclosing his intention to his brother. Boarding the Madras Mail at Howrah, he alighted at Bhubaneswar at around 2:30 a.m. In his own words, “Alighting at Bhubaneswar, I found that there were shrubs and trees all around, the dim light from a kerosene lamp in the station only making the encircling darkness more keenly felt.” On reaching the Math by bullock-cart, he was warmly received by Swami Nirvananandaji, the President of that Math. That very day he had his head shaved but for a tuft of hair, and his style of wearing dhoti was changed to reflect his intention to lead a monastic life.

Making salutations to Swami Nirvananandaji, Nareshranjan said, “Maharaj, kindly bless me that I may lead this life in the proper manner.” Swami Nirvananandaji said, “Everything rests with you. If you can do everything perfectly, then only that will be feasible.” It is from him that Naresh Maharaj learnt about monastic discipline with emphasis on japa, meditation and study of scriptures. From Swamis Nirvananandaji and Sankaranandaji he learnt how to perform all works keeping God in view and paying attention to the minutest details. From then on, he began to sit for meditation in the early hours, a habit which remained with him all through his life. Swami Nirvananandaji was deeply impressed by his service. Brahmachari Naresh came in contact with Swami Achalanandaji (Kedar Baba) who had come to Bhubaneswar Math for a few days’ stay. One day, Kedar Baba told him, “Swami Vivekananda would say that when you serve someone, think that Sri Ramakrishna is accepting your service through him.” He also told Naresh Maharaj about regular japa and meditation, and about maintaining a diary. A tie of close friendship with

Shambhu Babu (later, Swami Akunthanandaji) developed, which remained unbroken till the end.

At Bhubaneswar he studied scriptures under Pandits Dinesh Shastri and Vidhubhushan Bhattacharya. Maharaj would reminisce about this, saying, “I always enjoyed studying the Upanishads. There was an arrangement at Bhubaneswar for our studying Sanskrit and the scriptures. The teacher used to hold examinations too.” Nareshranjan was one among the inmates who were blessed with initiation by Swami Virajanandaji when the latter visited Bhubaneswar at that time.

Directed by the Trustees of the Math, Nareshranjan went from Bhubaneswar Math to Advaita Ashrama at Wellington Lane in Kolkata, in August 1942. Meanwhile, he went once to Puri, took a holy dip in the ocean, offered worship in the temple of Jagannath, and derived immense satisfaction.

At that time, the freedom movement was at its peak in Kolkata and everywhere there was uncertainty. The atmosphere at Advaita Ashrama, being devoid of ritualistic worship, was totally opposed to that which obtained in Bhubaneswar — no external ceremonies, no photos, no worship or aratrikam. At Advaita Ashrama there was just a meditation room in the topmost floor. Being in a publication centre of the Order, Brahmachari Nareshranjan came into contact with many monks working in different centres outside Kolkata. In his own words, “Because of publication work, Advaita Ashrama had contacts with many countries and I became exposed to international outlook and culture. Even at that time, huge was its work arena.” On 25<sup>th</sup> February 1944, he was initiated into the vows of Brahmacharya by his Guru, Swami Virajanandaji, and given the name “Brahmachari Amritachaitanya”.

A unique dimension of his life was ever-readiness to accomplish one’s duty in the midst of dangers. In this respect, his love of adventure

could be witnessed in his administration. After the partition of India, when communal riots were going on in Kolkata, Naresh Maharaj, standing on the top floor of the Advaita Ashrama, saw a few Muslims in a neighbouring house in danger. They communicated to Maharaj through signs that they had nothing to eat. Until the police took them to a safer venue, Maharaj daily took food to them in a tiffin carrier.

In the November of 1945, he went to Deoghar on a month's leave. From there he went to Rishikesh, Kankhal and Varanasi. At that time, he came in contact with senior monks, Swamis Atulanandaji, Premeshanandaji, Saradeshanandaji, Jagadanandaji, and others. From Varanasi he came back to Kolkata. In the year 1947, he went on leave to Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati. The sweet memory of Mayavati was ever fresh in his mind. He would say, "My stay in Mayavati was one of immense joy. Raja Maharaj used to say, 'To be a monastic worker in Mayavati means a prize-posting'. Truly, Mayavati has no parallel — holy atmosphere, snow-clad peaks of Himalayas, and then Swami Vivekananda stayed there. Mayavati is a place of tapasya. At 2 or 2.30 a.m., I would wake up, with no need of further sleep, fully refreshed. Japa and meditation was easy there. One night I was seated in the first floor veranda covering myself with a woollen blanket, when I saw a strange sight — huge trees standing quiet and motionless. The scriptures say, 'Vriksha iva stabdhah' — the trees are motionless as if in deep meditation." On another occasion he said, "Those who are engaged in sadhana and devotional practices will derive immense benefit by staying in Mayavati." He came again to Kolkata in February 1948. On 12<sup>th</sup> March of the same year he was blessed with the vows of Sannyasa by his Guru, Swami Virajanandaji, on the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, and given the name "Swami Gahanananda". He continued as the monastic worker at Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, for another four to five years. In June 1952,

he went from Advaita Ashrama to Bagerhat Ashrama (now in Bangladesh) and served there for six months.

He then went as monastic worker to Shillong Ashrama in Meghalaya in the last week of February 1953. Swami Saumyanandaji was its President then. A few days after this, the consecration ceremony of the temple took place there. In this connection Swami Sankaranandaji, the President of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Madhavanandaji, the General Secretary, and many other respected monks had assembled in the Shillong centre. Swami Gahananandaji together with Swami Saumyanandaji went around collecting funds for the celebration. The consecration ceremony was held with great pomp and enthusiasm. One day, a devotee told Swami Sankaranandaji, "You are going to install the image of Sri Ramakrishna." Swami Sankaranandaji corrected the devotee saying, "No, because He will reside here, I had to come." This was a great lesson Swami Gahananandaji learnt from Swami Sankaranandaji.

While in Shillong, Swami Gahananandaji together with the President, Swami Saumyanandaji, used to conduct relief activities in which many householder devotees helped them.

Mother worship was common among the people of Khasi hills. On one occasion, Swami Gahananandaji discussed in a certain village the greatness and grandeur of Mother worship. The simple village-folk derived immense satisfaction on hearing the discourse on the deep significance behind the worship of God as the Mother. They told Maharaj in all frankness, "You are the first one to come into our midst and affirm that the worship that we have been performing is correct. Those who came before you only told us that our conduct and worship were all wrong."

