

# AN EAGLE'S FLIGHT



A Yogi's Spiritual Autobiography



Swami Nirmalananda Giri  
(Abbot George Burke)

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by

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*They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings as eagles.*  
(Isaiah 40:31)

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# Foreword

## *Before the Beginning*

We live only one life—the life of the evolving spirit—but we live it through many bodies. Beginning with a single atom of hydrogen we take upon ourselves many body-shells, expanding our scope of consciousness in each one as we move from form to form, inspired by the inner command:

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul!  
As the swift seasons roll!  
Leave thy low-vaulted past!  
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,  
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,  
Till thou at length art free,  
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!  
(Oliver Wendell Holmes)

Until the spirit reaches the human form, this urge for transcendence is wholly subliminal, but in the human being, after many births it becomes a conscious act of will, taking on the perspective set forth by the mystic poet Rumi:

A stone I died and rose again a plant.  
A plant I died and rose an animal;  
I died an animal and was born a man.  
Why should I fear? What have I lost by death?  
As man, death sweeps me from this world of men  
That I may wear an angel's wings in heaven;  
Yet e'en as angel may I not abide,  
For nought abideth save the face of God.  
Thus o'er the angels' world I wing my way  
Onwards and upwards, unto boundless lights;  
Then let me be as nought, for in my heart  
Rings as a harp-song that we must return to Him.

To return to God we must first return to this earth times beyond number until the consciousness of the Prodigal Son who “came to himself” and said “I will arise and go” back to his home (Luke 15:17-18) awakens in us and we remember what we really are and from whence we came. More exactly, we remember *who* we are and from *Whom* we came. When this happens, we, too, determine to “arise and go” back to our Source.

This is the only aim of conscious life—the return of the drop into the bosom of the ocean, transfigured by its pilgrimage to participation in the infinite life of God, the Whole, of which it is an eternal part.

The chronicle of my many returns—like that of every human being—would fill a library. But in telling of this present life I will be revealing those that went before, as well, since each life is the sum and reflection of all previous births.

*NOTE:* There are many technical terms in this book. You can find their meanings in the Glossary at the end.

# Chapter One

## *A Child's Garden of Mysteries*

In the hours between midnight and dawn on June 27, 1940, I was born as William Roger Burke, the son of William and Alta Burke, residents of the peaceful town of McLean, Illinois, population 450. It was the feast day of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. ("Our Lady of Perpetual Help" is a title of a miracle-working icon of the Virgin Mary which is highly venerated in the Roman Catholic Church. I had such an affinity for this icon that at one time—without consciously planning it—there was a copy of it in some form in every room of my home. It was only some time afterward that I learned that my birthday and the feast day of the icon were the same.)

When family members would ask my mother why I was called Roger, since no one in our family or circle of acquaintances bore that name, my mother would simply reply: "Because Roger is his name!"—an answer that would have delighted Mark Twain. Years later as a yogi experiencing past life recall I discovered that in one significant previous birth my name was Roger, and she had been my mother in that life.

Though our lives were simple, materially speaking, we abounded in the riches of the spirit—a heritage compounded through several generations within both my mother's and my father's families. We lived in an atmosphere of the supernatural that was so stable and real that to us it was utterly natural. All of us possessed and exercised psychic abilities to some degree—but, again, so naturally that we had no idea we were doing it. (Actually, we would have denied it with full sincerity, insisting that we were "just using our heads.")

My maternal grandmother, Docia Margaret Burge, lived daily in spiritual clairvoyant vision and miraculous manifestations, all of which she kept in guarded secrecy, confiding them only to me as she had to my mother before me. Her special gift was that of healing. Never did her "patients" know of her intervention on their behalf—many of them never knew she existed! Whenever she would learn of anyone's illness she would slip away into her bedroom and close the door. (I do not think anyone but me even noticed). After some time she would emerge, and the next news of that person would be of his/her amazing recovery.

Her "biggest case" had been that of raising a neighbor from the dead sometime before I was born. In that particular instance the subject knew absolutely that my grandmother had done it, and it took much persuading by my grandmother to secure her silence.

When grandmother died, few flowers were sent and not many came to her funeral—for she had lived her whole life within her house, going out only to church and for rare visits to others. Most of the people of McLean neither knew nor cared about her passing, yet in many families there was at least one member that owed her their health if not their life.

Going through her personal papers I discovered descriptions and drawings of visions and even transcripts of conversations with God. I burnt them all, leaving her chosen obscurity intact. Who can number the saints and masters that have lived their lives incognito in this world, silently blessing and uplifting the unheeding masses that rushed past them without a glance? But they are known to God, and that is their desired reward.

Fortunately my earliest memories are of church, which my parents regularly attended as faithful members of the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana). I recall very well my mother teaching me to not look around at the people but to watch the minister. I was too little to walk, but I was not too little to look and listen. So I did, and I have very clear memories from that time of preachers and their sermons. Although my body was not developed enough to speak clearly, I had no lack of internal vocabulary and understood them to a goodly degree.

It is erroneous to think that until we attain some degree of spiritual mastery we have no control over our lives. The truth is that from the moment of our entering into relative existence our Higher Self is in total control. Although we may appear to be swept along by forces greater than ourselves—including karma—such is not the case. Every moment of our life, both in and out of physical incarnation, is consciously determined by us and so ordered by our inherent divine powers. Made in the image of God, we ever live accordingly. Our lives are literal lectures presented to our lesser selves, consisting of body, senses, and mind, by our true and higher selves. They are not mere reaping of past sowings or simple reflexes of universal law. They are purposeful writings of wisdom upon the scroll of our consciousness. It is not enough to experience them—we must decipher the mystical script and learn. Then alone is there hope of ceasing to need any further such lessons. Knowledge (*Gnosis* in Greek and *Jnana* in Sanskrit) is the prime requisite.

Almost from birth I had experiences that shouted eternal verities into my deaf ears. Looking back I can now realize that my mental or intellectual state was one of the strongest evidences of reincarnation that an individual could possibly possess. Yet, despite my clear memories of that infant state, I was not to believe in reincarnation at all until struck by the lightning of involuntary insight at the very threshold of adulthood—which certainly proves that no truth can be perceived by the individual until the divine fiat goes forth, that the intellect of man, however he may (literally) idolize it, is incapable of apprehending the simplest facts of metaphysical life on its own.

There were several factors that to my mind incontrovertibly prove the truth of my having lived before—all of them relating to my internal consciousness.

First, I was born knowing how to understand and mentally speak English. Because of my lack of control over my vocal apparatus I could not actually speak out physically, but I could converse internally with myself and others—though they could not hear me. This was not satisfactory, but it was all I had to work with.

I did begin to speak when I was six months old, however, and (so I have been told) by my first birthday I could carry on a limited conversation. Still, I did not have full control and could not speak words of many syllables for a couple of more years. I could

always articulate internally to perfection, but since I detested “baby talk” I refused to speak a word unless I could do it perfectly. Usually I employed the mirror of my grandmother Burge’s bedroom dresser. I would close the door and stand in front of the mirror practicing until I felt I “had” it. Then I would go and try it out on the first adult I met, demanding to know if I was saying it right. If not, then back to the mirror until I could say it like an adult.

