

STORY #38

*Pray to the Lord daily and accept happiness and unhappiness as the grace of the Lord. The Lord keeps the sun in the sky so everyone can have heat and light and keeps the moon in the sky so everyone can have coolness at night. The Lord opens the flowers and allows them to bloom and then closes and dries them up. All of these things happen by the will of the Lord and we are His children and He loves us. He doesn't want us to suffer or to be anxious. So rest, rest at His holy feet knowing you are cared for.*

MY FIRST MEAL AS A SWAMI

THE SAINT WHO GAVE me swami initiation was Shantanandiji Maharaj. I was 32 years old at the time. With this initiation, I vowed to be detached from everything: my relatives, my home, my town, everything.

I left the ashram the next day and set out on my own. I now had to beg for food and be prepared to sleep under a tree wherever my feet stopped for the day. I had never asked for alms before and I was hesitant.

"How can I beg for food?" I asked myself. I felt helpless.

I walked three or four miles and came to a small town. There was a temple there and I went in, bowed to the altar, and sat in the corner of the temple. It was exactly twelve o'clock noon and time for a meal.

I wasn't particularly hungry and was thinking to myself,

"Maybe I'll go for two or three days before I ask for food. I can make it that long. But I'll certainly have to ask for alms after four or five days."

The women of India, the mothers and sisters, are so kind that as soon as a swami asks for alms they immediately give food, no matter how poor they are, so I wasn't too concerned about food.

As I sat in the corner of the temple, I noticed there was another temple behind it. Both temples were in the same compound close

to each other and a mother and her son appeared to be living in the other temple. I could see that they did the pujas in both temples.

"Mother," I heard the boy say, "Yesterday, aunty promised that she would join us for our noon meal. But she's not coming now. She says that she's already eaten. What are we going to do with this extra food?"

"Oh," the mother said. "Don't worry about it. Go and finish your puja in the other temple."

The boy walked into the temple where I was sitting and he finished the puja with great devotion. Then he saw me and hurried back to his mother.

"Mother," he said. "There's a swami sitting in the other temple."

"My son," the mother said. "This extra food that we prepared today is for him. Go and tell him not to seek alms anywhere else, because his food is already prepared."

The son quickly came to me. He bowed down.

"Please come to our home for your noon meal," he said sweetly.

There are two types of alms for swamis in India. In the first one, the swami sits and eats with the family who offered the food. In the second, the swami graciously accepts the food and then retires to a quiet place to eat alone. Both of these manners are widely accepted and understood. It's up to the saint how he or she wants to accept the alms.

I followed the boy into the other temple. The mother was standing on the temple steps with a bucket of water and she washed my feet. Then her son wiped my feet with a clean cloth and they took me inside. The mother asked me to sit on a wooden platform while she waited on me. She lit incense and doted on me like I was her own son, with so much love and devotion and I was greatly moved.

Then the mother served me sweets and they both fanned me while I ate. This was my first meal as a swami and I felt that God was already taking care of me. Tears rolled down my face when I left and I knew, then, that I would never, ever, worry about my-

self. The Lord is always the well-wisher of everyone and it's His goal to bring happiness to everyone.