Earlier, when Maharaj was engaged in serving Ketaki Maharaj, a group of hill people came one day and sung with great fervour, "Guru

kripa hi kevalam”. Their deep faith and devotion cast an indelible mark in the mind of Swami Gahananandaji. From then on, there was an intense attraction in the mind of Maharaj for the people of Meghalaya. They were to him “more than one’s own” than the so-called “educated” and “people of one’s own region”. Reminiscing about his Shillong days, Maharaj would say, “I was in Shillong for only four and a half years. The memory of working in the midst of the hill people is still undiminished. The joy one got by serving them could only be compared with the joy one derived by providing drinking water to a thirsty person. The mind would become filled to the overflowing.”

While Swami Gahananandaji was staying in Shillong, many young men joined the Order there. Towards them all, Revered Maharaj cherished all-embracing love, and gave them valuable advice so that the newcomers would be inspired by the monastic ideal of renunciation and service, and be steeped in the ideals and traditions handed down through a succession of disciples.

A youth, within a few days of joining the Ashrama at Shillong, was affected by severe b-coli infection resulting in a frequent urge for urination accompanied with bleeding and unbearable pain. As there was no attached bathroom for his use, Swami Gahananandaji used to lead him, holding him by his hands, to and from a bathroom at a distance. In a few days, however, the Brahmachari recovered from this illness.

Another young Brahmachari did not go for dinner as his stomach was upset. Noticing his absence in the dining-hall and coming to know the cause of it, Gahananandaji affectionately asked him whether he had consulted a doctor. The Brahmachari replied that it was not necessary and that he would be alright in a day. On hearing this, Gahananandaji pointed at the Brahmachari’s body and asked him, “Whose body is that?” The Brahmachari replied, “It is mine.” With firmness born of conviction,

Maharaj said, “Yes, this body *was* yours, but from the moment you joined the Ramakrishna Order, it is the property of Sri Ramakrishna, and you have no right to neglect or misuse it.”

To a Brahmachari who had just joined the Shillong Ashrama, Gahananandaji pointed out, “Whenever you used to come here as a devotee, we used to say, ‘Please come, kindly sit down, help yourself to a little Prasad, etc.’ But now onwards, you will not get that treatment. Now, you are our younger brother in the Ramakrishna family. If need be, you will be chastised, and you will also receive affection due to a younger brother. If you expect the earlier treatment, you will be sorely disappointed. Remember this.”

The aforesaid Brahmachari used to pluck flowers from the Ashrama garden to decorate Sri Sri Thakur in his room. Noticing this, Revered Maharaj opened his eyes by saying, “You may have a good meditation if fragrant flowers are kept in the room. But, never pick flowers from the garden for your room. Know for certain that all the flowers in the garden are meant for Sri Sri Thakur in the temple — not in your room. Further, Sri Sri Thakur walks about in the Ashrama enjoying the fragrance and sight of flower-laden trees and plants. I have heard that Revered Raja Maharaj used to say so. Therefore, keep this in mind, won’t you?”

Once Gahananandaji’s insight and advice opened up new vistas of understanding in a Brahmachari, who was assistant to the kitchen Bhandari. A group of devotees, tired and hungry, had come to the Ashrama from a far distant place. Gahananandaji, who was the Manager of the Ashrama, learnt to his utter grief that for a long time the group had been waiting without food. When the aforesaid Brahmachari was asked by Maharaj to make arrangements for their food, the Brahmachari said that as the Bhandari was away, it would incur his displeasure and anger if

he did so without his knowledge. With great gravity in his tone, Swami Gahananandaji said, “This Ashrama belongs to Sri Sri Thakur. The devotees who come here are His guests. Go, feed them, for is it not our responsibility to look after Sri Sri Thakur’s guests? If on that score the Bhandari gets vexed, let him. Sometimes, it is better even to take the blame on oneself for the good and welfare of others.”

A very senior monk speaking of his days in Shillong said, “Revered Naresh Maharaj was the main advisor and helper in good and bad times. In various ways, including giving sound advice, he helped me. That is a debt that could not be repaid, nor will ever be repaid. I learnt from him the ABC of Ashrama life. Truly, under his inspiration only, the firm resolve to become a monk took root in me.”

In the year 1954, Swami Gahananandaji, with cooperation from devotees, lay and monastic, observed the birth-tithi of Swami Vivekananda on the holy Sankranti day in the month of Paush. The programme was held both in the house where Swami Vivekananda had stayed and in the Quinton Hall where Swami Vivekananda had lectured. The President of the function mentioned to the delight of the listeners that he had had the blessed opportunity to garland Swamiji during his reception in Shillong. In that very year, the birth centenary of Sri Ma Sarada Devi was observed in Shillong Ashrama with great pomp and eclat. A three-day celebration was also held at Shella. To this purpose, Gahananandaji and many others carried with them rice, potatoes, etc. to Shella. On that occasion, special worship was accorded to Shiva, Chandi, and other local deities. Recalling this incident, Gahananandaji later reminisced, “There was a mart of joy there during those few days. On the day of our return from there, the women-folk wept as if they were going away from their home to their mother-in-laws’ house.”

In the year 1932, with the aim of providing adequate health care to pregnant women and infants, a unique hospital known as “Shishu Mangal Pratishtan” came to be established in a small tin shed, by the untiring efforts of Swami Dayanandaji. In this institution, holding fast to the ideals placed by Swami Dayanandaji and placing himself under his guidance, Swami Gahananandaji shaped himself between 1958 and 1963. Keeping the lofty ideal of “service to humanity in the spirit of worship of God” bright before him, Maharaj set on a new spiritual journey. From 1958 to 1985, for long 27 years, he was intimately involved in the activities of the institution. It was owing to his strenuous efforts that “Shishu Mangal Pratishtan” developed into a full-fledged general hospital known as “Seva Pratishtan”. There are multiple ways to serve humanity: providing good medical care and treatment to helpless sick persons was the new way of service that Sri Ramakrishna chose for Gahananandaji.