From the beginning of my formal education my teachers always remarked on my extensive vocabulary and marveled at where I had gotten it. Of course, I had brought it along with me from my previous life—as I would discover later—but I did not know that, so I marveled, too.

There were many practical things I knew also—things that could not have been learned in infancy. I knew how to cook, for example, and I could trim the wick of a kerosene lamp to produce a perfect flame. All my innate knowledge was confined to nineteenth century matters, for I was a classical Victorian, disliking fresh air, the great outdoors, and nature in general. Nor could I endure for even my father and mother to see my bare feet or my bare arms. It was indecent! I refused to go barefoot at any time. First thing in the morning, on went the socks and shoes. And how I hated “kiddie clothes.” I loathed coats and yearned for a cloak. Electricity and automobiles were repulsive to me. The only modern invention I could tolerate was the radio. I was quite consciously angry and rebellious at finding myself in the twentieth century.

It must be admitted that I was puzzled by the people around me. They were very kind, and I appreciated their goodness to me, but they were so strange! At least, to me. Some of my most vivid memories are of sitting on the lap of my mother or grandmother and studying the faces of those around me, trying to figure them out. “Just who are these people?” I would ask myself inwardly. “These are not my people. I do not belong here.” Early on I decided that as soon as I was old enough to be independent, I would go on a search to find my place and my people. It is this feeling of alienation, arising from the fact of having lived in other times and other places, that usually causes children at some point in their early life to conclude that they have been adopted—that those they live with are not their real family. Not understanding the truth of reincarnation which produces this thought, this greatly hurts and frustrates the parents. How absurd that children are thought to be born blank!

The Bible was also at hand to my inner mind, and I continually quoted passages I had never read or heard. Oddly enough, I also knew a great deal about ancient Greek philosophy—especially political philosophy.

If a person is desperate enough he can dismiss much of what I have presented as my evidence of past life memory by saying that I must have heard about all these things when newly born and then later brought them out of my subconscious, only thinking they were spontaneous and originating within my own mind. But I have studied my background with this very idea in mind and found that it does not apply.

There is one thing that absolutely cannot be explained away thus, and that is the fact that I was born knowing how to read. The first time I saw a printed page I read it right off to myself without a thought. Adults often remarked how clever it was of me to

always know to hold a book upright—never upside down. And I turned the pages at exactly the rate I would if I could really read. Imagine that!

This I knew to keep absolutely secret. I did not know why I should conceal it, but I felt it was necessary that no one learn of my ability. When I got a new book I would wait to read it until my father or someone else had read it to me first. Then I would reread it silently many times, much to the amusement of any observers. I felt that if I read a book right away on my own, they might catch on. Often they would say: “Read your book to me, Roger.” Not on my or their life! My ego chafed at having to appear a dumb kid, but the inner command was so powerful that I never once gave a thought to breaking it. A partial betrayal came when I was six years old and my Aunt Faye discovered I had read several of her books, including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. A couple of years later, testing in school revealed that I was reading on adult levels and I was regarded as an intellectual prodigy. From then on I read openly (mostly Victorian novels) since “they” had a rational explanation at hand for my ability.

It is not usual for so much to be brought over directly from one life to another unless the person reincarnates quickly. Usually time is spent in astral renewal within those realms where summation and balancing out take place—even over centuries—before the individual returns to earthly birth. The more evolved a person is, the more rapidly he reincarnates, whereas those of little evolution may take centuries between incarnations. (There are exception to this, as in all things.) But once the leaven of conscious evolution—especially in the practice of meditation—begins to work within his subtle levels, a person finds himself impelled into an increasingly rapid series of births—often with little loss of knowledge and insight, especially in matters of the spirit.

Memories of past lives may be rare, but we all without exception live the first years of our lives by past life impulses—by habit patterns ingrained in our subconscious. Dr. Morris Netherton, author of *Past Lives Therapy*, has found that our responses to present situations are usually responses to a past situation of which the present one reminds us. This being so, if we observe the behavior and speech of a child in his earlier years we can pretty well figure out the character of the child’s past lives.

My body may have been American, but my instincts were definitely Indian. Pity my mother! When I was about four years old, I drove her to the brink by continually going into the kitchen, pulling the white cotton dish towel off its rack, taking off my trousers and wrapping the towel around me in the (consciously unknown) style of India. Finally the towel rack had to be raised up out of my reach! Even into the primary grades I exhibited many traits of Indian behavior that maddened my purely Western family. When I went to India at the end of 1962, I found that I automatically knew all the peculiarities of Bengali village etiquette—even the polite gestures that are made on occasions.

The moment I got hold of a set of dominoes I began to build replicas of ancient Indian temples like those found in the North Indian temple city of Khajuraho. Of course I had no idea that was what they were, and supposed they were just my imagination. Yet, when they were completed I used to wish with all my heart that they were “real” and of a size that I could enter. I would often lie on the floor, looking into

their interiors, willing myself inside. It did not work.

But one thing did. Frustrated by not escaping into the world of my domino temples, I would sit up, unthinkingly assume the posture of meditation, and practice a yogic technique for astral vision. I would be rewarded with spectacular results—at first astral patterns, but if I persevered the shining forms of masters would appear. I learned the identity of one of venerable countenance when years later I read *Autobiography of Yogi* and saw the photograph of Swami Sriyukteswar Giri, the guru of Paramhansa Yogananda. I also saw the faces of masters and saints that many years later I would come to know by personal acquaintance.

Some other Indian traits manifested, as well that were constantly winning me reprimands. Imagine my relief when in India I observed people doing just those very things.

Only at night did I live briefly in “my” world, a world I knew well when I went there as a young adult, having been there many times “on the astral.”

Sri Ramakrishna often told of the man whose son had died. The next morning when he awoke he was quite cheerful. When his wife asked him how this could be, seeing their only son was dead, he told her: “Last night I dreamed I had six sons, all of whom died. Now which shall I grieve about—the loss of the one son or the loss of the six?” He had realized that all we experience is really “the stuff of which dreams are made”—that as Shelley wrote, “all that we see or seem, is but a dream within a dream.” Upon awakening from a vivid dream I would often wonder: “Which world is real—‘this’ one or ‘that’ one? Last night in just one dream so much time seemed to pass, but it was really only a few minutes in this place! Am I at this very moment dreaming a longer and more permanent kind of dream? Will years seem to go by and then I will wake to find that I am still a little child and have all those years to live through—only an hour or so having really passed? Is there another world I may one day ‘wake up’ in to find that I am not even Roger Burke at all—and never was except in a dream?” Of course this is the very purpose of dreaming—to induce such questions within us.

