

The Sounds of YOGA-VEDANTA

A Documentary of Life in an Indian Ashram

Recorded in India by Leslie Shepard Folkways Records FR 8970



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The Sounds of YOGA-VEDANTA

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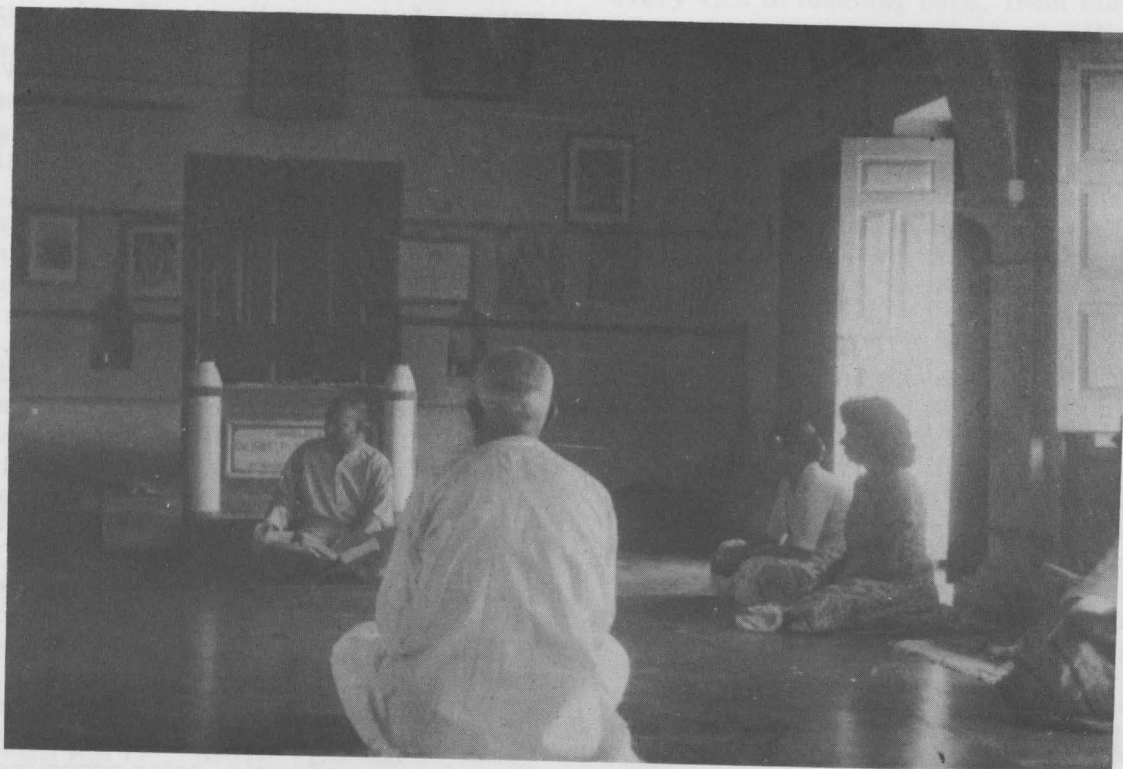
Introduction and Notes by LESLIE SHEPARD

Introduction

VEDANTA is the teaching of the sacred Hindu scriptures, primarily the Upanishads (which collated the ancient oral traditions of the Vedas). These scriptures teach the metaphysical knowledge of the meaning of life itself. Although these scriptures are primarily didactic in method, their real meaning is revealed only after self-purification. In ancient times, pupils were specially tested for their fitness to study these scriptures and then required to follow special disciplines so that the knowledge obtained would have integrity. The pursuit of metaphysical knowledge requires highly developed discrimination, and premature study without purification might lead to serious misunderstanding, sterile intellectual debate, perhaps even madness. According to the temperament and qualification of the pupil, various pathways of self-purification could be followed.