When he took charge of the institution in 1963, this hospital catered only to infants and mothers. He added to this Medicine, Surgery, Gynaecology, Neurology, and other departments. The farsighted Maharaj, with a view to developing the hospital into a complete, dependable medical institution, brought about a blending of practical experience and advanced basic research in the field of medical sciences by starting in the various departments postgraduate units affiliated to the University of Calcutta, thereby bringing about a meaningful confluence of knowledge and work. This was how the ‘Vivekananda Institute of Medical Sciences’ came into existence at Seva Pratishtan. Maharaj also brought into existence a high quality Nurses’ Training Course and different types of Paramedical Courses. It is to his great inspiration that the hospital came to be well acclaimed as an institution that provided dependable medical care at low cost to common people. His greatest contribution was that he

infused a genuine attitude of service to the poor and distressed patients in the minds of the doctors, nurses and other workers.

In addition to the hospital centre, he organized several service activities such as treatment to poor, sick people in distant villages using the Mobile Medical Unit, Eye Operation Camps, Relief during Gangasagar Mela, treatment to countless refugees who came to India during the freedom struggle in Bangladesh, etc.

A monk of the Order observes: “The leadership of Revered Swami Gahananandaji was a quality to imbibe — his distribution of work, taking on one’s own shoulders difficult situations, giving refuge to the downtrodden, standing beside any monk or lay devotee, assuring freedom from fear during times of danger, etc. When anyone among the workers fell sick, Revered Maharaj would go daily to his bedside, offer solace, and express equal concern for speedy recovery as well as seek to know from the treating doctors the minutest details. He never got angry or used harsh words. He was cool-headed, yet with a deep and genuine concern for all. All the requirements of the hospital were at his finger tips.”

Uncommon liberality peeped through his every utterance and conduct. Once a lay worker in Seva Pratishthan, with whose bad behaviour everyone was vexed, failed to get from the cashier advance money for his marriage. Sanctioning this request, Maharaj observed slowly with his innate genuine sympathy, “Let him behave as he does in the office; but on that score, shall he not marry?”

The greater the pressure of work placed on him, the greater was the steadiness with which Maharaj worked. He used to say, “I feel better under great pressure of work.” When a monk sought from him permission for taking an hour’s rest after lunch, Maharaj said, “It should be enough if you take rest by taking your meals slowly.”

A monk, who was seriously injured in a traffic accident, was brought to the Seva Pratishtan and placed under the treatment of orthopaedic surgeons. To infuse mental strength and instil self-dependence, Maharaj gave him light work to do when he was able to move about with the help of a crutch. And sometimes he would affectionately carry to him fruits, sweets, Horlicks, etc.

When there was turmoil among a section of the workers of Seva Pratishtan and the financial position was also extremely unsound, Maharaj brought the situation under control with the help of infinite patience and self-effort, taking the entire responsibility on his own shoulders. Though the other monastic brothers were rattled by this incident, they did not lose heart owing to the advice given by and the direction shown by Maharaj.

His ever wakefulness to team work increased the zeal for work in each. When taking up a new assignment, a monk was to learn the details from the person who was in charge earlier. This wonderful methodology ensured unity among the monastic workers. If anyone showed eagerness for taking up additional new work, Maharaj used to say, “Wait! Do not increase the work.” He had learnt this work methodology when he was engaged in service activities under Swami Sankaranandaji. If anyone erred in any work, Maharaj would not scold him in front of others; he would, to protect the person’s dignity and self-respect, call him aside and explain to him his mistake in a friendly way.

While at Seva Pratishtan, if anyone enquired of Maharaj whether he was keeping well, Maharaj would say that he was not keeping well at all. On asking to know the reason, Maharaj would say, “When everyone in a family is filled with grief even if one is sick, how can I be well when in this hospital so many in the family of Sri Ramakrishna have fallen sick?” Such was the bond of unity he had with the sick inmates.

It would be eight o'clock by the time Maharaj finished his ablutions, japa and meditation, and physical exercise after getting up early in the morning. From then on till late at night, it was only work — an occasion to be immersed in work with great application of mind.

Once while going from Belur Math to Seva Pratishtan, the vehicle by which Maharaj was travelling was caught up in a terrible traffic jam. Added to this, a military officer's vehicle hit his vehicle from behind. Calmly, Maharaj got down from his vehicle, went behind, inspected the extent of damage, and noted down the number of the vehicle which had caused the damage. Casually he took the chaddar from his shoulders in his hand and began to control the movement of traffic as if he were a traffic constable. On clearing the jam, he explained to the military officer his mistake, and brought him to the Bhavanipur Police Station. An onlooker monk, observing this quiet and peaceful demeanour of Maharaj, thought that to Revered Maharaj the entire world was an anxiety-free path to travel.

Once a few anti-social elements started causing damage in Seva Pratishtan. Maharaj came out of his room, caught hold of an agitated youth, brought him to his own room, and had a short talk with him. The youth came out of the room pacified and the situation changed entirely. Those who had wanted to create the disturbance left the scene. Maharaj was not at all perturbed by this event, and he took his seat in his office with his usual deep concern for all, as if nothing at all had happened.

Revered Maharaj would always remain unperturbed, calm, patient and cheerful, even under unfavourable circumstances. When asked about the secret of his mental poise, his spontaneous reply was: "Haven't you read in the Gita (6.22) –

*Yaó labdhvá cáparam lábham manyate nádhikam tataë|*

*Yasmin sthito na duhkkena gurunápi vicályate||*

“[That spiritual joy] obtaining which one does not regard anything as higher, and being established in which one is not perturbed even by great sorrow”. Incidentally, this was one of his favourite Gita verses.

Once a patient had become weak owing to serious illness, and there was no hope of recovery. But after Maharaj had spent a little time with him, the patient’s face brightened up with a rare sense of fulfilment, and he exclaimed, “Today my life is full with joy.”

Maharaj’s sympathy and love brought about radical transformation in the lives of many doctors. A well-known physician said about him: “This great soul, who is outwardly stern and disciplined but is loving, sweet-natured, soft-spoken, and efficient in work, is my life’s ideal.”

Once, while returning to Seva Pratishtan, he saw a man lying on the sidewalk, sick and miserable. He immediately took the man in his car and got him admitted to the hospital. Even after he was cured of his ailment, he was kept in the hospital for some more time and given nourishing food. After he gained strength and good health, he was sent home in a car.

