

Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam, Its Inspiration And Role Today

(Speech delivered by SWAMI NIIYANANDA GIRI at SATSANG III organized by ASHRAM AIKYA conference of Christian Ashrams and SNEHASADAN Institute for Study of Religion at Bangalore on 20th /21st October 1983.)

Sadguru Gnanananda Giri Swamigal established his ashram, Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam on the northern bank of the river South Pennar in the South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu about 30 years ago. The sage himself gives an idea of the role he intended for it in his own explanation of the name of the ashram.

“**Tapas**” is intense heat with its derivations, zeal, fervour, austerity, asceticism. “**VANA**” (in Tamil ‘**Vanam**’) is a wood or forest. In olden days, there were huge jungles and forests in India, where hermits could retire far from other men, living off fruit and wild roots and spending their time contemplating the things of God. Nowadays, in this part of the land atleast, there are no longer any real forests. The trees have been felled and the countryside transformed. So, as there are no longer any forests, it is absolutely essential to set aside certain places so that those who wish to lead a quiet life of prayer and asceticism can do so. The ashram was founded for those who wish to devote even a fraction of their time to the pursuit of spiritual wisdom far from crowds and from the turmoil of the daily round. Here they can receive proper instruction and give themselves upto meditation”.

The Sanskrit word ‘*Tapas*’, is derived from ‘*Tap*’ meaning ‘to consume by heat’ or to ‘mortify the body’ or to ‘undergo severe penance’. “Tapas” implies a concentration of the senses and the mind, a mastery of will and thought, by the habitual practice of exercising restraint over the bodily desires and affections which are linked to lower objects so that the aspirant may advance in the life of holiness”/ Bhagawan Sri Ramana says in *Upadesasaram*: “The realisation of That which subsists when all trace of ”I” is gone is good austerity (*tapas*). So sings Ramana, the Self of all”.

Gnana or Awareness of Self is being in one’s true nature as Transcendental Bliss. *Gnana* is *Ananda*. This is the meaning of the compound word ‘*Gnananandam*’ which means Atman. It also indicates that through Self-knowledge alone, can one attain true Bliss, going beyond grief and delusion. Gnanananda is the way and its goal, the Truth. So, “*Tapas*” in Tapovanam is “to be steeped in the Self, *Gnananandam*”.

Such was indeed the experience of Swami Abhishiktananda who refers to the days he spent at Tapovanam as “Days of Grace”. He recalls “Vanya (Abhishiktananda) could never forget the two weeks he spent with his guru; days of utter peace and fulness; some of the rare moments of life that one longs to re-live again and again; very special times when one knows one exists in the depth of oneself where all appearances are left behind and one is on the level of the True”.

It will be the experience of any one who is similarly open to the Grace of the Guru.

Sri Gnanananda was a monument of a man, a legend in his own lifetime. His glorious spiritual ministry is believed to have been phenomenally long, lasting atleast well over a century - none knows for certain how long. That he had conquered the process of aging of the physical body was evident from the observation of many devotees over a few decades. The core of his philosophy was negation of the ego and all that is non-Self, i.e. body, mind, etc. So, he never spoke about his birth and parentage. All achievements, spiritual and temporal, belong to the realm of the ego and so Sri Gnanananda did not speak about his *sadhana*, spiritual attainments which were obviously extraordinary, or even about the disciples who received his guidance. He was truly established in the Transcendental Advaitic experience, a Jivanmukta, living from

moment to moment, not reflecting on the past, nor looking forward to a future. Thus, Sri Gnanananda's earlier life is shrouded in mystery. He is believed to have been born in the early years of the last century in a village called Mangalapuri in Karnataka. He left his home even as a boy when he experienced a special descent of Grace - *Saktinipata*, and was drawn to Pandharpur, the famous centre of Maharashtra mysticism, on the banks of the river Chandrabhaga. There he met his Guru Sri Sivaratna Giri of Jyotir Math, the northern regional mutt in India established by Adi Sankara. The pontiff took his young disciple to Srinagar in Kashmir, trained him in various spiritual disciplines and initiated him into *Sannyasa*, giving him the name Gnanananda Giri. After the *Mahasamadhi* of the Guru, Sri Gnanananda Giri renounced his title to the pontificate and betook himself to severe austerities in the higher regions of the Himalayas. After many years of intense *Tapas*, he later traveled on foot throughout the length and breadth of India, as well as Tibet, Burma and Sri Lanka. It was clear from his casual references that in the course of his wandering over many decades as a *PARIVRAJAKA* or itinerant monk throughout the sub-continent, he had come into contact with the spiritual luminaries of last century and the present one. Sri Sai Baba of Shirdi, Saint Ramalinga, Sendamangalam Avadhoota Swamigal and his Guru known as 'Judge Swamigal', Saint Vithoba of Polur, Sri Seshadri Swamigal, Bhagawan Sri Ramana Maharishi, Sri Aurobindo and several others were amongst them.