YOGA is the general term for the various paths which purify the individual, qualify him to study the teachings of Vedanta, and lead to understanding in its deepest sense. The word 'Yoga'

means 'yoking' and is used to express the linking of man with God or Universal Reality. This union is necessarily a transcendental experience which lies beyond the plane of words and ideas, and has to be achieved by release from the limiting fields of physical, emotional, mental and intellectual experience. According to Hindu belief this might take more than one lifetime, but no efforts are wasted, and sincere exertion in this life will bear fruit in the next. The most generally known yoga system is that of the Sage Patanjali (probably 200 B.C.) who taught that in order to understand the nature of reality one must first transcend the activities of the mind and intellect. He outlined the following special disciplines:- YAMA and NIYAMA (ethical restraints and moral observances), ASANA (physical posture), PRANAYAMA (breath control), DHARANA (concentration), DHYANA (meditation), leading to various degrees of SAMADHI (superconsciousness). This progress was obligatory upon all spiritual aspirants and it was considered that any religious study without accompanying ethical conduct was bound to lead to confusion. At later periods, different yogis elaborated this programme,



Sri Swami Jyotirmayananda, Vedanta professor, teaching inside the Bhajan Hall.

so that the special temperaments of different seekers could be developed. A number of specialised types of Yoga were evolved, mainly the following:-

HATHA YOGA - the science of physical postures (this is the Yoga most familiar to Westerners). Mind, body and spirit are linked, and in this science the purification of the body should be reflected in mental and spiritual discrimination, balance, and harmony. Excessive pride in the body however, would lead to eccentricity and provide a barrier to spiritual progress, hence the all round development of Patanjali Yoga was still essential.

KARMA YOGA - Karmas are actions, and all actions have inescapable consequences. Some produce immediate results, others accumulated results in one life or another. All must perform actions of various kinds - religious rituals, self-interested, altruistic actions, actions to gratify body or mind. In Karma Yoga, actions are spiritualised by dedicating them to God. Special emphasis is laid on YAMA and NIYAMA - abstinence from killing, falsehood, theft, lust, greed; observance of purity, contentment, austerity, religious study, non-attachment. Meditation on the true nature of the self that performs actions leads to realisation of the Self of all, transcending all limited personal actions.

BHAKTI YOGA - is the path of love and devotion. An emotional temperament can transform his emotions so that they are absorbed in spiritual service instead of becoming attached to limited physical or sensory gratification.

MANTRA YOGA - is the science of sound vibration, of hermetic utterance. According to Hindu metaphysics, the world evolved from the essence of sound, through the diversity and intricacy of vibration and utterance. One of the most sacred mantras is the Parabrahman "AUM", origin of the Universe, comparable with the Greek Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew Shemhamphorash, and the creative Word of God in the Gospel of St. John.

JNANA YOGA - is the path of knowledge, of Wisdom. Beginning with the fine distinctions that may be evolved by careful observation, study and experiment, one speedily finds the limitations of mental knowledge through the limited senses. How can the scientific method compass the detail of all past, present and future - all things from the myriad specks of dust to the countless stars in the Universe? In Jnana Yoga, intellectual knowledge is transformed through intuition.

RAJAH YOGA - is the path of spiritual science, particularly suitable for those of a more abstract or metaphysical temperament. In one sense,

Rajah Yoga is considered as the aim of all other yogas, as it results in transcendental experience.

All these different paths are inter-related and show different facets of one vast practical and theoretical system. In the Vedantic teaching of the popular scripture "Bhagavata-Gita" (a section of the great epic "Mahabharata"), there are eighteen chapters, each expounding a yoga; these are all variations of the yogas enumerated above, and all lead to spiritual knowledge.

There are also various divisions of Vedantic teaching, mostly based on differing concepts of the ultimate reality. Of these, the unqualified Brahman teaching of the Advaita school of Sri Shankaracharya (788-820 A.D.) is perhaps the most impressive. In any case, the resolution of the finer academic points is considered to be a matter of experience rather than debate.

In brief, Vedantic teaching is based upon an analysis of the nature of man's consciousness. In life as we know it, all awareness is limited, hence circumscribed by ignorance and relative truth. In waking life, we are restricted to the mental impressions of the limited five senses. In dream life, the body experience vanishes together with direct sensory stimulation, but the mind continues its activities. In deep sleep, the activities of mind, body and senses all disappear, yet one does not cease to be oneself! What, then, is the continuum of essential self that is constant in all these three states of consciousness, and what is its relationship to the ultimate reality in which it is manifest? Whereas waking life is normally considered superior to dream life, the Vedantic view is that both are very limited aspects of total reality. Waking life has a different continuity - more consistent space and time - but is equally limited by its paradoxical concomitant of ignorance. This in itself, postulates a purer state of consciousness in which ignorance and knowledge coexist as poles of one reality. Moreover it is obvious in waking life that the ego, the sense of exclusive unity that all have, becomes attached to one limited aspect of reality - a particular body, senses and mind, with very limited objectives! Since the ego can also consider physical and mental activities as only levels of oneself, it follows that the individual self is not simply a particular body, senses, emotions, mind or even intellect. To truly discover that self, techniques of meditation are required, and these techniques fail without self-purification. Vedanta present an awe-inspiring view of an Absolute, conditioned in any way, that becomes personal, becomes Creator of a Universe. This one omnipotent God becomes interfused in creation, possible only by limiting omnipotence in the stages of time, space and causation. As the One becomes myriad, in these limiting adjuncts, polar opposites of ignorance and knowledge, desire and aversion, etc. are mani-