Gahananandaji kept himself informed of the condition of almost every patient, sometimes even after they had returned home. Through his personal attention, love and sympathy Maharaj showed how Sri Ramakrishna’s ideal of “serving man as God” (*Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva*) can be practised in one’s life.

He had a personal, loving relationship with every monastic brother of the Order. He was specially considerate towards those who found it difficult to adjust themselves in some of the centres of the Order. He would take them under his care and would give them some work which suited their temperament and capacity. But he kept a watch on their conduct and saw to it that they lived a disciplined life.

Gahananandaji had deep respect for the senior monks of the Order and took personal care of their treatment. Whenever necessary, he would send medical equipment, doctors and attendants to their rooms in Belur Math. Once when he was away from Kolkata, Swami Yatiswaranandaji was admitted to a nursing home. When Gahananandaji came to know of it on his return, he immediately brought Yatiswaranandaji to Seva Pratishtan. During the last illness of Revered Madhavanandaji, Nirvananandaji and Vireswaranandaji, he spared no pains in providing round-the-clock nursing and care to them.

When Swami Vireswaranandaji was seriously ill, an attendant was sent every day from Seva Pratishtan to Belur Math to look after him. Gahananandaji would enquire every day whether the attendant had had his food. It was winter then. Maharaj gave this attendant two blankets and told him, “One you spread on the floor and the other use for covering the body. If you catch cold and fall ill, how will you serve the patient?” One day Maharaj was returning to Kolkata from Belur Math, with this attendant seated in front and Maharaj behind. Being tired, the attendant started dozing, often falling on the driver. Maharaj stopped the car and asked the attendant to sit behind and he himself sat on the front seat. This capacity for empathy – the ability to feel for others as one feels for oneself – was an inborn quality of Gahananandaji Maharaj.

Once the employees of Seva Pratishtan started an agitation and organized a prolonged strike. As the Secretary of the institution, Gahananandaji faced the difficult situation with stoic courage. Finally, when the strike was withdrawn, eighteen of the offenders were charged for offence under law and dismissed from service. However, three months later, Maharaj called the legal consultant who had helped in dismissing the offenders, and asked him to reinstate them. Utterly surprised, the legal consultant reminded Maharaj about the trouble and

harm that those employees had caused to the hospital. But Maharaj in a calm and firm voice replied, “Have you thought how their children at home will eat?” Needless to say, the employees were taken back.

In all matters, under all circumstances, Gahananandaji depended on God. Once there was a deficit of 35 lakh rupees in Seva Pratishtan accounts. When some of the monks drew Maharaj’s attention to it, he told them, “Why do you lose sleep over such matters? Do service with your heart and soul, and everything will be all right.” After a few days, an appeal was issued and the problem was solved without much delay. Whenever anybody approached Maharaj for advice regarding any difficult problem, he used to give only one advice: “Pray to Thakur Sri Ramakrishna and depend on Him. All your problems will be solved.”

In later years Maharaj once told a monk of the Order: “Work is the best form of spiritual practice, and service to man is the best form of worship – these are the two principles I have followed all through my life.”

Swami Gahananandaji was elected a Trustee of Ramakrishna Math and Member of the Governing Body of Ramakrishna Mission in 1965. He was appointed an Assistant Secretary of the two institutions in 1979. For a few years he carried on the duties of the two offices – that of the Secretary of Seva Pratishtan, and that of the Assistant Secretary of Math and Mission. In 1989 he was made the General Secretary of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, and he stayed in Belur Math.

As the chief executive of the Math and Mission, he had to shoulder enormous responsibilities but he never lost his composure. One of the senior Trustees who worked under him said: “It was a joy to work under Revered Gahananandaji Maharaj. He never got upset and was never impatient. If we went to him late or did our work late, he never reprimanded us. He had all the time in the world.” As regards

punctuality, he used to say, “I won’t run after time; time should follow me!” He was never seen to be in a hurry. He never rushed himself to go to the airport or railway station. Once or twice he missed the plane, but that never upset him, and he returned with a smile on his face. The absence of hurry and worry in his life was the result of the wonderful control he had over himself. In fact, *self-possession*, *self-assurance* and *self-confidence* constituted the most characteristic feature of his personality. The characteristics of a *sthitaprajna*, a “man of steady wisdom”, described in the second chapter of the Gita, were manifested in him.

The all too familiar, ever-present smile on his benign face deserves special mention here. It was an expression of self-confidence and faith in God, the radiation of love and friendliness towards all.

He lived a very disciplined life and followed a strict routine. He was very particular about doing japa in the morning and at the night. On many days he had to go out to attend functions or to consult lawyers. But when he returned, he would first make pranams at the shrines in Belur Math, especially the Holy Mother temple. Then he would take bath, change clothes and do japa. Only after that he would take food. He was in the habit of working late into night, when it was calm and free from disturbances.

He was always neat and clean in his dress and way of life. He never approved of sloppiness or slovenliness either in one’s appearance or work. He was very particular that shirts should be fully buttoned up. If he saw any monastic brother wearing unbuttoned shirt, he would ask him to button it properly. He was also particular that monastic brothers should wear their caps properly. At the same time, he never liked gaudy or expensive things.

He had perfect control over the palate and always ate in moderation. He put on an apron before taking food and used spoons and fork while eating. He also exercised regularly, and had a strong physique. In all these matters his aim was to avoid falling ill, for falling ill is not only a burden to others but also sheer waste of precious time which could be utilized in the service of other people. He never liked to tell others about his physical ailments and difficulties. He bore silently the pain caused by prostrate problem, lumbar disc prolapse, coronary bypass surgery, etc. which occurred at different periods in his life.

Gahananandaji was an adept in japa. In the midst of his busy schedule and service activities, he continuously maintained an undercurrent of japa. While travelling by bus, train or plane he was seen doing japa whenever he could. Once he and another senior monk were travelling by car from Trivandrum to Kanyakumari. On the way the brake of the car failed. Realizing that an accident might be imminent, both the Swamis jumped out through the doors, Gahananandaji uttering “Jaya Ramakrishna”.

A senior monk of the Order once said: “I have observed three unique qualities in Gahananandaji: (1) all through his life he did the work of the Sangha with a smiling face; (2) he has dedicated his life to the service of others; (3) he always repeats the Divine Name.” Maharaj would ask people, “How much japa do you do every day?” He found that many people did very little japa.

