

The Swami of Akalkot

by Damodar K. Mavalanker

Published in The Theosophist 1880

A book entitled "Swami Charitra" (The life of Swami) has just been published in Marathi, in two parts, by one Narayan Hari Bhagvat. It contains the life of one of the most remarkable among modern Hindus, the Swami of Akalkot, from the time he became known under the name of Digambar Bawa, in a town called Mangalvede near Akalkot. Nothing is known of this wonderful man before that time. Neither did any body dare question him about his antecedents. One named Babajipant, who was one of those who had lived with the Swami since the time his public career as an ascetic began, urged him once to give information about his name, native place, and family. Swami gave no direct answer, but simply said "Datta Nagar", and "Chief person" — "the Vata tree." No other attempt to elicit information was made. The reason that led the author to commence this biography is very astonishing. He says that one night he went to bed as usual, but could not sleep for a long time, being oppressed with various thoughts. In this frame of mind he at last fell asleep, but was startled by a most unexpected dream. He saw a Sannyasi approach his bed. This reverend man, unlike persona of his avocation, wore clothes, had "kundala" [A sort of ring usually worn by the Sannyasis in the lower part of their ears] in his ears and carried with him a "dand" [A three or seven knotted bamboo of the wonder working ascetics] and kam andalu.[The gourd which Bramhacharies, Sannyasis and others use for holding water] A man who accompanied him asked the author to get up and see the Swami. He seemed to obey and Swami then said: — "It is a well-known fact that I took Samadhi at Akalkot [When a great Sadhu is dead, this phrase is usually said. Samadhi is the highest stage of Yog training, and when a Yogi is in that state he loses consciousness of this world and sees nothing but his own Divine Spirit]. Write my biography as well suit the present times, in accordance with my instructions. I now disappear." This seen, the author awoke, got up, and was at a great loss what to do, especially as he had never seen the Swami, and was consequently unable to obey the instructions conveyed to him in the dream. Neither had he ever felt any sincere desire to see the Swami during his lifetime. Unlike many, he had never regarded him as an incarnation of God. While in this state of mind he slept for the second time, and again in his dream saw the same person in the same dress and with the same marks about him, who said "get up, why are you thus puzzled? Begin writing and you will have the necessary materials." The author thereupon resolved to at least make the attempt, and wrote to all the persons who knew the Swami well, to supply as much information as they could. The facts mentioned in the book are therefore authenticated. They are moreover credible, because the author says he got many of these from persons he had never written to. Moreover it is not likely that a person like Mr. Govind Vishnu Bhide, who is well informed and experienced, would talk at random without considering well upon the matter. He says that once when he went to see the Swami in fulfilment of a vow made by him, he had also a desire that Swami should advise him in regard to spiritual matters. No sooner did he stand before the Swami than the latter turned his face towards him, and repeated the following verse in Marathi: —

upAsanalo dyaDa cAlavAveM || satkamaryogoM vaya dhAlavAveM ||
thudevasaMtAM sadA lavavai || sarvAM mukhoM maMgala bAlevAveM ||

The Swami of Akalkot by Damodar K. Mavalankar

No less credible is the fact mentioned by Mr. Vishnu Chintamon Bhopatkar, Sheriff of the Sessions Court at Poona. Some ten years ago, when he served as Sheristedar of the District Judge, his wife suffered from a very severe attack of fever. Every day the sickness increased and the doctors pronounced her incurable. He was therefore ready to try any remedy suggested to him. He saw a friend of his who advised him to make a vow that he would take his wife to the Swami of Akalkot, if she should improve, and in the mean time to keep her under the treatment of a native doctor named Gunesh Shastri Sakurdikar. He accordingly prayed to the Swami, and promised to offer a cocoanut to his idol on his behalf. But unfortunately he forgot his promise when he went to bed. And although this fact was known to nobody, his brother-in-law saw in a dream the Swami rebuking him for having forgotten his promise to offer a cocoanut on Swami's account. As he was not aware of the promise made by Mr. Bhopatkar, he was at a loss as to what his dream meant, and consequently communicated the fact to all the family, in great astonishment. When Mr. Bhopatkar heard this, he repented having forgotten his promise, but immediately at her taking a bath he offered the cocoanut on Swami's account, and made a vow that if his wife was cured he would go with her in the month of January to Akalkot to see the Swami. Then he sent for the native doctor mentioned to him by his friend, but found that he had left for his Inam village and was not in Poona. But nevertheless, to the great surprise of Mr. Bhopatkar, it happened that while he was returning home from the office he met on his way the very native doctor whom he was searching for. He then took him home and the latter gladly undertook to treat Mr. Bhopatkar's wife. The medicine administered proved a success, and she went on improving gradually. And, although she was pretty well by the month of January, Mr. Bhopatkar did not think it advisable for her to travel as she was still very weak, and consequently did not take her with him when he left Poona. But he had no sooner left Poona without her, than her sickness recurred so seriously that the next day he was telegraphed to return. Since she had been all right at the time of his departure the sudden receipt of this telegram made him suspect that all this was due to his not having fulfilled his vow to take his wife with him to Akalkot. He then invoked the Swami, asked his pardon, and promised to go with her to Akalkot in the month of July if she should recover. She at once began to mend so rapidly that by the time he reached home he found her all right. In the month of July, although she had recovered, she was in too feeble a state to face the cold of the season. He however resolved to abide by his vow this time, and accordingly went to Akalkot with his wife and the doctor under whose treatment she was. When they reached their place of destination it was raining very hard, and the place where they had put up was very damp. Her constitution however received no shock, but on the contrary she continued to improve. When they all went to the Swami he ordered a certain book to be brought him, and after finding a certain chapter gave it first to the doctor and then to Mr. Bhopatkar, thereby intimating without speaking a word, that their object in coming was gained.