fest. The world of the senses and mind, of the individual consciousness, is illusory, true only within its own terms of reference, but relatively untrue on a higher plane, from which truth and untruth may coexist as aspects of one reality. True realisation of the nature of things is perhaps nearest to us in deep sleep, when the illusions of the body and mind do not obtrude. Yet awareness, that which underlies the ego in all conditions is not then integrated with the illusory sense impressions of everyday life. This is possible only in a higher, fourth state called Turiya, in which awareness of the essential individual self discovers its eternal unity with the Self of all. This is the teaching of Vedanta, and the aim of Yoga practice. In short, the discovery of the actual nature of reality behind its multitudinous appearances and confusions.

It is difficult to do justice to the beautifully comprehensive detail and profundity of Vedantic teaching in a short summary. By comparison, most modern schools of philosophy appear limited sterile controversies of minor points. Even Schopenhauer commented: 'The Upanishads are the most rewarding and elevating reading possible in the world: they have been the solace of my life, and will be that of my death.' Some students find difficulty in working with the specialised and elaborate Sanskrit terminology, especially with the more pedantic translations. In the last few years, however, the Western world has been better served by translations offering more to the spiritual aspirant than the pedant.

Most ashrams in India teach the same Vedantic truths, usually through one religious figure around whom the ashram has grown. Necessarily there tends to be a parochial atmosphere to many ashrams and often an overemphasis on the merits and wisdom of a particular saint rather than the universal truths which he expounds. This cult of personality is disturbing to the Westerner, but understandable in the setting of India, where temperaments are more emotional and there is a wide range of aspirants. It need not disturb the true seeker whose efforts are directed only to the goal of real knowledge, real experience, honouring equally the Divine in all... Most doubts and confusions result from an over-intellectual view and are resolved by self-purification in the actual practise of yoga.

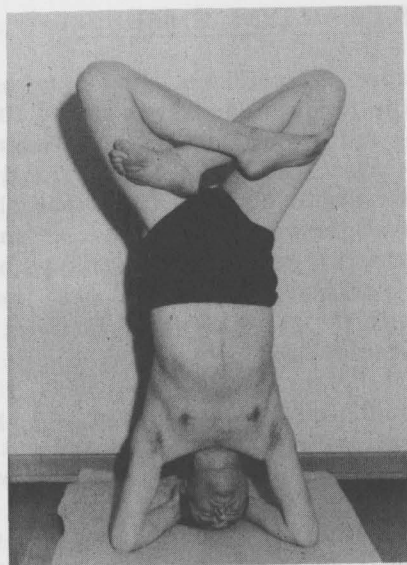
Part of the popularity of the Sivananda Ashram, the Divine Life Society, is the stress which Sri Swami Sivananda has placed upon practical yoga. For the everyday busy person, caught up in the affairs of modern life, he has reduced all Vedantic teaching to the simple formula: SERVE, LOVE, GIVE, PURIFY, MEDITATE, REALISE. BE GOOD, DO GOOD, BE KIND, BE COMPASSIONATE. ENQUIRE 'WHO AM I?', KNOW THE SELF, AND BE FREE...

Many centuries ago, the saints and rishis of ancient India retired to the forests and caves of the Himalayas to meditate and to instruct chosen students in the secrets of Yoga. Today, the tradition is still unbroken, even in an India of five-year plans and industrial development. On the road from Rishikesh to Badrinath, hundreds of sannyasins (monks who have renounced the world) still travel on pilgrimage while the modern world flashes past them in smart automobiles.