Revered Maharaj’s devotion to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi cannot be adequately described in words. He lived, moved and had his being in God. It was an unforgettable sight to see him making pranams to Sri Ramakrishna in the shrine. The slow, calm, steady way he offered flowers and obeisance to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy

Mother made it clear that it was a symbolic act of offering his entire being at their lotus feet.

Patience and forbearance constituted a distinguishing mark of his character. He used to say, “By sweet words the whole world could be conquered.” He was straightforward in his dealings with people. He never liked beating about the bush, evasive or misleading talk. With unerring intuition he could understand the inner motives of people. In his dignified presence nobody dared to indulge in irrelevant or unnecessary talk. In his official capacity in the administrative field he often had to deal with erring people sternly, no doubt, but they could also see his loving heart and concern for their welfare.

In all administrative matters he was careful about following rules and regulations. As a result, he is hardly ever known to have taken a false step in day-to-day affairs. He had a fairly comprehensive knowledge of legal implications in many administrative matters, and consulted legal experts before taking any important legal steps or executing such transactions. He was close to some of the eminent lawyers in Kolkata. He had the foresight to see the future expansion of the Math and Mission, and therefore paid particular attention to acquisition of fixed assets for the Sangha.

He had special concern for the welfare of the paid employees of the Math and Mission, and was particular in paying them what they deserved. He used to say, “We do various types of service outside our Ashramas, but should we not also think about those who serve us inside our Ashramas?”

He was always interested in all the activities of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, and strove his utmost for the consolidation, expansion and progress of these twin institutions. In 1980 when the Second Convention of Ramakrishna Movement was held in Belur Math,

Swami Gahananandaji played an active role in making the Convention a grand success. He was a member in many of the steering and executive committees formed by Math and Mission from time to time.

To ensure the participation of lay devotees in spreading the message of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji, a new institution known as Bhav Prachar Parishad was brought into existence under the aegis of Ramakrishna Math in 1980. These Parishads are federations of unaffiliated Ashramas found in different parts of India, especially in West Bengal. The original inspiration for this new venture had been given by the tenth President of the Order, Swami Vireswaranandaji. But Swami Gahananandaji was one among those who gave the proper shape to the movement. In a meeting held at Malda centre in December 1983, he brought together the representatives of twenty-two unaffiliated Ashramas and formed the “Uttaranchal Parishad”. In this way he played a leading role in the formation of “Uttar-Purvanchal Parishad”, “Hooghly District Parishad” and “North 24-Parganas Parishad”.

His deep commitment to spreading the message of the Holy Trio made him travel to different parts of India and the world. Without caring the least for his personal comforts, convenience or health, he used to travel, sometimes walking all the way, to even remote and difficult places. Shulkuni is a remote village in the Sunderbans without electricity or even a metalled road. Nor was there any good house for accommodation with toilet facilities. To reach the village one had to wade through mud and water. Four devotees carried Maharaj on their shoulders across that area. Maharaj stayed in that village overnight and blessed the poor people there with spiritual initiation.

Once the students of Vidyamandira, Ramakrishna Mission’s college near Belur Math, organized a service camp under the National Service Scheme (NSS) in the village Manikpur in the district of Howrah. The

aim of the camp was to do service to the poor villagers. The students requested Gahananandaji (who was then Secretary of Seva Pratishtan) to visit their camp, and Maharaj agreed to go. In order to reach the village one had to get down at a level crossing and walk along the railway track. To the surprise of everyone, Maharaj got down at the level crossing and walked along the rail track at a brisk pace.

Although the major part of his life was spent among grown-up people, he was very much interested in youth welfare. He would encourage youngsters to undertake different types of social service, and would try to mould their character and life through salutary advice. He had a five-‘S’ formula for youths: *Seva*, *Swádhyáya*, *Sádhana*, *Samyama*, *Satya* (service, study, spiritual practice, self-control and truthfulness, respectively)

In July 1991 he visited England at the invitation of Swami Bhavyanandaji who was the head of Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre at Bourne End in Buckinghamshire. On that occasion he visited Moscow also.

Swami Gahananandaji was elected one of the Vice-Presidents of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in 1992, and shifted his residence to Kankurgachhi Math of which he became the head. He continued to perform the dual duties for thirteen long years. During this period he travelled extensively in India and abroad giving spiritual guidance to innumerable people. The extent of enormous physical exertion that he had to undergo for spiritual service at this time is beyond the capacity of ordinary people.

Maharaj had the firm faith that the true meaning of Sannyasa was ‘renunciation and service’, as Swami Vivekananda had put it. If some young man or woman expressed the wish to take to monastic life, he would feel very happy and would encourage them wholeheartedly. Once

a young man came to him and told him that he wanted to become a monk. Maharaj was delighted to know this, and the next morning when he went for a walk he took the young man with him, talking with him as if he were his own. Finally he asked him, “When will you join us?” The youngster mentioned a particular date, and on that day he came and joined the Kankurgachhi Math.

He used to encourage spiritual seekers in their quest for God realization. His favourite song was Swamiji’s “Hymn of Samadhi”. (In Bengali beginning with *Na hi surya na hi Jyoti ...*) In the course of his talks to youngsters he would speak of Swamiji’s message with so much fervour that it would create a lasting impression in their minds. Speaking about the need for intense aspiration in spiritual life, he used to say, “Like the hungry man desiring for food, like the thirsty man thirsting for water, like the drowning man struggling to have a breath of air, so should we have intense longing for God realization. Along with this, it is also necessary to prepare oneself every day for God realization.”

In spite of his dignified bearing and his high position in the Order, Gahananandaji was always cheerful and had a keen sense of humour. He had a good stock of humorous anecdotes and stories which he would sometimes narrate to regale monks or to drive home the point he was trying to stress. When he was holding charge of Seva Pratishtan, there was a paid accountant at the office who was of irritable nature. One day he went to Maharaj and began to harangue about the difficulties of balancing the accounts. In an agitated voice he blurted out: “By keeping this kind of complicated accounts my hair has turned grey. What do you say, Maharaj?” Maharaj calmly said, “Is that so?” Then pointing to his own bald head, he said, “My hair not only turned grey but has all fallen.” But the humour was lost on the accountant. Then Maharaj pointed to a walking stick in the corner and asked the man: “Do you need the help of a

walking stick?” This brought out a faint smile of understanding on the face of the accountant.