At the turn of the last century, Sri Gnanananda was staying in Sampathgiri hills of Polur near Tiruvannamalai. Wherever he went, all people were drawn irresistibly to him, irrespective of caste, creed or nationality, by the dignity and strength of his personality, no less than by his charm and childlike simplicity. In the course of his travels in the later years, he settled sometimes for some years at spots, which attracted him. Inevitably whenever he settled in any place in this manner, a small band of devotees congregated around him and as facilities had to be provided for them, an ashram would come into being. He would then remain for sometime teaching anyone who wished to learn. But his love of solitude, however, would impel him to disappear one fine day and retreat to a remote spot. Upto his final settling down at Tapovanam, the Swami was first and foremost a **PARAMAHAMSA PARIVRAJAKA** par excellence, and he would not allow himself to become the prisoner of any institution, even one of his own making. Such ashrams or places for his stay grew up around him at Kallakudi, Sreemushnam, Sular, Attiyampatti and Siddhalingamadam. We have reliable accounts of his stay in the last two ashrams, both of which he left, walking out of them in the same spirit of freedom in which he had originally come to these places, a true monk without belongings or obligations. He exemplified in himself that love of insecurity and anonymity which is the hallmark of a genuine Sannyasin, and it was only as a concession to the devotees and aspirants who came to him, that he allowed ashrams to grow up in the places where he stayed. He himself appears never to have planned or established any institution from his own deliberate choice or volition. This is entirely in consonance with his abdication of the pontificate of Jyotir Math and his philosophy of the *PARIVRAJAKA* life he adopted and his life of uncompromising non-attachment and freedom. This aspect of the founder's personality has to be understood, if the role and inspiration of Tapovanam today is to be appreciated properly.

Swami Abhishiktananda records an inmate of Tapovanam telling him, "As long as the Swami is willing to live amongst us let us make the most of it and try not to do anything that might displease him or make him go off somewhere else".

Therefore, it will be misleading to say that Sri Gnanananda founded the ashram, as if he purposefully established Tapovanam with a set pattern and an ideal in his mind to which he wanted it to conform. It would be truer to say that he settled at the place where Tapovanam stands today and that the Ashram over the years grew around his presence. It has evolved by a process of organic growth and changed into what it is now and this evolution no doubt continues. From another angle, one may say that it is the continuous unfolding of a great *GYANA SIDDHA'S* Grace and blessing, undeterred by the limitations of time. Tapovanam, however, is markedly different from the two ashrams at Attiyampatti and Siddhalingamadam, and it is also

different from the last ashram that Sadgurudev was to establish at Yercaud. It was obvious that the Swamiji realised, as Tapovanam slowly took shape around the small thatched hut which was originally his dwelling, that it was to be his last settlement and it would be his 'final resting place'. He allowed the ashram to grow to a degree of organisation and size that the others never reached and he took less pains to preserve his anonymity. Whereas previously he had shunned publicity and avoided contact with celebrities, he, in later years at Tapovanam, patiently received ever-increasing crowds of visitors and allowed himself to be known to the public. Even this was without any deliberate intention or action on his part. He simply ceased to discourage or avoid it. It was precisely when his fame began to spread, that he had left his previous ashrams. But at Tapovanam, sensing that the end of his term in the mortal body was near, he allowed seekers to flock to him, so that they might benefit in his final days from the fruits of his life-time of *Tapas*. He made preparations for the internment of his mortal remains and for the continued functioning of the ashram after his *MAHASAMADHI*.

Swami Abhishiktananda describes Sri Gnanananda's divine love for all who came to him:

"Gnanananda's whole being radiated a pure and tender love; a love which was complete for each one and the same for all. This joy of feeling oneself loved by him, resulted in a high degree of detachment, for who does not dream of being loved, apart from others and with a preferential love? Yet, at the same time each man felt as if he were enveloped in a plenitude of love. One felt that with Gnanananda, all distinction, *bheda*, had been overcome and had vanished. It was the true personality the Self alone, the Atman, in each person which was immediately perceived by him"

Sri Gnanananda received devotees of all ages, of all stages in life, of all races - men, women and children. They were all exposed to the transforming influence of his grace. He constantly reminded them that human birth is rare to obtain, and that it is not to be wasted in pursuit of material wealth and sensual pleasures. He pointed out again and again, that the goal of life is to realise God and the Self. He recognised *Adhikaribheda* or variation in spiritual equipment and competence according to one's *Samskaras* or past impressions and environmental factors. He led each one of them in the way most natural to him. Swamiji emphasised that the pursuit of *Swadharmā*, that is to say the discharge of one's duties, with total dedication to the Divine is the path to spiritual perfection. All life is yoga, according to him. The whole of life is a spiritual unity, and it cannot be compartmentalised into the secular and the spiritual. Devotees seeking relief from suffering or praying for progeny or mere material wealth came to him, as also seekers of knowledge with an intense spiritual aspiration, not to mention the realised ones. He gave the devotees what they wanted so that in course of time, drawn to him by his infinite compassion and surrendering themselves completely to him, they might themselves aspire for and seek from him what he wanted to give them - the liberating Knowledge.