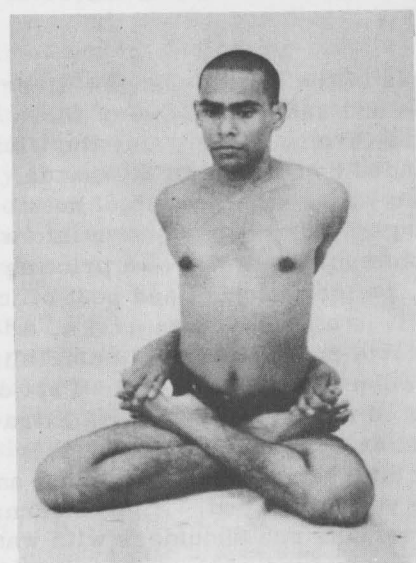
The main road from Rishikesh village winds by the side of the Ganges for two miles to the ancient temple of Laxaman Jhula. Along this road travel all kinds of people - hill folk driving cattle, the women in gay colours with heavy bangles, old monks in sober saffron robes, pilgrims and business people in the single-decker buses or in tongas (the local horse taxis) with their jingling bells.

Here, by the banks of the sacred Ganges River, are many temples and ashrams. One of the most famous is the Sivananda Ashram, the Divine Life Society, founded by Sri Swami Sivananda. Ten years ago this was a small group of huts surrounded by jungle; today it has grown into a self-contained community with its own printing press, hospitals, primary school and post office. To many people, it is a kind of Shangri-La, a half unreal lost world poised between materialism and religion, between past and present. Part of the strange power of this place lies in its extraordinary and paradoxical contrasts. There is every kind of teaching here, from the simple and elementary to the very advanced. High Government officials and Maharajahs rub shoulders with wandering mendicants. Every kind of person comes here, from saint to rogue.

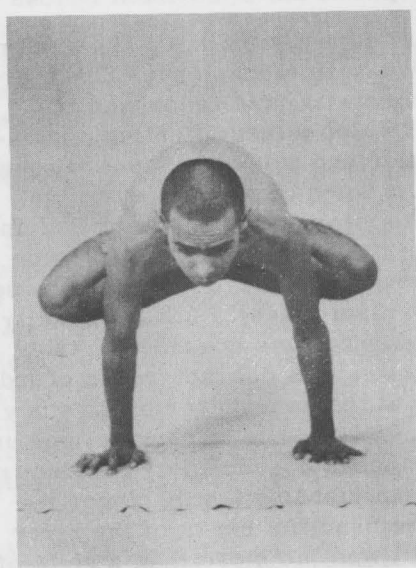
The Indian ashram does not maintain the austere seclusion of the Western monastery. There are resident monks here who have renounced the world, but there is also a large floating population of ordinary men and women. Some are just sightseers, looking for a convenient overnight stay, some are pilgrims on their way to Badrinath temple, high up in the Himalayan snows, some are sincere seekers who want to follow a course of sadhana (spiritual disciplines). All are equally welcomed. They are fed and housed with that liberal hospitality which is characteristic of India. They can worship at the ashram temples, study hathayoga (the ancient science of physical postures), attend scripture classes conducted by resident professors, or they can just find lonely places for meditation near the beautiful banks of the river Ganges. Many will want no more than a sight of Swamiji Sivananda.



Hatha Yoga practise by a Western student
- Oordha-Padmasana.



Hatha Yoga asanas performed by Sri
Swami Vishnudevananda.
- Baddha-Padmasana (The 'bound lotus')



- Kakasana ('Crow' posture)

The ashram gives its teachings free, sustained by its faith that sympathisers will continue to give support. Day after day people come and go from all over India and even from other countries. Although the prayers and ceremonies are in Sanskrit, the house language is English, a common link between so many Indian language groups and the foreigners from overseas. Sightseers and students come here from U.S.A., England, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Africa and all over the world. This ashram is, in fact, a world in miniature.

Over this microcosm presides the benevolent figure of Sri Swami Sivananda, known affectionately by everyone simply as 'Swamiji'. Revered as a saint by his devotees, he is no aloof figure, but a hard worker with a lively sense of humour. Now in his seventy-fourth year he comes to the Ashram office every morning to supervise the work of sending out spiritual literature and guidance to thousands of devotees all over the world. The rishis of old could only teach a small number of students in their forest universities, but at this modern ashram, Swamiji can exert a worldwide influence, pressing for a religious revival as the answer to the troubles of modern life.