The year 1993 happened to be the year of the centenary of Swami Vivekananda’s historic appearance at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in September 1893. Swamiji left Mumbai on 31 May 1893 en route to America. Gahananandaji Maharaj celebrated the centenary of this event by conducting different functions at Kankurgachhi Math. In the course of his speech at one of these functions, Maharaj said: “The time has now come for us to put into practice Swamiji’s insights and build a new universal society in which everyone without the distinction of caste, creed or race can experience intellectual enlightenment, religious harmony and spiritual fulfilment.”

To celebrate the centenary of the 1893 Parliament of Religions, a World Parliament of Religions was organized in Chicago by a group of eminent American citizen. The Vice-President of the Celebration Committee came to Kolkata to invite Gahananandaji, and Maharaj accepted the invitation as a representative of the Math and Mission. At the Parliament, Maharaj gave a short talk in the inaugural session and two long talks on Swamiji’s message to the West in two plenary sessions. He travelled in different parts of the US on that occasion.

When Revered Maharaj moved to Kankurgachhi Math (Yogodyan), he saw some big rooms which were used only once in a year during the annual public celebrations. He noticed that the poor children of the locality did not have a place to study without disturbance. So Maharaj converted those rooms into study halls for the children. In due course, arrangement for free coaching of the students was also made there. The children were also given nourishing food. In this way a “Balak Sangha” or Educational and Cultural Centre for Children came into existence at Kankurgachhi Math.

Swami Vivekananda, after his first visit to America, returned to India in 1897. He landed in Kolkata on 19 February 1897. At the instance of Gahananandaji the centenary of this event was celebrated. The railway authorities arranged a specially decorated train which started from Budge Budge. Maharaj himself travelled in the train carrying a big photo of Swamiji and got down at Sealdah station.

In 2004, Gahananandaji organized the Holy Mother's 150th anniversary celebrations on a big scale at Kankurgachhi Math.

Busy as he always was with services of various kinds, Gahananandaji never had any strong desire to visit holy places of pilgrimage in India. Nevertheless, in later years he visited some holy places like Badrinath, Gangotri, Gaya and Amarnath in the company of other monks.

In 1999 March, Maharaj had to undergo coronary bypass surgery at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi. The next year, he had an attack of malaria. These physical troubles and incessant work and travel began to tell upon the otherwise robust health of Maharaj. But he continued his routine and services as usual.

At Kankurgachhi he would go to the shrine after his bath. When he returned from the shrine, sadhus would assemble in his room to make pranams to him. After that the devotees would offer their pranams. A sadhu known as Vishnu once did not come in time for pranams. Maharaj waited for him and this annoyed others. Suddenly Vishnu appeared on the scene. Maharaj told him with his usual smile, "See, we have been till now conducting the yajna (sacrifice) without Vishnu." (Lord Vishnu is the Presiding Deity of all Yajnas or fire sacrifices.) All burst into laughter.

Maharaj had a tolerant attitude towards all. Holy Mother Sarada Devi used to say, "There is no virtue greater than forbearance (*sahyagun*)". This virtue was abundantly present in Gahananandaji. Once a senior

monk came to him and complained about a junior monk. Maharaj told him, “I have to make the bouquet (for offering to the Lord) with different types of flowers.”

After becoming Vice-President of the Order he used to receive requests from the heads of different branches to visit their centres and bless devotees with initiation. As the Sangha is growing in its stature and popularity, the number of spiritual aspirants seeking initiation (*daksha*) has also been steadily increasing. Responding to the requests of heads of branches, Gahananandaji toured the different states in India such as West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman, and other places, and blessed countless numbers of spiritual seekers with initiation. Outside India he toured all over Bangladesh and visited Singapore, Malaysia, Rangoon, Mauritius, Australia, Japan, America, Canada, England, France and Germany. In some of these countries also he gave initiation to many people.

In some places the number of devotees seeking initiation in a single day went up to 200 or even 250. But Revered Maharaj would patiently give spiritual instructions to everyone individually. Sometime the initiation ceremony went on till the afternoon or even dusk. But Maharaj never felt tired. He gave initiation not only at the Math and Mission centres but also at many other ‘private’ centres including some small ones in remote areas. In many of these places there were not enough facilities for comfortable stay, but Maharaj didn’t mind the difficulties. When his monastic attendants objected to his going to such places, he would reply: “If I were staying in a place like Rishikesh, I would have to live by begging. The arrangements in these places are far better than that.” He had a soft corner in his heart for the tribals of the northeast regions of

India. He used to visit that part almost every year and gave initiation to large numbers of people there.

After the passing away of the thirteenth President of the Order, Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, on 25 April 2005, Swami Gahananandaji was elected to be the fourteenth President of the Order on 25 May 2005, when he made the President Maharaj's quarters in Belur Math his permanent place of residence. Here also he had to be busy with the work of spiritual ministrations. He gave initiation twice, sometimes thrice, a week. Apart from this, he had to receive the pranams of monastics in the morning and of devotees both in the morning and in the afternoon, and talk to spiritual seekers at other times also.

In 2005 after becoming the President, Swami Gahananandaji visited some places like Bangalore, Kalady, Delhi, Mayavati, Shyamla Tal, Guwahati, Shillong and Cherrapunji. The next year in February, Maharaj consecrated the new temple at Nagpur Centre. In addition, he visited Agartala, Deoghar, Bhuvaneshwar, the Ancestral House of Swami Vivekananda at Kolkata, etc., and blessed many devotees. On Swami Brahmanandaji's Tithipuja day in the year 2007, he inaugurated the newly constructed Probationers' Training Centre Building at Belur Math where the novices of the Order are trained.

As President of the Order, he presided over the tri-annual monks' conference held on 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2005. Addressing the monks on this occasion he said, "Renunciation, Love of God, and Service — these are the three ideals of our Order. We have inherited this lofty ideal directly from the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna through a succession of disciples. The future of the Order depends on how we are going to practically implement these great ideals."