Glimmers of esoteric knowledge emerged into my consciousness quite early. I regularly experienced the expansion of consciousness into my higher bodies and the projection of my awareness upward from the confines of my physical form. In the state between sleep and wakefulness, I would frequently begin to inwardly intone a Sanskrit mantra in time with my breathing. The moment I began to move from that state the mantra would slip from me, and I could not remember it when awake. (I discovered it many years later as I will relate in a later chapter.) I had the strong belief that if I would shut myself in a closet and sit there “things” would happen. I tried it once, but it was too spooky. However, I retained the conviction that something would have taken place if I had only known what to do to make it happen.

I discovered one mode of psychic perception quite accidentally. When I was between three and five years old, my mother told me, “No matter what you can imagine, it is happening somewhere in the world right now.” Immediately I went into the bedroom, got on the bed, closed my eyes and spoke the name of a major city in the world. I vividly experienced the “feel” of that city—its vibrations. This intrigued me, so I

named another city and got the same result. I repeated this process several times and had the same experience. (Years later when I went to some of those cities I got the same impression of its psychic atmosphere.) Over half a century later I was telling another yogi about this, and the question came bursting into my mind: How did I know the names of those cities at that very young age? Past life memory was the only sensible answer. This was another mystery in my garden of mysteries.

Tied in with this was my further realization that the places where I was physically also had their own psychic imprint. I well remember walking from one end of our living-dining room to another, noting the shift in atmosphere that occurred at almost every step. I tried to pin down just what the distance of each “psychic cell” might be, but discovered that it varied, though it was definitely a “grid” of some kind. From then on a simple walk through a house produced a flood of impressions, at times distracting and even tiring to a degree. This whole thing utterly bewildered me, for no one in the narrow orbit of my life had ever heard of “vibrations” or bio-magnetism or any related concept, so my shifting perceptions were a mighty puzzle. I became increasingly sensitive to the radiations of people, often sensing them even when walls and doors blocked any sight of them.

One awareness did arise from all this: everything is alive. I would say “Excuse me” to a wall or a piece of furniture I bumped into. I could both feel and see the life moving within so-called inanimate objects. Moreover I could tell that things made of many parts were yet somehow a unity. This was the discovery of “thought form” in one aspect, but I had no idea that was it. One vivid early teenage experience was of my scrutinizing a wooden chair, being aware of the disparate vibrations of its various parts, yet feeling sure that at some time a kind of coalescence of energies might take place and the chair become a unity. “Could it not even become conscious?” I asked myself. But I knew better than to ask that question of others.

There had never been a time when I was not aware that I was moving within a homogenous field of consciousness that was the basis of matter. My mind could extend through this field and touch objects. As a child, especially, I could not endure for people to tap, rub, or scratch on things within just a few feet of me, because I could *feel* it—not quite the same as if they had been touching me physically, but in a more internal manner. Never at any time did I experience being a single object isolated in empty space. To my mind I was experiencing the reality of God; that it was God in which I was moving, God that I was breathing in with the air. In the highest sense that of course is true, but now I know that I was experiencing the *vishwaprana*, the universal life force (prana) Mesmer called “animal magnetism.” When I was twenty years old I prayed to experience the feeling of separateness that “normal” people live in always so I could perhaps better understand their ways of thinking and acting. My prayer was granted for about twenty minutes, which was plenty and enough. But it did enable me to understand to some degree why “they” thought and acted the way they do—and the same on my side, as well.

Children are born with this innate sense of unity and life, but unfortunately “learn” the illusion of separation and unconsciousness. This is part of the personal fall of each

one of us from “Paradise.” Along with this fall we not only enter into a supposed separation from the world around us, we also lose contact with our inner selves to an equal degree. For the inner and the outer are one.

The question of the nature of the “inner me” was so inexplicable and the answer seemingly so inaccessible that in time I gave it up. But not until I had discovered that the inner me reflected the outer me. Whenever I verbalized my thoughts inwardly, I would hear a voice speak within me that was a duplicate of my outer, physical voice. What is more, I discovered that if I held my mouth wide open the inner voice had trouble speaking. If I went even further and rolled my tongue up within my mouth or stuck it out, my inner voice would sound just as my physical voice would in such a situation. Any change in the physical speech apparatus brought about the corresponding change in the inner voice. This had to be a real thing. Now I know that I was experiencing the astral senses that do in truth mirror the physical organs of sense and action. But at the moment it was a ponderous mystery, though the greater mystery was why no one else seemed aware of these things. Thanks be to God, I did know at least one maxim of the initiate: “Keep Silent!”

I may not have comprehended the nature of the inner me, but I had been working with it for a long time. Sensitivity to “vibrations” and whatnot carries along with it the curse of susceptibility to the psychological blight of “moods.” I well remember the first time I woke up in a negative, moody state. I was more shocked by my words and behavior than anyone else. Luckily—or unluckily—my parents thought it funny. But I did not. The next time it happened, I was determined not to express the mood, and went through the day miserable. The third time was indeed the charm. I woke up with a little thundercloud over my mind. Nothing doing! I lay very still, not wanting my mother to know I was awake and get me out of bed. Instead I lay quite still and penetrated deep into my mind where I dispelled the cloud. Then I called for my mother to help me out of bed (I was still sleeping in a baby bed with the railing up and had to be helped down). From then on I refused to leave the bedroom until I had banished any moodiness. In time it became easy to dispel whatever arose during the day, as well.

Insight into three things deeply impressed my baby mind: Hitler, Gandhi and the atomic bomb. I encountered all three through motion pictures.

Hitler I saw in a newsreel as I sat on my mother’s lap in a theater. He was simply walking up and down on the roof of a building, occasionally looking at the camera. My reaction was too profound to be verbalized, but I knew he was the presence of evil in the world. Seeing Gandhi on the theater screen had the opposite effect. In my mind the two were the chief figures of the opposing forces of good and evil upon the earth. But I did not have too much optimism as to which side would win.

My atom bomb experience was, I think, the first trauma of my life. A very boring “short subject” was being shown about research into the atomic structure of matter. In those days the general populace had no idea about “the bomb.” At one point a model of an atom and the movement of its particles (represented by rubber balls) was shown. As I looked at the balls moving around one another, suddenly I saw Hiroshima instead. The terrible light blinded me, and I began to struggle in my mother’s arms. I opened

my mouth to scream, but suddenly I could see the great cloud forming and rising upward like a tree—at least, as a child draws a tree. (For the world it would be the tree of the knowledge of life and death and the Ring of the Nibelungen.) The abysmal horror of it silenced me. For weeks afterward the sequence would come unbidden into my mind, terrifying me all the more because I did not understand what I was seeing. I could only intuit, not verbalize, and that made it all the worse. When the bomb was dropped two or three years later, the whole world was shaken, but not me. I had already learned to “live with the bomb”—a terrible burden for a child, much less one little more than an infant.