It is courteous to present oneself at the morning office session. Here Swamiji takes in the newcomers with a smile or a quizzical glance, makes sure that Westerners are given a comfortable seat on the few chairs. He gives books, sweets, fruit, sometimes gramophone records with an astonishing openheartedness. He answers questions, sometimes jokes or teases with keen psychological insight. Much of his teaching is oblique. He often touches a visitor's life problem simply by his reactions to being given a sweetmeat. He can demolish pomposity with a few humorous words; he can warm a devotee's heart by no more than a glance. Some visitors are overwhelmed by his presence, others have doubts. Some stay for a few days to clarify their impressions, others move on, looking for another saint at another ashram...

There is no easy way for the aspirant who aims high. People look for some ideal ashram, some easy path where one is gently led to wisdom as comfortably and courteously as a conducted tour on a first-class luxury aeroplane! But there must be conflict and suffering; this is part of the process of self-purification and gives true meaning to formal knowledge. Once there is even some small experience of the true meaning of life then the everyday world, its problems and opinions, need not trouble any more.

One can get this realisation anywhere in the world through many different religions, but especially in the highly concentrated atmosphere and beautiful surroundings of Rishikesh, hallowed by the saints of ancient times. It is a spartan life, here,

of course. Although Westerners are treated with special consideration, the food (purely vegetarian and very simple), the unboiled river water (Ganges water is sacred), the primitive sanitation, the hard floors, the insect pests (specifically bugs and scorpions) provide too much austerity for many.

Much at this ashram might be thought banal and squalid, much might be found noble and transcendental. The real meaning of any ashram is not the material aspect that is seen day by day. The real Swamiji is not just the person you see and hear at the morning office and the evening prayer meeting. Many have found that there is a secret life to the ashram, have found their spiritual development moulded by thought currents and uncanny forces. Casual remarks from Swamiji may contain extraordinary overtones. You may get a sudden flash of insight stimulated by some apparently trivial event.

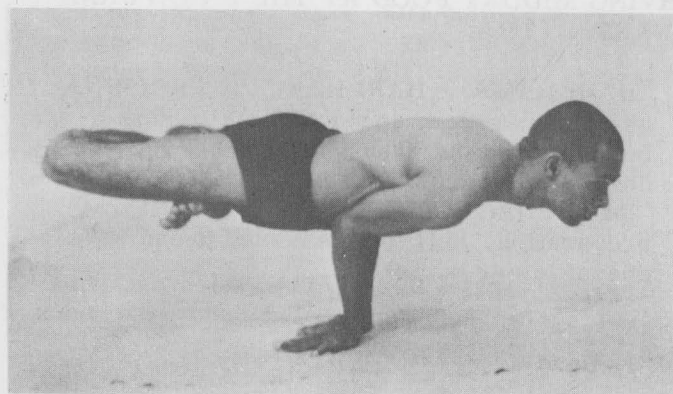
There are as many opinions about the Ashram and Swamiji himself as there are types of visitors. Many people discover here only the attitudes of faith or cynicism which they have brought with them. Some are lost in indiscriminating emotionalism, others are stranded in intellectual doubts. Some are disappointed. Others find meaning for the first time in their lives.

At the heart of the Ashram, day by day, Swamiji radiates a spontaneous generosity and wisdom, while visitors come and go like characters in a vast theatre. Many keep contact through the Ashram literature. Swamiji has written over two hundred books on different aspects of Yoga-Vedanta, many in Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kanarese and Gujarati; they are printed at the Ashram's own printing-press.

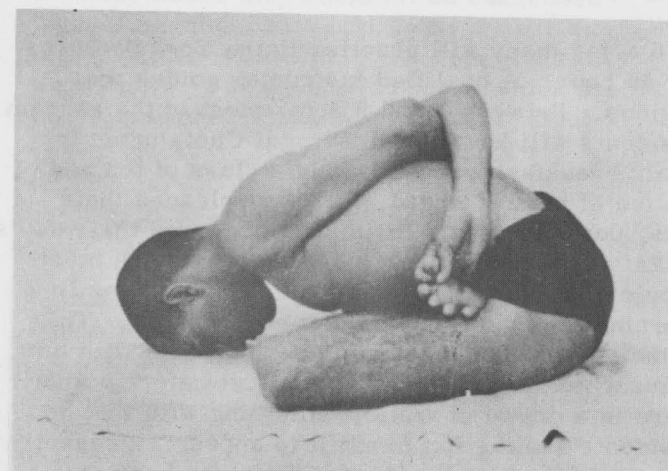
These books are often a strange mixture of Eastern and Western idiom, with quaint phrases and misprints, but Swamiji is not at all perturbed so long as they reach their readers. The teachings are the age-old religious philosophy of India, but modern apparatus is used to disseminate knowledge. A swami, clad in the centuries-old traditional saffron gown of renunciation, sits proof-reading books from a modern printing press. Just outside the printing press building is the temple of Sri Viswanath, where regular worship is performed with traditional Vedic rites.