Maharaj's regard for the elderly monks of the Order is worth emulating. On many days it was seen that, when Swamis and

Brahmacharins offered their salutations in the morning, Maharaj would sometimes try to get up from his seat. This was because he had spotted an elderly monk approaching. As soon as the monk neared, Maharaj would request him to place his hands on his own head. The elderly monk feeling himself small, would remonstrate saying, “How can that be! You are our Sangha Guru. Do place your hands on my head.” At last, Revered Maharaj had to be content with merely touching the feet of the elder monk.

Normally, Maharaj would not converse at the time of morning pranams. However, when a topic was raised, he would give appropriate replies. An incident is worth recounting. Maharaj had returned to Belur Math after visiting a branch centre. One by one, the Swamis and Brahmacharins were offering their pranams to Revered Maharaj. An elderly monk prostrated himself before Maharaj and, getting up, said, “Maharaj, you were away for such a long time and the Math was empty without you.” Pointing to the portraits of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda and the other monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Maharaj said, “But, they were here!” The monk said in reply, “But, you are their representative.” Revered Maharaj then stated, “You too are their representative.” The monk said, “Maharaj, you are the President of the Order. You are far, far advanced compared to us.” After a while Maharaj looked directly into the eyes of the monk and said with firmness in his voice, “It is sufficient that Sri Sri Thakur has graciously given us refuge.” The assembled monks remained spellbound listening to this conversation, thinking how deep must be the realization of Revered Maharaj to have such a deep spirit of self-surrender to Sri Ramakrishna.

One day an attendant asked Maharaj, “Have you had the vision of God?” Maharaj did not want to encourage this kind of personal questions. So he asked him, “What need have you to know it?” But the attendant

continued, “If we know your response, we will get more strength and enthusiasm in our spiritual practices.” “Yes,” said Maharaj, “one day while I was at Seva Pratishtan, I went to the first floor of Udbodhan to offer pranams to Holy Mother. Standing before the footprints of the Holy Mother, I was looking at Her picture. I then saw that the Holy Mother was actually standing by my side.” The attendant asked Maharaj, “Did the Holy Mother tell you anything?” “No,” answered Maharaj.

It appeared that the grace of Revered Maharaj showered on the devotees became a hundredfold on becoming the President of the Order. Mentally and physically challenged persons too were given initiation, although it caused him great trouble. Revered Maharaj for the first time initiated a convict from the reformatory of Medinipur. He initiated four more and all of them found a new meaning and purpose in life. It surprised all to see the transformation in their lives which became the subject matter of articles in the newspapers.

From the beginning of the year 2007, a rapid deterioration in his health was perceptible. Added to that, he became more and more indrawn. He had the last darshan of holy Kamarpukur and Jayrambati in February 2007. In both places he gave initiation to many earnest seekers and fulfilled their prayers. After staying there for a few days, he returned to Belur Math. Before leaving Jayrambati, he repeatedly insisted, like a petulant child, to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the Holy Mother Temple. The attendants, considering the health of Maharaj, did not want him to do that. However, they had to yield. On entering the sanctum sanctorum, Maharaj asked for flowers to offer to Holy Mother. Monks immediately rushed and procured some flowers from the nearby garden, and Maharaj offered all the flowers at the feet of the image of the Holy Mother with full satisfaction. Thereafter, holding the marble lotus on which the image of the Holy Mother was seated, Maharaj remained for a

long time offering pranams to Holy Mother. Maharaj came out of the temple with a joyful countenance. Before boarding the vehicle, he offered namaskars to all the devotees with folded hands. Was it because he had a premonition of the impending end?

In May-June of 2007, Maharaj went to Jamtara Math, staying there for a little over a month. Despite ill health, there was no respite from devotees' pranams, initiation, and interview. Simultaneously, he was undergoing acupuncture treatment. Here, Maharaj gave hints of his imminent Mahasamadhi on several occasions. Once during the morning walk, he said, "My work is over. Now I have to go." His attendant told him, "How is that, Maharaj! Your health is fine. You are walking steadily. You have to remain with us for a long time; there is so much to be done yet." Maharaj stood up on hearing this and, raising his walking stick, said, "You can verify what I have said." At the conclusion of the morning walk, he said, "Call them (the Trustees) from the Math. I will explain everything to them. Let them shoulder the burden hence." With great effort the thoughts of Maharaj had to be weaned away to other topics.

On 17<sup>th</sup> June, Maharaj returned from Jamtara to Belur Math. After his return to Belur Math, Maharaj was unable to go to the temple of Sri Ramakrishna on account of his bad health. He was unable to take food properly and he also reduced his conversations with others. An attendant one day asked Maharaj, "Do you know how many days you have not gone to the temple? Sri Ramakrishna is seated there and yet you are not going to the temple." Maharaj, who had not been talking much for a few days, said in a stern voice, "He is here also, and He is seeing me." The attendant said, "What indeed is He seeing? You are not taking medicines and He is doing nothing in this matter." Maharaj said, "He is giving me the right medicine." The attendant asked, "Why then has He made you

the President and kept you like this?” Maharaj asserted, “You will not understand that.” The attendant queried, “Who will know then?” Maharaj said, “He who is to understand that will understand. When it is time for you to understand, you too will.”

It was the Snana Yatra day, 30<sup>th</sup> June. A great many devotees had assembled. Maharaj entered the sanctum sanctorum of the Main Temple, offered flowers to the relics of the Master, and also water. Thereafter, Maharaj expressed a keen desire to sit on the floor of the temple. But on account of lack of practice, he could not sit on the floor. Seated on a low stool, he performed japa for a long time. Then he offered pranams to Sri Ramakrishna and left the temple. His face shone with boundless peace.

On 17<sup>th</sup> July, Revered Maharaj initiated devotees for the last time. He who commenced his life of initiating devotees with 25 devotees on the Snana Yatra day, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1992, at Yogodyan, ended with initiation to just 2 devotees on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2007. The total number of devotees initiated by Maharaj is 1,42,955. Owing to poor health, it was not possible to give initiation to more. In spite of all this, he inaugurated the newly constructed building in the campus of Seva Pratishthan on 24<sup>th</sup> July, on the occasion of the Platinum Jubilee of the institution. Thereafter, he was admitted to Seva Pratishthan the same day and had a thorough check-up.