Resonations of past life understanding of religion were also present through my childhood and beyond. I would see a philosophical or theological aspect to many things. When exploring my past lives some years later I found that I had been a member of the Roman Inquisition—not to be equated with the infamous Spanish Inquisition. All I did was read books and write an analysis of their content—no recommendation or condemnation, just a statement of the general philosophical/theological character of the book. But I was definitely an intellectual bloodhound in ferreting out the implications of the book as well as its obvious statements or its mistakes. In this life my childhood theological reactions were rarely mild since children tend to be extreme. But I could always snuffle out the hidden theological implications behind any attempt to inoculate me with beliefs or attitudes not openly stated to me.

My first conscious desire was for a Roman Catholic rosary. When I saw a rack of rosaries for sale in Kresge’s dime store my reaction was immediate: I wanted one. To my Protestant parents it was an unacceptable whim, but instead of saying “no” they said “later.” Doubtless they came to regret that strategy, for they could never afterward go to town without being met by me at the door with the demand “did you get it?” upon their return. After a long time I caught on: No rosary for me. But the desire never left me, for I knew somehow it had a spiritual value.

My first conscious efforts at spiritual comprehension occurred during my third and fourth years. The stimulus was a Bible story book. Opposite the title page was a color picture of Jesus with some children. Jesus was holding an infant close to His face, gazing fully into its eyes as it very evidently attempted to communicate with Him. At His feet knelt a little boy, clutching and pulling on His robe to get His attention.

I identified fully with the kneeling boy. I would spend long periods of time staring at this picture as there arose in me the definite conviction that the picture held for me a crucial message. Sitting in contemplation of the page, I would say to myself: “That is God come down to earth. And *I* have to do something about it. But *what* must I do?” This created in me a very real agony of soul. Somehow I knew that it would be useless to ask anyone around me for assistance. This was something I must find out for myself. And if I did not find it out, my life would be a complete failure, a miserable loss.

Some hope came during a visit to distant relatives. I was drawn to a wall plaque which I felt had a special significance for me. When I asked about the plaque, I was told that it was a prayer. “What is a ‘prayer’?” I asked my mother, who answered: “It is when you talk to God.”

Talk to God! The concept was astounding. It struck me like lightning. My prior inquiries about God and His nature had not proven very fruitful due to the limited theology of my parents' religion. As a consequence I had to work it out on my own, and had managed to figure that God was the atmosphere of intelligent consciousness that I felt all around and within me, that joined me to everything and enabled me to experience them as extensions of my own being. I was also keenly aware that there was more to God than my small mind was perceiving.

But it had not occurred to me that I could *talk* with God. The idea made immediate sense as well as appeal. I had to know those words! They might be a key to unlock the shackles of my dilemma as to how I should respond to God Become Man. Several times I asked to be picked up and held before the plaque to read the words of the prayer which I did my best to memorize in order to try it out later. Even then I understood that there should be verbal formulas that produced tangible results. (It is my firm conviction that children are natural magicians and should be instructed in esoteric knowledge and practice to some degree just as soon as they are able to comprehend it.)

The prayer was the classic "Now I lay me down to sleep,...." "If I should die before I wake" did not give me any trouble. Death, too, I had already figured out on my own to some extent. One of the residents of McLean had died, and I heard my grandmother and mother talking about going to the funeral. "What's a funeral?" elicited the vague answer that it was a church service that was done when you died. "What's 'die'?" (They should have known *that* was coming.) Apparently they held the mistaken idea that it is morbid to tell little children about death, although one of the reasons the Lord Jesus told His disciples to become like little children (Mark 10:15) is their capacity for accepting realities—even if they do not completely comprehend them. Therefore I got no answer worth considering.

Standing there in the kitchen I made an interesting decision: I would "see" for myself what death was. And since I did not "know" I could not—I *did*.

I saw a bed and an old lady lying on it. She seemed to be suffering from some cause. As I watched, she appeared to fall asleep, but simultaneously a translucent duplicate of the woman rose up out of her body. I understood that the duplicate was really "her," that she had gone out of her body just like I got out of my pajamas every morning. The "real" form began to rise upward right through the ceiling and roof of her house. She did not stop, but continued rising high, high above the town. When she got up into the clouds a golden light appeared and she went into it and was gone. (Referring to this golden light, the Brihadaranyaka and Isa Upanishads tell a dying person to say: "The face of truth is covered with a golden disk. Unveil it, O Pushan, so that I who love the truth may see it." This verse is recited by the next of kin whenever a Hindu is cremated. The golden orb of light, seen by some persons after death, is looked upon as a door whose opening will unveil the higher worlds of truth.) I realized that she had gone "somewhere else" to continue living. I also realized that some version of this happened to everyone at the end of life, and that it would also happen to me. Very few people believe in the reality of their own death, but fortunately from that day forward I did so believe and looked upon my subsequent life in its context.

The prospect of contacting God through the “lay me down” prayer kept me repeating it all the way home so I would not forget it. Once in our house, I headed for the attic stairs and hurried up them using my hands, knees, and feet. Going over to the bed we kept up there for guests—and that shortly would be mine when I was adjudged too big for my baby bed—I knelt down and began to recite the prayer over and over. An inner light seemed to come into the room—absurd and contradictory as that may sound. Nothing dramatic resulted, but I knew I was doing the right thing even if I had doubts about the way I was doing it. Just as a true lover simply loves loving the beloved, so I loved talking to God, even if He did not actually talk back. It did not surprise me that He did not, for I understood that communication with the Divine—which I hoped to accomplish sometime in the future—would be far beyond the realm of words. This form of praying became a regular activity for me. Each night I would lie there repeating the prayer until I fell asleep.

Instead of alleviating the inner ferment I felt when looking at the picture in my Bible story book, my prayer habit increased it. But some glimmer of light was about to enter my obscurity. Because of his hospitality to strangers, Abraham hosted God and His angels (Genesis 18:1-8). A different sort of angel-messenger in the form of a stranger was dispatched to help me see the beginning glimmerings of the path I should take in life.

By arrangement with the state my uncle John Burke and his wife, Florence, frequently took neglected children into their home until a permanent home was found for them. Since they lived just around the corner and up a short block from our house, I frequently played with the little strangers—who usually were about my age.

On an early fall morning in 1944, I was out in our front yard with one of the regular visitors. He was not my favorite, since his misfortunes had already turned him into what used to be called “a little tough.” The plain truth is, I only played with him as an act of charity after my aunt Florence asked me to. Anyway, we were wandering around without much to do when he asked: “What are you going to be when you grow up, and who are you going to marry?”

At the age of four my knowledge of professions was pretty limited—as was my contact with marriageable females! However, I took the question quite seriously. I had never thought of such matters before. What *would* I be? Who *would* I marry? Having no clue to the answers in my outer mind and life, I instinctively turned within. Although my body kept moving here and there, my attention was deep inside, questing. And my quest was not in vain.

Just as the opening of a door can reveal vistas hitherto unknown, so a mysterious opening within the silence of my spirit revealed the solution to both questions. The intensity of the experience rendered me breathless. I turned and ran around the side of the house so I could be alone to cope with the revelation and assimilate it as best I could.