There are many such facts as the above mentioned in the book, all going to confirm the Swami's claim to the knowledge of Yog Vidya. He was a practical example to show what a man can do, if he *will*. If any body had taken advantage of the opportunity thus offered to him and gone to the Swami purely with the intention of studying philosophy, how much good might he not have done himself and his country! During the twenty years or more that the Swami was at Akalkot, no less than 500,000 persons must have gone to see him. But of this large number it would seem that scarcely any had within them an honest desire to study philosophy. Almost all were actuated merely by selfish worldly desires. If they had gone to him with a sincere aspiration to learn how to obtain control over bodily passions, he would have bestowed favours on them, of which no robber in the world could have deprived them. But they sought but these worldly enjoyments with which fools are satisfied. They had never given a moment's consideration to the thought of what their state would be after the death of their physical bodies. In the whole book under notice are given but two or three instances of persons who went to the Swami with a desire to obtain knowledge. The course which he adopted to fulfil the desires of such persons is very curious. One named Narsappa, an inhabitant of Mysore, had gone to Akalkot with a view to receive some instructions on spiritual matters. He was at a great loss how to explain his intentions to the Swami, as he knew neither Marathi nor Hindustani. He however would regularly go and sit silently by the Sannyasi. Once, while he was

The Swami of Akalkot by Damodar K. Mavalankar

sitting near a Puranik, [A person who reads any of the 18 works of Puran and explains the meaning] Swami made him a sign to approach and upon his obeying, Swami took a blank book that was lying by him, and, after turning many of its leaves, gave him a certain page to read. He there found, to his great astonishment and joy, an injunction printed in Kanarese characters, that he should read Bhagvat Gita if he would have his desires fulfilled. He then gladly communicated the fact to a Puranik friend and asked him to read the book to him. The Puranik approached the place where the Swami was sitting, and taking the blank book which had been placed in the hands of Narsappa, looked for the page on which Narsappa said he saw Kanarese characters. He also examined all the other books, as well as all the papers lying there, but nowhere could he find Kanarese characters. This fact is an illustration to show that this singular being communicated his instructions only to those who sincerely desired them.

The book teems with facts illustrative of the power obtained by a Yogi. There are very few persons in this country, who being in search of the ancient Aryan Philosophy, have obtained control over the bodily passions which trouble ordinary men beyond measure. Fewer still who like one now living in India, whom I dare not mention, are known. Almost all who have thoroughly studied or are studying that ennobling philosophy, keep themselves out of the public view in compliance with wise and inexorable rules. It is not through selfishness, as too many imagine. Though unseen, they none the less are continually working for the good of humanity. In thousands of cases what they effect is ascribed to Providence. And whenever they find any one who, like themselves, has an ambition above the mere pleasures of this world, and is in search of that Vidya which alone can make man wise in this as well and happy in the next, they stand ready by his side, take him up in their hands as soon as he shows his worthiness, and put in his way the opportunities to learn that philosophy, the study of which has made them masters of themselves, of nature's forces, and of this world. It is apparent that the Swami of Akalkot was one of such persons. A man peculiarly oracular and sparing of speech, and eccentric to a degree, he nevertheless did a world of good, and his life was crowded with marvels. Many facts might be quoted that would tend to show the great knowledge possessed by him, but the few above related will suffice to introduce him to the reader, and to indicate his familiarity with the occult side of nature. While he was alive, very few learnt the Vidya from him; now that he is gone for ever, his death is lamented, as is usually the case with the sons of India. Their eyes are at last opened to the injury they have inflicted upon themselves by neglecting a golden opportunity.