Guru Purnima fell on 30<sup>th</sup> July. Despite ill health, Revered Maharaj received the pranams of Swamis, Brahmacharins, and devotees, and blessed them all mentally. Again, he did likewise on Jhulan Purnima, 28<sup>th</sup> August, being the birthday of Swami Niranjananandaji, a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

From then on, Maharaj’s health continued to deteriorate. Owing to Parkinson’s disease and other age-related ailments, he used to have convulsions. This was a cause for anxiety among all. So, he was admitted to the Intensive Cardiac Care Unit of Seva Pratishthan on 4<sup>th</sup> September.

On account of the administration of sedatives, Maharaj was practically drowsy all the time. Even then devotees were not deprived of having his darshan. For the first few days, Maharaj wanted to say something, but it was not comprehensible. Suddenly, he was heard saying, “Victory to the Guru, Victory to the Guru,” in a clear voice. Thus, bereft of external consciousness, Maharaj was staying in the hospital. There were ups and downs in his physical condition.

The hospital nurses served Maharaj without a break. Their one-pointed dedicated service to Maharaj is beyond compare. Those who were witness to the efforts of the doctors in the improvement of their extremely venerated Maharaj’s health and their concern for him, can never forget it. Reputed doctors from Kolkata and Bangalore, as also well established experts in the field of neurology from England and America, tried their best and applied their mind. But it was all to no avail.

His physical condition was the cause of anxiety for all, because the Autumnal Worship of the Divine Mother Sri Sri Durga and the Heads’ Conference were near at hand. Any unexpected turn of events would be a great impediment to both these programmes. However, the celebrations and the Conference went on smoothly. What is more, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November, the day of his Mahasamadhi, there was noon feeding of the Heads of Centres who could not attend the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of the Seva Pratishthan. Seventy Heads of Centres had the darshan of Revered Maharaj at noon and offered him their pranams. There was a rapid deterioration in Maharaj’s health from 4:45 p.m. Doctors administered appropriate medicines immediately. There was no improvement and the continued deterioration only increased everyone’s anxiety. Doctors told the attendants of Maharaj that the last moments of Revered Maharaj had arrived.

Those assembled saw that Revered Maharaj had opened his eyes. A little holy water (*charanamrita*) brought from Belur Math was given to Maharaj through his parted lips. The flowers offered to Sri Ramakrishna were held on the forehead and chest of Maharaj. The photos of the Holy Trio were held in front of the eyes of Revered Maharaj and it appeared that he actually saw them. All assembled sang in one voice, “Hari Om Ramakrishna”. Fifteen minutes passed by in this way. Maharaj gradually closed his eyes. After 3 to 4 minutes, he took deep breath twice. The monitor indicated a flat line revealing that life had come to an end. The river had entered the ocean; the jivatman had merged in the Paramatman. A true humanitarian, an untiring worshipper of God in human beings, one who had been dedicated at the feet of God — Swami Gahanananda — merged for ever at the lotus feet of Sri Ramakrishna. It was 5:35 p.m. Darkness enveloped on all sides. The aratrikam in the centres of the Ramakrishna Order had started just then.

The sad news of the Mahasamadhi spread with lightning speed through the media. The lifeless body of Maharaj was brought from the cabin to the building which had been recently inaugurated by himself, and kept in a hall for all to offer their last respects. Countless men and women thronged the hospital to have a last darshan. That same night, the body was taken to the Cultural Hall in Belur Math. Throughout the night thousands of people lined up and walked with slow gait to offer flowers and garlands soaked with their tears. The next day, 5<sup>th</sup> November, at 10 a.m. the body was taken in a procession by Swamis and Brahmacharins to the front of the temple of Sri Ramakrishna and kept at the Math Courtyard for two hours. After that it was taken to the Holy Mother’s ghat where the body was bathed in Ganges, clothed with new ochre robes and worshipped with camphor Arati. The body was then taken to the Holy Mother Temple; to Swami Vivekananda Temple; and to the final

resting place on a bed of sandalwood at the Math's cremation ground. All through there was chanting in chores, "Hari Om Ramakrishna". The funeral pyre was lit at 1 p.m. amidst singing of devotional songs appropriate to the occasion, which continued till the fire reduced the body to ashes at 3.45 pm. The fire was put out with Ganges water and the holy spot was beautifully decorated with garlands. Everything came to an end with the Vedic peace chants and Jayadhvani:

Victory to Sri Guru Maharaj!

Victory to the Divine Mother!

Victory to Swamiji!

Victory to Ganga!

Om! Peace! Peace! Peace!

## **Selected Precepts of Gahananandaji**

1. Sri Ramakrishna is the centre of our lives. We should never forget this fact at every step we take in life. He is the Master of our home; He is the Master of our Ashrama. Whenever we get into difficulties, whenever we have to face problems, go to Him, tell Him about your difficulties, pray to Him.
2. Always keep in mind, “I belong to Him, I am the representative of Thakur.” For a representative there is nothing which he can regard as his own. If this attitude is always maintained, then we won’t take any false step.
3. Character-building is the real thing to be done. We have to shape our character in the mould of Thakur–Swamiji. For the building of character, self-confidence and self-reliance are very much necessary.
4. If we want to have total fulfilment, true bliss, everlasting peace, then we have to go beyond our petty little self, our ego, our limited personality, and we have to discover our true nature, our higher Self, the source of our consciousness, the Atman.
5. Each and every work in the Math should be done by always keeping in mind that the centre and goal of all activities is Thakur. This means we have to give one hundred percent of our mind to Thakur. The work we do, sweeping and cleaning, keeping things ready for worship such as picking flowers or bel leaves, whatever work we do, if we can give our total mind to it, then every work will become service to Thakur, worship of Thakur.
6. What we should do is to put all our life’s burden upon Thakur. We do not know what we ourselves really need. Dependence on Thakur is all that we need.

7. The ideal of Thakur and Swamiji should be held before all those youths who do not have any ideal in life. If every person tries to follow this ideal in one's home also, then one's sons and daughters will be influenced by it and they will gradually develop the full human potential inherent in them.
8. What we need is to be inspired by the ideals of renunciation and service. For us who have come into contact with this ideal of Thakur, our goal in life should be to strive for the welfare of all people.
9. At this critical juncture in the present age, our immediate duty is to come forward on behalf of all people and create a new 'yoga sutra' based on the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji. The basic Mantra of this new 'yoga-sutra' should be **unselfish love**.