I would live for God alone! Never would I labor for the bread that perishes (John 6:27), but would only work for Him. That my life would be filled with activity and much striving was made clear to me—but never would it be for selfish gain, for money,

or for “me.” He would be the polestar of my life, and all I did would be for Him, however feeble or poor my doing might be. And I would give my life to no one but Him—there would be no place in it for another, human or angel. I would not just give God first place—He would fill *all* the places, and besides Him there would be no other. No other!

Feeling an obligation to answer the one who had triggered such profound realizations within me, I hurried back to the front yard and announced: “You know who I’m going to marry? I’m not going to marry anyone!”

“Not anyone?” His incredulity showed I had scored a definite hit.

The implications of his query thrilled me to the depths.

“No, not anyone, ever.”

The freedom and joy I felt was inexpressible. Equally incomprehensible to him, I knew, would be the assertion that I was never going to work for money. It was incomprehensible to me. So I prudently said nothing more.

During the following years I was continually exasperated by having the same two questions put to me in varying forms—the most maddening being: “Who’s your girlfriend, Roger?” The insulting implication that I had a girlfriend—and thus was unfaithful to God—always evoked the abrupt response: “I don’t have one. I’m never going to get married.” This of course produced either disbelief or a teasing assurance that I would feel differently when I got older. The assurance by them that I would one day betray God by forgetting Him and centering my life around another human being produced an overwhelming desperation in me, and I would pray fervently that their smug prophecy would never be fulfilled. I cannot claim to have held unswervingly to the ideal set before me, but from that day onward, whenever I did begin to drift from that ideal, God found ways of quickly setting me back on the right track.

Nor was this to be the only insight that year would bring. Sometime before Christmas I was by myself in the late afternoon, piling up snow in an attempt to make a snow mountain to climb up and stand on. My efforts would have convinced any observer that I was not destined to be an engineer.

Abandoning my hopeless endeavor, I looked toward the house. Since the day was heavily overcast, the lights had been turned on, and I could see my mother and father moving around inside. As I stood watching them, the question formed in my mind: “Who are those people, and what are they to me?”

A feeling of deep awe came over me as once more my inner sight communicated to my mind an understanding from beyond my childish ken. Wordlessly I turned my head upward and gazed into the sky. He, the all-pervading boundless Being of Whom the limitless sky was but a reflection, was both Mother and Father to me. Looking back down I watched the figures of Alta and Bill Burke with a new consciousness. Their love for me was undoubtable—as was my love for them. But they were not really my mother and father. Yes, they were the parents of my body, but I was *not* my body. What was more, they had only been my parents for four years, but God had been mine—and I had been His—forever. I was a living spirit whose only Father and Mother was God, the infinite Spirit.

Again, I felt joy and freedom inexpressible. No one belonged to me, and I belonged to no one! God alone was mine, and I was His alone! All else were passing shadows, He alone was real.

Thou art my hope, O Lord God: thou art my trust from my youth.  
By thee have I been holden up from the womb: thou art he that took  
me out of my mother's womb: my praise shall be continually of thee.  
I am as a wonder unto many; but thou art my strong refuge.  
Let my mouth be filled with thy praise and with thy honor all the day.  
O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I  
declared thy wondrous works. (Psalm 71:6-8, 17)



A young William Roger Burke, called Roger, and his parents Alta and William Burke



Roger and his Aunt Faye



Roger in high school



His maternal grandmother, Docia Margaret Burge

# Chapter Two

## *A Child's Garden of Miseries*

More than one thousand years before the time covered in the last chapter, a young man of Constantinople named Andrew—later to be known throughout the Eastern Orthodox Church as “Saint Andrew the Fool In Christ,” and one of the greatest Eastern Christian mystics—had his spiritual consciousness awakened by a remarkable dream in which he found himself sitting at a great banquet table next to a king—who was really Jesus. A dish containing a shining white substance was placed before him. It seemed as though made of light, and Andrew immediately tasted it. Never in his life had he tasted such sweetness and intensity of flavor. Without delay he ate it all up and called for more. A dish was then set before him in which there was a substance as black as the former had been white. This must be another treat! Thinking so, Andrew literally dug right in. It was as horridly disgusting as the other had been delectable. Andrew was nauseated, and felt that he might be poisoned. Retching, he tried to expel the awful taste from his mouth. When he turned to the king to protest, he found another dish of the white substance set by the side of the unfinished dish of black material. Pointing to the dishes, the king said to Him: “You can have all you want to eat—but you must eat an equal amount of both. There is no gaining of the sweet dish without eating the other. You must decide, then, what you will do!”

In the same way, having been fed on sweets for nearly five years of my new life, it was time to “pay the piper” and learn to dance to a new cadence altogether—a dirge, to be precise.

Since the subject of dreams has already arisen in the last chapter, let us examine a very hideous side of that.

The Lord Jesus tells His disciples to be vigilant and to watch (Mark 13:37). So also do the Shadow Dwellers, those whose avowed purpose is to extinguish the light. They watch carefully for the advent into the earth plane of those who either have served the Infinite in the past or who will be capable of beginning to do so in this incarnation. Perceiving them from the marks in their auras as well as the qualities of their auric radiations, they begin from the very first to frustrate their spiritual potential. They do this through many ways. The first method is usually direct psychic attack. If this is not satisfactory in its results they then inspire their human coworkers to attempt injury. Their objectives, in descending order, are: the death of the child, the psychological or physical impairment of the child, the prevention of the child's mental and physical development, and the deflection of the child from higher purpose through leading him into a deceptive or meaningless avenue of life.

These aims are usually accomplished through the creation of a negative or stultifying environment for the child. They especially try to instill a subconscious fear or aversion in relation to the esoteric, the mystical, and the supernatural. If they cannot

do these things to the child they will do so to those close to him so the effect will deflect onto their actual target. This is why so many outstanding spiritual figures have had parents, guardians, or associates who were opposed to their realization of their destiny and have placed every possible object in the way of that realization.

The Shadow Walkers used all the strategies on me.

First, they induced dreams of death images—my death. Over and over, like the training sessions they were, I would be taken out of my body by black-swathed skeletons and carried, step by monotonous step, down the street to the edge of town and out the road to the cemetery a mile away. There I would be placed on the ground on the exact spot where—though I did not know it—I would have been buried if I had died at that time. I began to dread sleep, lest those dreams that were really astral experiences would take place.

Getting no results, the tactics were changed. If the evil ones are unsuccessful themselves through psychic attack they then switch to harassment through physical beings, usually human. The first manifestation of this took place at a bus stop. My mother came there, pushing me in a stroller. Several people were waiting there, including an albino woman with red eyes and long fingernails. Upon our approach she whirled around and stared at me intently for a few moments, then leaped forward and tried to jab my eyes out with her fingernails. She did not succeed, but my face was severely clawed.