The account of his death given in the biography is pathetic, and worth repetition. On the last day of the first fortnight of the month of Chaitra, [The first month of the Hindu year according to the Shalivan Era] in the year 1800 of the Shalivan Era, people suspected that the health of the Swami had begun to fail. While he was sleeping in the afternoon of that day, at the place of Tatyasaheb Subhedar he suddenly got up, and ordered a square earthen tile which was lying there to be placed on somebody's head. He then went to a tank outside the skirts of the town, followed by a large crowd, as well as by the person who had the earthen tile on his head, and seated himself on the steps of the tank. He afterwards ordered the man to place the earthen tile in water without injuring it, and asked the crowd to make a loud noise. [According to the Hindu custom when any body loses his nearest relation or one he clearly loves, he turns round the dead body and makes a loud noise by pressing his hand against his mouth, such a noise is here meant.] He then removed to the temple of Murlidhar in the evening until which time he was all right. But at about 9 in the night he had a severe attack of cold and fever. But without communicating the fact to any body he got up early in the morning and went to the burning ground where he showed two or three funeral piles to some of his followers and asked them to remember them. He then directed his footsteps towards the village of Nagannahalli which is about two miles from where he was. And although it was past noon he had taken neither his bath nor meals, but nobody dared ask him to do any thing. On his way he rested in a shed reserved for cows. His followers as usual began to prepare him a bed, when he said — "Henceforward I do not require any bed. Burn it on that tree opposite to me." This startled some of his

The Swami of Akalkot by Damodar K. Mavalankar

followers, but they did not even suspect that the Swami thereby meant any thing in regard to himself. The next day he returned to Akalkot and stopped under a Vata tree behind the palace of Karjalkar. And notwithstanding that he then suffered from fever, he carried on his conversation in his usual tone. Neither did he show any change in his actions. Shortly afterwards he had an attack of diarraehea, and his appetite failed him. But he did not omit his customary bath, and if any body raised objection to his doing so, on account of his sickness, he answered, "What will your father lose if I die?" He was cured of diarraehea by Hanmantrao Ghorpade, the doctor of the dispensary at Akalkot, but continued to suffer from fever and shortly afterwards had paroxysm of coughing. He was then placed under the treatment of a native doctor named Nana Vaidya, all of whose attempts to cure him failed. If asked not to bathe or expose himself to air, he would pay no attention. Neither could he be persuaded to take the medicine prescribed for him. Two or three days afterwards he began to breathe very hard, and he sank rapidly. But still he made no complaint and he did not permit his outward appearance to show any symptoms of what he internally suffered. When his sickness was at last too apparent to be concealed some of his respectable friends thought it advisable for him to distribute alms before his death. This he did most willingly, himself repeating all the necessary mantrams. He gave, with his hands, his own embroidered shawl to Ramacharya. As his cough increased every moment, he was advised to remove from an open place into the inner part of the house. But all the entreaties of his friends proved in vain. The same answer was repeated to them, At noon on the 13th day of the latter fortnight of the month of Chaitra, he ordered his cows and other animals to be brought before him. He then gave away all the food and clothes offered to him. Seeing that by that time his voice was almost gone, one of his good disciples asked him if he had any instructions to communicate. In reply he repeated the following verse from the Gita: —

Ananyakshchintayanti mAM yojanAh: paryupAsate |
tashAM nityAthiyuktAnAM yogakshemaM vahAmyahaM ||

He then turned from the left to the right side and ordered himself to be seated. No sooner was the order obeyed than he was ... !

Now, as was above remarked, people have begun to appreciate his greatness. They have erected a sort of a temple on the spot where he breathed his last, to commemorate his memory. But if they had held him fast in their hearts while he was alive, and if they had studied the Vidya with him, then they would have raised themselves above base passions and the pursuit of pleasures; and obtained that kingdom from which the gainer is never dethroned. To such as may ask how he could have assisted them in making themselves masters of self, let the author speak. — "As all the facts mentioned in the book relate to others, it is quite plain that readers would have the author say what may have happened to himself. It would be unjust for him to shrink from relating his own experience in deference to unworthy fears. It is thirteen months since he saw the Swami in his dream, and he does not now feel the infirmities of age. All his senses are in proper order and not decayed by age. By degrees he gains possession of the secret that enables him to control practically the passions which trouble ordinary men. And whenever he cannot, with all his efforts, check any improper desire, he sees, in an inexpressible way, some event which shows that the Swami is determined upon driving all improper thoughts from the author's mind by bringing him face to face with strange events. This is the only experience which the author has had until now of Swami's greatness." — But it suffices to show that the author is in the right path.