In Attiyampatti and Siddhalingamadam, uneducated common folk thronged to him and he introduced them to the rendering of Tamil devotional lore, such as *Thevaram* and *Tiruvachagam* and taught them simple religious practices. Perhaps, Swamiji valued such simple religious and pure rustic love more than that of others. Instruction in Vedanta was always given only to a rare few who were qualified to receive it. But at Tapovanam, soon after it was established, a regular daily routine came to be observed - *darsan* of Swami any time between three and four early in the morning, followed by Vedic chants and recital of prayers which included many Sanskrit hymns composed by *Adi Sankara* and Tamil songs with deep Vedantic import. The simple *pooja* performed to the feet of Sadguru described by Swami Abhishiktananda as 'ablutions prior to the meal' gave place to a full-fledged ritualistic worship of the *padukas* or sandals encased in gold, in which *Adi Sankara* and *Gurudev* were invoked. The *pada pooja* was preceded by Swamiji leading a *Deepa Jyoti procession* of all devotees with a young girl carrying a lighted lamp symbolising the Divine Mother and with the singing of hymns and songs. During the day, there would be often *impromptu satsang* at which Swamiji answered questions of the devotees. In the

afternoon ladies sang songs of Thayumanavar and other Vedantic lore such as Gita Sara Talattu at *Annai Mandapam* (Mother's *Mandap*) when Gurudev was present in an exalted mood, here and there explaining a passage. They would conclude with bhajans and arati in the evening.

Sri Gnanananda who renounced his title to a mutt, did not desire Tapovanam to be developed as a mutt with himself as its head. Yet, here the glory of *Adi Sankara* is sung, Sankara's *padukas* are worshipped everyday and the homage is paid to the old traditions, particularly to that of *Sannyasa*, more than in any of the traditional mutts. Nor did Gurudev provide for a line of succession by choosing one of his disciples and declaring him to be his successor to head the ashram. But he was keen that the monastic lineage or *parampara* should continue and monks of the ashram pursuing Vedantic *Sadhana* and meditation should continue to be given all facilities in the same manner as was provided by Him. He told Swami Abhishiktananda:

“Come back and be near me. We shall talk again. Above all you will have time for silent meditation. No one will disturb you. You will not have to worry about food or anything like that. Apart from our conversations, you will remain in silence”

This is indeed the call of Gnanananda to his monastic disciples to Tapovanam for all time. He instructed them to lead a life of total *nivritti* or withdrawal.

The daily routine of the ashram beginning with the ringing of the temple bell early in the morning to announce *Gurudev's* arrival for *darsan* and closing with the arati in the evening went on automatically like clock-work, in the mere presence of the sage. The harmony and rhythm of the routine continues in the same manner to this day, ten years after his Mahasamadhi, with the devotion of a few self-effacing residents of the ashram charged with fervour by the ever-present grace of Sadguru.

During the final years at Tapovanam, Sri Gnanananda exhibited the entire spectrum of Hinduism in his person and teachings, just as the entire spectrum of the Indian public - Hindu, Christian and Moslem came to him for guidance, consolation and inspiration. At one moment one could hear him instruct a peasant how to marry two sacred trees with the appropriate ritual of Hinduism, and at another he would be explaining the highest Vedanta to a qualified seeker! Always he aimed at elevating those who came to him. But he realised that they could be elevated only from where they already were.

Swami Abhishiktananda records Sri Gnanananda telling an aspirant, obviously a Sannyasin, of the path of *nivritti*:

“*Dhyana* is the only thing necessary and it is absolutely essential. *Pooja*, *Japa*, rites, litanies, and the rest, all belong to the outside realm depending on the world of appearances and have nothing to do with the Real. Far from being useful or necessary, they are on the contrary, an obstacle for the man who is committed to the way of *Gnana*. They must be resolutely put aside”.

But Swamiji urged that these practices are not only useful for beginners but also essential for them. He underlined the importance of Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga. He held the traditional view that *Upasana* (devotional meditation) has a very important place in the scheme of *sadhana* and only he who has attained the purity of heart and single-minded concentration is qualified to pursue Self-enquiry. In order to meet the needs of the largest group of the devotees who came to him, he built a small temple underneath five mango trees and installed deities with names having the prefix of '*Gnana*' such as - Gnana Vinayaka, GnanaSkanda, Gnanapurisa, Gnanambika, Gnana Venugopala, Gnana Anjaneya. His discourses abound with references to the importance of the worship of the personal God with form.

Swami Abhishiktananda beautifully explains the content of a famous verse of Thayumanavar, which Sri Gnanananda often used to repeat - “Guru will come to him who has passed through the stages of worship of **murtis**, **sthalas** and **Tirthas** properly”.