Sometimes evil forces and spirits use animals to work their will. Later my mother and I were visiting with my Aunt Faye in a small town in northern Illinois. The neighbor across the road had a pet chicken. While my mother was standing outside holding me, the neighbor's pet chicken came hurrying across the road. It walked up to my mother and then turned its head over so one eye glared at me with tangible hatred. I looked down at it in fascination, for never before had I sensed conscious intelligent malevolence from any animal, much less a chicken. Suddenly, the chicken flew straight up into the air and wounded me deeply just beneath my right eye, having fallen short only a fraction of an inch from piercing the eye itself.

The attempts to kill or maim me having failed—at the moment, for there were to be more in later years—the Shadow Walkers settled down to a many years' siege on my intellectual development which I will describe later.

That my mother was ill, I knew, for even my earliest memories included waits in doctor's offices and trips to Chicago to the research hospital there. What I did not know was that my mother was dying of cancer, slowly but no less surely. She effectively concealed her pain from me, even playing "pretend" games with me as she lay on the sofa barely able to move because of the pain she was experiencing. If the pain became too intense to conceal, she would send me to my grandmother's a few blocks down the street with a note pinned to my shirt asking her to look after me until my father came home. Often her agony was so great her handwriting was nearly illegible. (My grandmother kept those notes and I saw them years later.)

One morning my father took me around the corner and up the street to my Uncle John's house. We brought along some of my clothes, for he said I was to stay there a

few days. This was fine with me, as Uncle John and Aunt Florence were always kind to me, and Aunt Florence and I would sometimes play together and laugh so much we became breathless.

That afternoon I told Aunt Florence that I was going home for a little while to see my mother, but she told me that I should not because my mother needed to rest. This seemed odd to me, but I accepted her words the way children do until they discover how seldom adults are truthful—at least in relation to them.

The next morning I was in the back yard from where I could see the front of our house a block away. The longest car I had ever seen was parked in front. Finding Aunt Florence I told her about the mystery and she came out to look. Taking her hand I urged: “Let’s go see what’s happening.” “No,” she replied and impelled me into the house. This was not agreeable, and I demanded to go back home. Sternly she told me that I could not go, because my mother would not be there—she was being taken to a hospital because she was sick. With the ordinary egotism of childhood I was not particularly concerned over my mother being sick, but I was upset that all this would take place without my being told.

For the next few weeks I remained with Aunt Florence and Uncle John. Two or three times my father took me to the hospital to see my mother. I did not know it, but these visits were terrible for her, as she knew she would soon die and the thought of leaving me alone in the world was far worse for her than the disease that was consuming her. She had even once told my Aunt Faye: “I would rather have this cancer a thousand times worse than to ever see my boy sick or unhappy.” All through the few years of my life she had often studied me with a smile so full of sadness that it puzzled me. Later I realized that she was thinking of how short a time it would be before death would separate us.

Early one morning while was still dark my father woke me up. Sitting on the sofa bed where I slept when visiting Uncle John and Aunt Florence, he told me that my mother had died. He used the inane and meaningless terms adults do when speaking of death to children, but as I have already described, I knew what death was. I understood that my mother was lost to me irrevocably.

A desolation and grief engulfed me that was never to be either mitigated or absent from me for the next fifteen years. Wisely, my father, uncle and aunt left me to myself. It was many hours before I emerged from my room, having managed to realize that I must continue to live. But my mother had sensed correctly. Upon her death the abyss of hell gaped at my feet and would never cease to pursue and torment me with relentless hatred, intent on my total destruction, for many years.

As my fight for survival began, many psychic avenues became closed to me, as the journeying of them was too fraught with danger now that the hounds of hell followed close after me.

For the next eleven years, until I was sixteen, there would always be someone living under the same roof with me whose major interest in life seemed to be ensuring that I would have no chance of intellectual development. If my body did not die, then my mind should. Reading was prohibited. I was forbidden to have a library card or to read

anything but schoolbooks. If in conversation I evidenced any knowledge beyond the most elementary subjects I would be relentlessly grilled to discover how I had come by such information. Then I would be harangued for hours as to my wickedness in disobeying the bans on reading and study. “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23b) was a common quotation when I let it slip that I was more than minimally literate. The blasphemy of applying the sacred words to such a farce was more shocking to me than the insanity of the entire situation. Later on my enrollment in any classes that would prepare me for higher education, such as literature or languages, brought down violent wrath upon me. (If I described the persecution I underwent when I began my study of Latin, few would believe it.)

Classical music in any form was also anathema. I surreptitiously taught myself to read music and play the piano (at someone else’s house), living in terror all the while that somehow that sin, too, would be found out. At age nine I discovered the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts (Rudolph Bing’s first season). Every Saturday afternoon during the opera season I would slip down to the basement and lean over my old bull’s-eye radio, listening with the volume at minimum so I would not be discovered transgressing. Milton Cross, Boris Godolovsky, and Mary Ellis Peltz became unseen friends, no less beloved for their invisibility. I also had an old Columbia recording of the *Si, vendetta* duet from *Rigoletto* that I played about half a dozen times a day, starving for real music.

Along with all this, I was rigorously isolated from anyone that loved me or even evidenced a mild liking for me. Anyone who might develop in me a positive self-image through their regard or affection was singled out for virulent verbal attacks, and I would be subjected to hours of hysterical ranting about what fools and “nuts” they were—especially if they had expressed admiration for me or commented on any abilities I might have. On occasion those people were actually approached and ordered to quit even speaking to me. How did they “get away with it”? Simple. It was my own evil deeds coming back to me in the form of karma. I had been my own enemy first. Even more, it was my self-enmity, in the fullest sense, that created the outer enemies, or at least opened the gate for their entry.

Through all those years the outward attacks from strangers did not cease, but they become verbal tokens. As I would be walking down a street, I would see in the distance a figure that I would intuitively know was evil. The person (it was always only one at a time) would be completely unknown to me. Usually at first sight I would not even see them clearly, they would be so far away. But I would grow cold inside and know that an enemy was approaching. These encounters would always take place when no other pedestrians were in sight. As the malevolent one drew nearer, my dread would increase. Finally we would be only a few feet apart. They would look me full in the face and their own countenances would begin to twist into expressions of hatred and derision. As they passed me (never striking out physically) they would turn around and, walking backward, begin to rave at me, cursing, swinging their arms, and shouting. Then as though a switch was turned off, they would stop, turn around, and go their way. This phenomenon took place off and on between my ninth and

seventeenth years. Then stopped. Explanation have I none, except that they might have been sent to physically harm me and my angel guardians prevented it. I always traveled with a “company” visible to me whenever I “looked” for them. Most of them floated along, “sitting” cross-legged in the air. It was many years before I realized these must be Indian yogis. They never spoke to me, just watched.