There is another kind of service at the modern Eye Hospital. Swamiji believes in the spiritual value of devoted service to other people, to the sick and suffering, and here disciples have dedicated themselves to this work. The surgeon in charge, Swami Sivananda-Hridayananda, was once a famous Eye Surgeon in Madras, but she renounced her family and her distinguished career to live at the Ashram and devote her life to Swamiji and his work. Thousands of cases have been treated at this modern hospital, and Swami Sivananda-Hridayananda performs many delicate eye operations. Nearby is a smaller hospital, too, the only general medical dispensary for many miles around.

So the ideals of this Ashram are timeless, although there are modern buildings, electric light and other amenities. But the jungle is not far away. At the back of the Ashram buildings, the tangle of ragged undergrowth and woods slopes up to the skyline and hundreds of monkeys run wild through the Ashram, snatching any food within reach. Up in the hills there are still tigers...



Hatha Yoga asanas performed by Sri Swami Vishnudevananda.
- Mayurasana ('Peacock' posture)



Hatha Yoga asanas performed by Sri Swami Vishnudevananda.
- Yoga-Mudra

THE RECORDINGS

SIDE I, Band 1:

Here are the sounds of a typical day at the Ashram.

Early morning, around 4 a.m., is a very good time for meditation. There is an unreal air at such an hour, lost between day and night. Some swamis take their Ganges bath at this time, then sit by the side of the river, turning their thoughts inwards in search of the reality behind the phenomenal world. Meditation is assisted by the hypnotic sound of rushing water, like the music of dreams. The Ganges, falling from heaven through the matted hair of the god Siva high up in the Himalayas, fertilises the land and purifies all sins. This is one of the most sacred sounds in India:

a) THE SOUND OF THE RIVER GANGES.

In some of the nearby huts, other swamis are reciting prayers. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, they repeat sacred formulae and names of God, keeping count on a rosary of 108 beads. This chanting is called 'Japa', and is said to dynamize the subconscious mind:

JAPA IN EARLY MORNING:

- b) repetition of "OM NAMO NARAYANAYA"
- c) repetition of "RAM, RAM, RAM"

SIDE I, Band 2: BELL and TEMPLE SERVICE IN PROGRESS

At 5 a.m. a bell sounds for morning Puja (worship) at the temple. In 'Abyhishekam' the Siva lingam, an image of God, is bathed with milk to the recitation of prayers:

SIDE I, Band 3:

At 6 a.m. many will practise Hatha Yoga postures for an hour. A qualified instructor guides the novices. Between 7 and 9 a.m. most of the ashram residents will have taken a frugal Chota hazri (a 'little breakfast') consisting of a glass of tea and a slice of toasted bread, will have cleaned their huts, perhaps read a little, and prepared their day's tasks. At 9 a.m. is the big event for which most people have waited impatiently. This is Swamiji's morning darshan (appearance) at the office. This is their chance to meet him, perhaps talk with him, at least to sit in his presence. Just before 9 a.m. there is a crowd of visitors mingling with the residents waiting for Swamiji to appear. Presently he comes out from his hut on the river bank, supported by his secretaries, with a score of devotees following. Slowly the procession walks the two hundred yard path to the office. At the time these recordings were made an ardent devotee staying at

the Ashram walked ahead of the procession, calling titles and praises for his Guru (teacher) in the manner of a Town Crier:

'TOWN CRIER' calling the merits and praises of Swamiji Sivananda.

SIDE I, Band 4:

In the office, there are prayers in Sanskrit and in English. Everyone chants the special Ashram mantram (sacred prayer). Swamiji is in excellent form. He jokes and distributes books; he supervises the work of the office swamis. 'Ego-dectomy' is one of his humorous terms with which he teases medical people who ask for spiritual guidance. He used to be a doctor himself...

SWAMIJI'S MORNING DARSHAN AT OFFICE.

Prayers in Sanskrit and English.

The Ashram Maha Mrityunjaya Mantram:

"Om Trayambakan Yajamahe..."

Swamiji talks, jokes and supervises office work:

"...egodectomy... mala (a rosary)..."

titiksha (austerities)..."