“There is also the *darsana* of the sacred places of *Kshetra*, of the temples, and of holy images or *murti*, where the divinity who transcends all forms is willing to don the numerous forms invented by man’s imagination when set on fire by faith. Above all, there is the *darsana* of holy men, the most meaningful of all for the man who is on the right wave length. The *darsana* of the Guru is the last step on the path to the ultimate *darsana*, when the final veil is lifted and all duality transcended.

This is the absolute *darsana*, the one that India has sought since the beginning of time. Here, India shows you her secret and, ‘revealing herself to you reveals you to yourself in the most intimate depths of your being’¹⁰.

At Tapovanam, Sadguru Gnanananda’s institution of the ritualistic worship of the deities in accordance with the *Agama* in the ashram temples, the *pada pooja*, *namasankirtan*, and the daily routine of prayers in the auspicious hours of the early morning called *Brahma Muhurta*, are all performed as per the tradition as old as Hinduism itself.

Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam is not strictly speaking, a monastic or even an exclusive community. For we do not come across in orthodox mutts or ashrams a set-up in which Sannyasins and Brahmacharis live side by side with retired householders as well as others working in schools or offices. Gurudev gave great importance to the scheme of *ashramas* or stages of life as set forth in the Hindu tradition. In Tapovanam, elderly retired people take an active interest in the temple rituals and worship, and some of them study Vedanta under the guidance of the senior Sannyasins. The ancient *Vanaprastha* ideal, as preparatory to the more thorough-going renunciation of the Sannyasin, was given great emphasis by Sri Gnanananda who was deeply interested in monastic revival. A few of the *Vanaprasthas* were initiated into *Sannyasa* by him. The families of other householders - ladies and children - are exposed to the influence of an ashram life, as they take part in the daily prayers, pujas, etc. A fine training is imparted to the children from a very early age. As they grow older, they transmit to the next generation the message of Swamiji through the hymns and songs of Tapovanam in which the Guru principle is enshrined. Thus, today the daily prayers of Tapovanam are sung in houses of devotees in different parts of the world. Hence there is a fruitful mingling of monks and the laity. “*Satsang*” with Sannyasins is beneficial to the house-holders who are, however, expected to respect the essential aloofness of the monks. The contact with the house-holders and the children gives a balance to the life of the monk which might otherwise be lacking. But care is always to be taken to ensure that the contact does not tend to pull the monks down by what is called ‘*Lokavasana*’, or an undue interest in mundane affairs. Young and not so young Brahmacharis have ample scope for *Guru Seva* and study and some of them are trained for *Sannyasa*. The training is informal for the most part. However, utmost care is taken to ensure that only candidates who have genuine calling for the monastic life are initiated into *Sannyasa* and that they are well prepared before hand in the disciplines of asceticism and interiorisation.

Swami Abhishiktananda observes that Sri Gnanananda made a clear distinction between house-holders and outside visitors with family and social responsibilities on the one hand and those fully committed to spiritual life. He showed great compassion and love towards the house-holders and dealt with them at their own level by blessing them and encouraging them:

“But if a person was free from external obligations and spoke of consecrating his life to seeking God and the things of the spirit, then Gnanananda was adamant. No one can trifle with wisdom, much less with God. The man who professes to have committed himself to follow the way which leads to God has no right to be less than honest. One does not discuss the subject of meditation;

one immerses oneself in it, giving up everything else. Since there is no hurry in life, as the so-called disciple is the first to admit, he must give up wandering from place to place, speaking of everything with everybody and reading every book that comes to hand. He must settle down in one place and give himself up solely to gazing within”.

One finds at Tapovanam Sannyasins practicing meditation and Self-enquiry alongside with bhaktas who spend their day singing *Kirtans* in praise of the Lord. There are others who prefer ritualistic worship with Vedic chants. This unique institution represents the many facets of the Master’s personality. In the seeming diversity, there is an order, a scheme which gives it beauty, sense, unity and harmony.

It was only during his later years at Tapovanam that Swamiji gave initiation into *Sannyasa* to a few of those who were ready. The renunciate disciples were encouraged in the study of Vedanta and the path of meditation on the formless. Sadgurudev established in 1969 his last ashram at Yercaud, called **Sri Gnanananda Pranava Nilayam**, specifically as a retreat, a centre for contemplation on *the Atman, the Turiya, the Ardhmatra* of **OM**, the *pranava* as the name itself indicates. He was anxious that his monastic disciples should not be disturbed by the increasing crowds of devotees who were coming to Tapovanam. This ashram in the hill station provides a fine environment in which they could pursue their specialised *sadhana*.

There is no ritual or communal worship at Yercaud. The pictures of Sri Gnanananda, the Buddha, Swami Vivekananda, the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Kaaba of Mecca are hanging on the wall of the central hall. The monks and aspirants are to devote themselves completely to meditation and study. The older Sannyasins who could not stand the rigour of the climate of Yercaud continued to live at Tapovanam. Swamiji himself, some months before his *Mahasamadhi* recalled a senior Sannyasin and an advanced aspirant from Yercaud to Tapovanam.

Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam draws its inspiration from its founder and *Guru* and from the spiritual tradition he represents. *Guru Gita* says that according to its etymological sense, the word ‘*Guru*’ means one who dispels the darkness of ignorance of his disciple’. He imparts knowledge to the disciple not out of any worldly motive or even out of any religious, moral, or professional compulsion. He does so out of a divine compassion, which is spontaneous and without any trace of ego. Just as the sun dispels the darkness of the night, the Guru automatically dispels the spiritual darkness of the qualified disciple. We may say that it is the action of the Grace of the Guru and ascribe it to his compassion. But one should beware of falling into the trap of thinking that the disciple has no work to do. He has to qualify himself for receiving the Grace, by making himself open to it. That is *Sadhana*. Swami Abhishiktananda records this observation of Sri Gnanananda:

“Do you make a fire with green wood? You must first cut down the branch, then dry it. Only then will it catch alight. The fire is Grace and the preparation of wood, *sadhana* - the effort made by the person who truly wishes to succeed”.

Sri Gnanananda instituted *padapooja* or the worship of the *Padukas* (sandals) of his Guru and of Sri Sankara to emphasize the importance of devotion to tradition. “*Guru padukas* signify the unbroken succession of the spiritual masters and their tradition. *Paduka* is a subtle symbol of the *Guru* himself in its gross form; it is, as it were, *Guru’s* Grace in a congealed form”. Through the *Guru Padukas* one is linking oneself not only to the particular Master but to the whole tradition to which he belongs. Swamiji has so exemplified the spiritual tradition that He has indeed come to embody it. When we worship the *Guru*, we worship the whole tradition and when we seek guidance from tradition, we feel it is our *Guru* who speaks to us through it.

The ritualistic worship of the *padukas* is only symbolic of the disciple’s total surrender

to the *Guru* and his *Sraddha* or faith in his teachings and in the tradition. This tradition leads one beyond itself to transcendence.

Devotees belonging to different traditions perform *pada pooja*. To each of them, the *Padukas* represent the tradition to which he belongs. Sadguru Gnanananda in transcending all traditions has become the *Guru* of all.

Pada Pooja occupies the pride of place in Tapovanam. Swamiji was keen that even Sannyasins should attend the *Pada Pooja*. Sri Sankara says in his commentary on Srimad Bhagavad Gita : “*Gnananishta* or single-minded devotion to Knowledge is indeed unattainable to those who have not been properly initiated into the traditional knowledge by the Gurus (the great ones)” (XVIII, 50).¹⁵

Devotees of Tapovanam are well aware that their Master is a Siddha Purusha. Even when he was physically amidst them, his presence was not limited to his body, the place or time. They have had various accounts of his operating in different planes at the same time. All this had helped the devotees to learn not to identify the presence of the Master with his physical body only.

Moreover, Swamiji over the years had by his words and discourses taught the devotees the truth of the concept of *Guru*. Through the hymns and songs sung every day, the *GuruTattwa* had sunk into their consciousness. They used to offer salutations to *Sadguru*, chanting *Sri Dakshinamurti* Stotra of *Sankara* which gives the quintessence of *Advaita*, and clearly states that *God, Guru* and *Atman* are one. Swamiji had selected 45 verses from the *Guru Gita* for recital during the *Pada Pooja*, and all of them point to *Atman* as the *Guru*. Sri Gnanananda-Guru-Stava-Dasaka praises *Gurumurti* as *God* and *Atman*. In accordance with the Hindu tradition the devotees had developed the conviction that *Guru* is verily *God Himself*. Hence, they could worship him and seek his *Grace* as from *God*, even when his physical form is no longer visible to their eyes.

As Swamiji himself used to point out very often, many of the great temples flourish at the *Samadhis* of *Siddhas*. He says: “Like the eggs of the tortoise (in the legend) getting batched at its very thought, those doing *sadhana* at the *Samadhi* of *Yogis* who have attained *Self-realisation*, become blessed with success when the Master thinks of them”. Spiritual and other benefits of worshipping at the *Samadhi* shrines are well accepted in the living Hindu tradition. The site of Tapovanam is a spot already hallowed by contact with saints and sages of yore and is located within the spiritual aura of *Arunachala*. It was with deliberate intention that Swamiji chose to shed his body at Tapovanam so that future generations could benefit from his powerful spiritual presence in the *Samadhi* situated in already hallowed surroundings. Shirdi Sai Baba declared: “My tomb will speak; my clay will give you replies. My shrine will bless my devotees and fulfil their needs”⁷. Sri Gnanananda assured his devotees that his *Samadhi* would be a *Jiva Samadhi* i.e., he would retain his subtle body without dissolving it and would continue to shower his grace on them.