During this time another phenomenon developed that was a manifestation of the same demonic attempts, but it was so bewildering to me that it was not until after it had ceased in my beginning twenties that I was able to recognize its true character. It always took place in a religious social setting I would be in a group of strangers—though of the same church or philosophical interests—in which one (it would never be more) would instantly “square off” for a verbal battle the moment I would enter the group. Spite and animosity would appear on their faces instantly, and the rage that would radiate from them would be tangible—at least to me. This would completely perplex me, for as we would not know each other at all, there could be no comprehensible basis for a conflict between us.

The hate vibrations always translated into the same message: “I am going to ‘get’ you and discredit you before these people so you will not be able to ‘get’ me!” This was additionally confusing, for it was not even in my nature to ever ‘get’ anyone. And since I knew absolutely nothing about them, how could I possibly manage to ‘get’ them even if I wanted to? And why would I want to do such a thing to a stranger? It was compounded madness. Nevertheless, the moment I would open my mouth in any statement, whatever the character, they would swing into action and bombard me with rapid-fire rebuttal intended to prove that both my words and I were completely idiotic and contemptible. The thrust was always to discredit me and any future words I might speak, not merely to refute any idea I might have expressed just then. Often what I said was so patently true or in agreement with the thinking of everyone present, including the antagonist, that they would turn on me and begin blaring back to me the very ideas I had expressed—often in the same words—as though refuting what I had just said! When I would express my agreement, they would jut out their chin, jerk their head up and down a few times and spit: “That’s *right!*” in a tone indicating that they had certainly set me straight and I had better not stray in the future. This confused the hearers as much as it did me, but I came in time to realize that the colossal absurdity of it had a very definite and evilly clever purpose. By so acting they would convince our hearers that I must have said the opposite to what I had—otherwise why the vehement protest? What appears silly is often hellishly—in the very literal sense—clever.

For the first few years I would try to placate these people, which only produced more nastiness on their part. Those who were witnesses to these strange encounters would often remonstrate with my adversaries for their truly outrageous conduct. This would result in a sullen lapse into permanent silence, though the unspoken stream of malice would continue to flow over me unabated.

What actually ended this odd kind of assault was my finally developing the insight and wisdom to spot these people immediately and send them the mental message: “I know what you are and I know what you are up to. And I *will* ‘get’ you!” Usually they

would leave within a few minutes. (As some came through the door, when I recognized them and sent them that mental message they would immediately turn around and leave.) After several of these internal encounters over the years I never saw this type of demonic agent again.

The Lord Jesus says: “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44). Contrary to shallow “positive thinking” this does not mean that we are to look upon everyone as wonderful and as our friends—otherwise he would have said to love our friends, and left it at that. His use of the term “enemies” means just that: we have enemies. And we must recognize them. On a personal level we should do our best to be at peace with such persons and to cultivate an attitude of good will and healing toward them.

But not all enemies are personal. Some are the enemies of God and His divine plan of spiritual evolution. Their hatred and opposition has no personal basis whatever, rather it is a matter of polarization. They are working for the Dark and we are working for the Light. Since light dispels—nay, destroys—darkness, they are fighting for that internal state of darkness they think is their life. They are, as the Apostle says, “implacable” (Romans 1:31), and no truce or cease-fire is possible with them. They must be vanquished. (I am speaking psychically and spiritually, not physically.) The wise do not even engage in verbal combat with them but inwardly invoke and radiate the Divine Light. Nothing more is needed, though the methodology may be more sophisticated than such a simple statement. Edgar Cayce said that Armageddon would not be fought outwardly on the earth, but in the realms of the mind and the spirit. He was most certainly right. The fight is on and we should not draw back.

There were compensations for all this negative experience in my childhood, for, as Yogananda often said: “I have learned one thing in life: God never forsakes the devotee.”

The greatest compensation was my going, at age six, to live with my Aunt Faye, an older sister of my father. Our true relation was not physical but spiritual. William and Alta Burke might have been my mother and father physically, but Aunt Faye was both father and mother to me on all other levels. The overshadowing grief of her life was her childlessness, for she loved children, and children loved and trusted her on sight. If ever there was anyone qualified to be a mother it was Aunt Faye. But it was not to be, for, though desiring children, she had her own spiritual form of birth control. Knowing that the pursuit of spiritual life was the only life work worthy of the human being, from the first day of her marriage to my Uncle George, Aunt Faye had prayed that she would not have a child if it would not dedicate its life completely to God. Through the years she shed many tears over her barrenness, but never did she modify or withdraw her plea to God. As always, her spiritual values far outweighed her personal desires.

The bonds between us were very deep, so much so that when my mother confided to her that she was going to have a baby, my future Aunt Faye astounded her by crying out: “Yes! You are going to have a boy—and I know just what he will be like!” In vain did my mother protest that she was hoping for a daughter. Aunt Faye was adamant—it would be a boy. From that day forth until my birth, Aunt Faye prayed daily, describing in her prayers how she wanted me to be, asking God to bestow spiritual consciousness

upon me and to ensure that I would dedicate my life to Him. My birth proved her right as to my gender. As to the other characteristic, that will be revealed in the final summation of this incarnation.

Because of World War II and my Uncle George's involvement in it, Aunt Faye lived far away from us for much of my first five years. The earliest memory I have of her is seeing her coming down the street to visit the house of another aunt, and knowing that she was to be a major factor in my life. But it was not until after my mother's death that I really came to know her.

In my adult years, upon reflection I came to realize that until I began to experience God directly and personally as a result of meditation, I did not really believe in God at all, but in Aunt Faye. That is, until meditation replaced it with a more sophisticated view, my concept of God was my concept of Aunt Faye expanded to infinity. Aunt Faye loved me unflinching. She always spoke the truth and was always just. She never made a promise she did not keep—and in that she was truly unique as an adult. When I wanted to talk to her and she said: "I am busy, come back later," it was not a pushing away or a rejection. It meant that she wanted to give me her full attention and would do so as soon as she could. And she did. Always.

Aunt Faye assumed that I had a mind, and communicated with me accordingly, readily explaining to me the "why" of things. When I did wrong she would show me clearly why my action was wrong. And I never did it again. She remembered well her own childhood, and therefore understood the mind of a child perfectly. Aunt Faye could be trusted to understand and care about anything I cared about. And woe to whoever tried to wrong me! The town bullies left me alone after just one encounter with my champion. Most of all, she was a friend. When I was not in school I often followed her around the whole day. As she worked she would talk to me about her spiritual ideals and insights. By the time I was eight I had learned her entire life story.

I came to believe that the God Aunt Faye taught me about was just like her: my beloved friend whose love for me could never change, and who would in truth be "a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). I also learned from her that my relationship with God was the only reality, that earthly life could be dissolved in a moment, but eternal life would not. "What others think of you does not matter, and what you 'gain' in life means nothing. It is what God thinks of you and what you are to Him that counts. Forget everything else." What a blessed ideal! She also told me, "One day you are going to die, and then there will just you and God—not me or anyone else. What your relationship with God is at that time will be the only thing that matters. So right now, too, that is the only thing that matters."