Asks whether books have been given, refers to America...

SIDE I, Band 5:

Swamiji returns to his hut at midday, and the bell sounds for food. This is a daily miracle. The Annapurna Annakshettra gives food to all who come - resident swamis, visitors, itinerant sadhus and mendicants, hospital patients - sometimes over four hundred people per day! People sit on the floor in a long narrow building and food is served in the metal trays which are now replacing the traditional leaf plates. Bhajans (hymns of praise) are sung as grace. Even the humblest diner is addressed as 'Bhagavan' (Lord) since the giving of food is regarded as service to the Lord.

SERVING MIDDAY FOOD AT THE ANNAPURNA ANNAKSHETTRA.

"HARI RAMA...HARI HARI"... "KRISHNA..."
bhajans as grace; sound of metal plates being handed out; The food servers move down the lines: "DHAL BHAGAVAN?"...
"ROTI BHAGAVAN?" (Dhal is a lentil preparation, Roti is unleavened bread - chaputties or puris).

SIDE I, Band 6:

Later there are Vedanta (scripture) lectures in the Bhajan Hall. This is where a relay of residents and visitors have maintained an unbroken prayer vibration for the welfare of the world for

eighteen years. This Mahamantram (Great Prayer) is: "HARI RAMA, HARI RAMA, RAMA RAMA, HARI HARI; HARI KRISHNA, HARI KRISHNA, KRISHNA KRISHNA, HARI HARI" - these are amongst the most sacred names of God. When the classes are ready to start, the prayer recitation sinks to a whisper, then becomes Manasika Japa (silent repetition):

AKHANDA KIRTAN OF MAHAMANTRAM IN BHAJAN HALL

Lady reciting "HARI RAMA..."
Man's voice takes over;

SIDE I, Band 7:

Outside the hall the bell sounds for Vedanta class;

SIDE I, Band 8:

Inside, Manasika Japa.

SIDE I, Band 9:

VEDANTA LECTURE by SWAMI
JYOTIRMAYANANDA:

Preliminary prayer - Guru Dhyanam (meditation on Guru):

"OM BRAHMANANDAM PARAM SUKHADAM
KEVALAM JNANA MURTIM DWANDWATITAM
GAGAN SADRISHAM TATWAMASYADILAKSHYAM.
EKAM NITYAM VIMALAMACHALAM
SARVADHISAKSHIBHUTAM BHAVATITAM
TRIGUNARAHITAM SADGURUM TAM NAMAMI."

(I prostrate to that true Guru, Brahman (absolute) that is bliss, giver of supreme happiness, absolute form of knowledge, beyond the pairs of opposites, vast like space, attainable through knowledge of the Self of all - One, eternal, pure and changeless, witness of all states of the mind, transcending all change, beyond the three qualities of matter).

SIDE I, Band 10:

Lecture on the qualifications of a Jnani (one who has realised true wisdom).

SIDE II

In the evening, between 7 and 8 p.m. everyone gathers for the main assembly of the day - Satsang. The word means 'company of the wise'. Swamiji presides over an evening of prayers, hymns and lectures. There is Sankirtan (group hymn singing) in both English and Sanskrit. Swamiji has composed many simple choruses in English, in which everybody joins, often he leads the singing. Sometimes there are exhibitions of Bharata Natyam (sacred Indian dance) by skilled visiting devotees, often, inspiring musical performances by brilliant players like Sri Swami Parvatikar. At around 10 p.m. the meeting disperses after the traditional Arati ceremony. After a few hours sleep the day will begin again between 3 and 4 a.m....

EVENING SATSANG:

SIDE II, Band 1:

Section of musical performance on Rudra Vina by Swami Parvatikar (Raga Bhoop);

SIDE II, Band 2:

Talk by Swami Sivananda, Sankirtan and prayers.

SIDE II, Band 3:

("Sunaja Krishna"... "Song of Eighteen 'Ities'", "Hari Rama", Mantrams, etc. led by Swami Sivananda).

Swamiji says that although he has written so many books they could all be condensed to the formula "SERVE, LOVE, PURIFY, MEDITATE, REALISE". He then gives the well known "Twenty Instructions" which are recommended for Sadhana (spiritual discipline).

SIDE II, Band 4:

An ashram singer praises his Guru: "DEVA DEVA SIVANANDA..." and Swamiji leads the singing in group Sankirtan.