The *Samadhi* chamber was constructed by him even before his *Mahasamadhi* and he had given detailed instructions for the internment of his body. A six pillared hexagonal structure in polished granite has been constructed as the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of the *Samadhi* shrine as per his directions and a *Siva Linga* has been installed. Regular Vedic ritualistic worship is offered to Sri Gnanananda Mahalinga in the morning and evening. The six pillars signify the *Shanmata* - six forms of *God* for worship, as established by *Adi Sankara* - *Ganapati*, *Siva*, *Vishnu*, *Surya* (the *Sun God*), *Sakti* and *Subramanya*. Each of the pillars carries twin images of the respective deity. The significance of this arrangement is that *God* worshipped in any of the forms and pleased

with the devotion of the aspirant over many births, blesses him with *Advaita-vasana* or inclination towards non-duality. Out of compassion for him, God takes the human form and appears as *Sadguru* to give him the liberating knowledge. Guru is God himself in human form. *Guru Upasana* is, therefore, the easiest and highest form of *Saguna Upasana* i.e., meditative devotion of qualified Brahman.

Swamiji has also consecrated a likeness of his in a life size *Sila Vighraha* or stone image. The *Archa* form is in a sitting posture, the right palm lifted with *Chinmudra* which transmits the *Upadesa* or teaching of the content of the *Mahavaka*

TAT TWAM ASI” - “THAT THOU ART”, i.e. identity of the Atman, the subjective Self and Brahman, the unchanging Substratum of the appearance of the phenomenal world. South-facing, it is the embodiment of Sri Dakshinamurti teaching through silence. On his birthday in 1973, Swamiji stood behind the *Sila Vighraha* for some time and consecrated it by touching the head and investing it with his Jiva Kala or his consciousness as spiritual power, just as Sri Ramanuja is said to have done to his own images at Melkote and Sriperumbudur before his *Mahasamadhi*. Coming from behind the *Sila*, Swamiji whispered to devotees around him that from the next birthday they could have his *darsan* in the *Vighraha* only. After his *Mahasamadhi*, daily ritualistic worship is offered to this *Murti* of Gurudev in the Mani Mandapa shrine.

While the idol itself is the symbol of Swamiji as Sri Dakshinamurti or the Teacher, the Siva Linga at the Samadhi shrine “stands between form and non-form, *rupa-arupa*, between manifestation and what can never be manifested”.

There is a *Deepa Stambha* or column of lights called *Makara Vilakku* which now stands in front of the *Sila Vighraha* of Swamiji. He has instructed that it should be moved to the point of intersection of the centre lines of the Samadhi shrine and *Mani Mandapa* shrine, in the hall to be constructed in front of the Samadhi. This column of lights symbolises Atman, the Light of all lights. “By Its light is verily all this is illuminated”, says the Upanishad’. Atman or Brahman is the same as God and Guru. Thus Swamiji’s shrine will be a shrine of *Guru Tattwa* itself.

“To Him who is differently manifested in the forms of God, the Teacher, and the Self, whose body is all-pervading like space; to Sri Dakshinamurti - to the Effulgent Form facing the South, to Him be this obeisance!” *Manasollasa of Sri Sureswaracharya 1.10*

Swamiji is wholly present in these signs, “which are utterly ‘Beyond’, yet at the same time and for that very reason most intimately within, the Absolute of both transcendence and immanence.

The Jivanmukta has cast off the limitations of the physical body and now his presence in *Videha Kaivalya* has become all-pervading. An abiding Peace encompasses and permeates the ashram premises and the very air is redolent with his powerful Presence. Indeed it is not confined to Tapovanam. As before, even now wherever devotees may be, they find his unfailing Grace and immediate support in a more potent inner Presence. They now realize the significance of his often repeated assurance, “Swami will always be with you”. For him who has become all and every-thing, even as there is no coming, there is no going away.

Although the eternally youthful, lustrous, sweet and smiling face of the sage, lotus-like in tinge and form, may not be visible to their gross vision, his continued and uninterrupted presence and constant shower of Grace have been the definite experience of all devotees who surrender to him.

Let us here recall the reflections of Swami Abhishiktananda on the mystery of the *Guru* after he recognised in Sri Gnanananda his *Guru* at the very first meeting with him:

“The *Guru* is one who has himself first attained the Real and who knows from personal experience the way that leads there; He is capable of initiating the disciple and of making well up from within the heart of his disciple, the immediate ineffable experience which is his own - the utterly transparent knowledge, so limpid and pure, that quite simply ‘he is’...”

“When the vibrations of the master’s voice reach the disciple’s ear and the master’s eyes look deep into his, then from the very depths of his being, from the newly discovered cave of his heart, thoughts well up which reveal him to himself.”

“When all is said and done the true *Guru* is he who, without the help of words, can enable the attentive soul to hear the ‘Thou Art That’, *Tat+Vam+Asi* of the Vedic rishis and this true *Guru* will appear in some outward form or other at the very moment when help is needed to leap over the final barrier.....

Reflecting on the *Guru* disciple relationship, Swami Abhishiktananda says:

“The *Guru* and disciple form a couple, a pair of which the two elements attract one another and adhere to one another. As with the two poles, they exist only in relationship to one another, a pair on the road to unity, a non-dual reciprocity in the final realisation.

“Human encounters do not exclude duality. In the deepest of them one can say there is a fusion and the two become one in love and desire, but in the meeting of the *Guru* and disciple there is no longer even fusion, for we are on the plane of original non-duality. *Advaita* remains for ever incomprehensible to him who has not first lived it existentially in his meeting with the *Guru*”.

Swami Abhishiktananda writes, Recalling his conversations with Sri Gnanananda during his stay at Tapovanam.

“Many times Vanya questioned Gnanananda as to the role of the *Guru*, but the replies referred only to the definitive *Guru*, he who appears at the moment of the *darsana* of the *Atman*, the *Guru* who is the very light with which the *Atman* shines when he is finally discovered. ‘The *Guru* is *akhanda*, undivided’, and he would repeat, ‘He is *advaita*, non-dual. He alone is the *Guru* who can make one take the high dive; he appears and reveals himself only at the moment of diving ! The other one is the *Guru-murti*, the *Guru* in visible form, the one who can only show the way **Adhyatma Vidyalaya** Swami Abhishiktananda mentions more than once that Sri Gnanananda’s teaching is a perfect echo of that of Bhagwan Sri Ramana. Maharshi Ramana expounds the role of the *Guru*.”

“The *Guru* is both ‘external’ and ‘internal’. From the ‘exterior’ he gives a push to the mind to turn inward; from the ‘interior’ he pulls the mind towards the Self and helps in quieting the mind. That is *Guru Kripa*. There is no difference between God, *Guru* and the Self”.

Sri Gnanananda called Tapovanam an **Adhyatma Vidyalaya** a centre for Self knowledge. Self enquiry, *Dhyana* or meditation were always emphatically declared by Swamiji to be the royal road to Realisation.

When Abhishiktananda first came to Tapovanam, he asked him:

“What is Swamiji’s position concerning supreme Reality? Is it *dvaita* or *advaita* ? When all is said and done, does any difference remain between God and creatures? For instance, is it possible for man to enjoy God and eternally partake of the joy? Or, is there finally, beyond everything, only being non-dual (*advaita*) and indivisible in unlimited fullness ?”

“What is the use of such questions?” replied Sri Gnanananda quickly. “The answer is within you. Seek it in the depths of your being. Devote yourself to *Dhyana*, meditation beyond all forms and the solution will be given to you”

Swamiji has given the answer. Sankara too exclaims:

“That Self is not even one; how can a second, as different from That, be? There is not (for It) absoluteness nor non-absoluteness Neither the non-dual (reality). How can I describe That which is established by all Vedantas? - *Dasasloki, 10*

It is an experience which cannot be labeled. “Then why are you so determined at all costs to find a name for that which is by very definition stripped of every possibility of being named? Swamiji exclaims elsewhere.

Therefore, Tapovanam, has never been a place of religious or philosophic disputation. Swamiji insisted on the monastic disciples studying Vedantic texts but warned them of the danger of getting lost in *Sastra-Vasana*. Tapovanam never was and is not to this day a place of mere learning. Swamiji desired the aspirants to attentively listen to the texts, continually reflect on them and then contemplate on the *Mahavakyas*, the summit of Upanishadic teaching - rather like the uninterrupted thought of *Ko 'an* in the Zen tradition. In fact some of the methods of Swamiji who was a *Siddha Purusha* were like those of the Zen masters, to make the disciple leap beyond the mental. He would say that the awakening would happen as a flash of lighting. Swami Abhishiktananda describes it as follows: “The call of the Upanishad is the one which comes from beyond space and time. Its word issues from the silence, seeking to awaken man and to lead him to himself. As is the *Guru*, so are the Scriptures, the mirror in which man progressively discovers himself comes to know himself in his innermost truth. That moment comes when the spark flashes between the two poles. After that there is nothing but pure light, in which all has disappeared - master, disciple, and Scripture too.

When Swami Abhishiktananda broached to Sri Gnanananda the subject of initiation, Swamiji replied in his characteristically succinct fashion

“What is the use of initiation? Either the disciple is not ready in which case the so-called initiation is no more than empty words, or else the disciple is ready, and then neither words nor signs are necessary. The initiation then happens spontaneously”²⁸.

And it happened to Swami Abhishiktananda, to which he indirectly refers with great feeling:

“From him (a *Kesi*, a true *Guru*) he received a marvellous *diksha* in which all things were revealed to him; but such a *diksha* was supported on nothing whatever He - (that *Guru*) did not even realize that he was giving *diksha*, because he had no idea that he was a *Guru*. If he spoke any words they arose naturally from the inner Source, direct and unmediated. This was a *mauna-diksha*, the silent initiation, an infinitely pure communication within the mystery of the non-dual Spirit, a glance which pierces to the very depths, an embrace which abolishes all distinctions But the *Kesi* in the spirit can beget only *Kesis*”

Inspired by Swamiji, Abhishiktananda retired to the Himalayas, entered into the mystery of *Avadhoota* living it in the fullness of his Sannyasa. He lived a perfectly acosmic life and realised that all-transcendent character of Sannyasa. He appropriated the advaitic experience of the Upanishadic ideal, he had met in his *Guru*, Sri Gnanananda. He has transmitted the teaching of his *Guru* and his own experience as it is at its very source and with all the vigor of its original strength, in his last testament - “Guru and Disciple” and Essays on *Sannyasa* and on the Upanishads.

A Christian priest who was drawn to *Advaita* asked Sri Gnanananda whether he should become a Hindu to pursue the *Vedantic Sadhana*. Swamiji told him that there was no need to change the religion. He should go deep into his own religion when he would discover it there -for every religion bears within it an urgent call to pass beyond itself, in as much as its essence is to be a sign of the Absolute. Swamiji had expressed himself against religious conversions.

The role of Tapovanam is primarily that of an ashram, where the monastic revival is nurtured and where seekers who may stay performing their *Sadhana* have a suitable environment in which they may be in communion with Sadguru Gnanananda's Grace. Whilst qualified advanced seekers may pursue the Upanishadic ideal, other seekers who are not yet fit for 'the flight of the alone to the Alone' could prepare themselves for it by the preparatory practices japa, ritualistic worship, *NamaSankirtan* etc. Vedic chants during the pooja are those of the Upanishads containing the *Mahavakyas* and having relevance to Self-enquiry. All rituals are also symbolic of the Upanishadic Truth. Similarly, the hymns and songs refer to it and to *Guru Tattwa* only, in various ways and using different names. Thus even lay disciples and outside visitors who are involved in these forms of worship have the higher truths of Hindu mysticism always before them, whether as philosophic concepts or poetic religious images. The ashram attempts to preserve the ancient Vedic culture and to keep alive traditions of the past which it sees as valuable to the Indian spiritual life. An important place is given to Tamil devotional and mystic lore.

Rituals, however, constitute only small part of Tapovanam's spiritual life; the main important part, like the bulk of an iceberg remains hidden from a superficial view.

Sadhana in Tapovanam which is essentially a *Gurukula* may be summed up by the sloka from the *Guru Gita*:

“There is no truth higher than the Guru, no austerity more purifying than service to him, no realisation greater than knowledge of the *Guru (Tattwa)*. Salutations to the *Guru* !

There is no Tapovanam apart from Sri Gnanananda and the inspiration of Sri Gnanananda is the inspiration of Tapovanam. We have had a few glimpses of Sadguru's inspiration. We would request those interested in a deeper study to refer to the book 'Sadguru Gnanananda' - a Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Publication. We shall conclude recalling some of the thought-provoking observations of Swami Abhishiktananda in his book 'Guru and Disciple'

“Herein lies the real significance of the call of India, that it invites none to enter those inner depths which are beyond all that human reflection can attain to, or human thought or “31 words can express..“Here (in India) the umbilical cord has never been severed between the unique experience in depth and the multiplicity of forms which the experience is reflected on various mental levels.

“They (scriptures and tradition) are never more than means of introduction to the mystery: here we come to the secret of instruction by a *Guru*. Ideas never enclose or contain truth in their structure, as the West so often tends to think! Study of scriptures has no other goal than that of preparing for the awakening”

“Here we cannot separate Knowledge from salvation. Yet this salvation through Knowledge is not a gnosis; it is the return of the soul into her depth through ascetic practice. The man who does not have in his depth this thirst for salvation, *mumukshutva*, which alone can lead to true Knowledge, will never truly 'hear' India's message...”

“*Gnana, Bhakti* and *Karma* are proving to be satisfactory paths only if, on the level of thought, devotion and action they already reflect the dawn light from the depths of the person’s being. Their inspiration is always far beyond them...”

“He (Sri Gnanananda) refused all cheap spirituality. His teaching is fundamentally the way of total renunciation so that finally there is no ego left to manifest itself. May the sceptic try the way of *dhyana, which* he taught! It is not a case of his being the intermediary inducing certain mental states in his disciples thus helping them to penetrate to the inner mystery. He goes straight to the essence by a path as barren as that of the “Ascent of Mount Carmel”. His communication with his disciple is never through the intermediary of things. It is direct, in depth, at the source of his being. It is true that nothing is felt except a peace which reveals and illumines and which transforms the one who can receive it His teaching is pure Vedanta....”

At Sri Gnanananda Tapovanam we are dedicated to the pursuit of Vedanta. We hope we may be able to share with seekers of all religions, from all traditions, cultures, and nationalities, the benefits of the insights of our *Sadguru* and the spiritually charged atmosphere of the ashram established by him and where in his Samadhi his living Presence is felt by all.

OM TAT SAT