From Aunt Faye I have received a legacy that nothing can take from me—death will merely affirm it. How sad that parents seldom give such an inheritance to their children. Instead they pass on to them only materialism, sensuality, and greed. No wonder their children often curse them to their face in later years and eventually put them away in a "home" to die in loneliness, giving them no room in their lives, having learned the lesson of selfishness from them better than they might have wished.

Aunt Faye loved religious imagery, despite our fundamentalist religion that

inveighed against the “idolatry” of Catholicism. “Don’t pay attention to ignorant preachers and others who say that Catholics worship images. They do not. They keep them as reminders of God, and that is a good thing.” So she often told me. She practiced her preaching by having at least one depiction of Jesus in every room of her home. She loved to sing hymns to the Virgin Mary, too, but only I heard her do so.

Some years before, when I was about two years old, Aunt Faye had twice gone with my mother to Saint Joseph’s hospital in Bloomington, Illinois, so she could look after me while my mother had radium treatments. Both times, as soon as my mother was out of sight, Aunt Faye whisked me away to the chapel. There she introduced me to each of the images, having me caress and even kiss them. The first visit I do not remember, but the second one I remember very well.

It was after the first one that an incident occurred that got Aunt Faye into trouble. She had returned to wait for my mother well before she was finished so she would not learn that Auntie had been turning her baby into an idolater. But it was to be. As my mother was carrying me along, we passed an image of Jesus. Twisting around, I held out my arms to the image and called: “Take me! Take me!” Now, to my poor Protestant mother it seemed I was asking to die, since it is so common to speak of someone as “being taken” when they die. “What have you been teaching this child?” she demanded, and began to cry in fear. Aunt Faye tried to soothe her, but my mother had suspicions ever after. Although I forgot the incident, the Lord Jesus did not, as I came to discover later on.

What was the bond between Aunt Faye and me? When it was first formed I have no idea, but it certainly existed in the Middle Ages when I was a monk in Northern Italy. She was at that time the abbot of the monastery and my spiritual director or “soul friend,” in the idiom of those wiser days. Her taking me into the chapel was no doubt in reaction to a subconscious memory from that life. I had died during Lent, when it was the custom to keep all holy images veiled until Easter. (In later centuries the veiling was only done during the last week in Lent. The first time I saw the images so veiled in this life I felt an automatic dismay, no doubt rooted in the—at that time—unremembered past.) While dying I pled that I not be made to die without the sight of a sacred depiction. And so, breaking the rules and squashing all protest, the abbot brought the monastery’s processional crucifix to my room, unveiled it, and fixed it at the foot of my bed so I could breathe my last looking upon Him Whom I hoped to see with truer sight beyond the confines of earth. Therefore in this incarnation she carefully schooled me in respect for images—a thing utterly contrary to our church’s theological prejudices—and made sure I saw them.

But no one could substitute for my mother, and my consciousness of the loss never lessened. What a difference it would have made if the laws of birth and death—that is, of reincarnation and karma—had been taught me. And how different I would have felt if I had known how near the “dead” can be to us.

“Actions speak louder than words” not only in daily personal life but in religious life as well. Many churches teach one thing and live another. This is especially true of Protestantism, which verbally affirms the immortality of the soul and utterly denies it

in practice. One need only observe the behavior of Protestants in the face of death. Despair and hopelessness reign. Their absurd idolatry regarding the dead body (putting it in coffins with innerspring mattresses, so it will “rest easy,” pumping it full of chemicals to preserve it, while at the same time usually putting it in the ground to be desecrated by insects and decay, etc.) shrieks to any observer that the body is all there is, that it is the reality of the person, and that death “ends it all.” Therefore the “grave” customs prevail. Although saying that the dead are “departed” or “gone,” they regularly visit and decorate the graves and talk to the dead as though they are down in the ground in the coffin, listening.

How different it is to be in India and see a body, swathed in bright colored satin, being carried down the street toward the cremation ground. As the members of the family and other friends carry the simple wooden litter along, they continually sing: *Rama Nama satya hai*—“The Name of Rama [God] is real,” implying that birth and death are mere dream images observed by the ever-living and ever-conscious soul, whereas God, with Whom the soul is essentially one, is alone real—and in His Name the bereaved take refuge. Reaching the place of cremation, Sanskrit mantras are recited affirming that the true Self is not the body, life force, or mind, but the immortal, changeless Spirit. With prayers for the ascension of the departed to realms of enlightenment, the funeral pyre is lit and the participants (not “mourners”) leave without a backward glance, knowing that the body which is being burnt is not their beloved one any more than were his clothes. “Bodies are said to die, but That which possesses the body is eternal. It cannot be limited, or destroyed” (Bhagavad Gita 2:18). How ironic that exoteric Christianity is supposed to comfort its sorrowing adherents in the very grief and despair that it produces in them by its ignorance.

Authentic religion demonstrates the immortality of the soul through its rites for the dead and its veneration of the saints. The saints are proof of immortality in God, for after their deaths they have manifested their continuing life through various means including visions and miracles. They maintain intimate and even personal contact with those who still dwell upon the earth. Thereby they prove themselves to be far more alive than the “living.”

By means of the prayers for the departed, a subtle bond of communication is established between them and those who remain on earth. Frequently their loved ones also either see or feel them near during the ceremonies. I have seen long-standing grief eradicated completely after the sorrowing ones attended a memorial service for the departed. One Protestant friend of mine asked some Catholic nuns to pray for her deceased father a few years after his death. That night she saw him vividly in a dream—something that had not happened before. “Dad!” she exclaimed, “You’re alive!” “Well it’s about time you acted like it!” he replied, implying that praying for the dead is acting out the fact of immortality.

After her death I did see my mother once. It was, of all unlikely places, in a Montgomery Ward department store. Perhaps she chose it so the incongruity of the setting would demonstrate that it was certainly not auto-suggestion. As Aunt Faye was examining something on a counter, I looked up to see my mother standing two aisles

away, smiling at me with her characteristic sad smile. She was clothed as she had been the last time I had seen her “dressed up,” so there was no chance that this was some look-alike. Frantically I tried to get Aunt Faye to look up and see her, but oddly it was as though Aunt Faye could not hear me or feel me pulling at her sleeve. When she did look up, the apparition was gone, but I was left with the conviction that my mother was looking after me as best she could.

At the age of nine, spontaneous knowledge of divination arose in my awareness. On the way to school I found a metal object shaped like a miniature spear. On both of its flattened sides there was a small ring in the middle so that when it was placed on a flat surface it spun around easily. After a single spin I knew what I had at hand. Fortunately I did not get caught, but for the next few days my school time was whiled away by mentally putting questions to my metal oracle and spinning it to get the answers. I thought of my desktop as divided into halves, top and bottom. So if the spearhead stopped in the top half, the answer was Yes, and in the bottom half the answer was No. A new world opened to me—and as quickly closed when my spinner vanished mysteriously after a week, obviously having been stolen by one of my classmates. Somehow I felt that I could not make or find a substitute that would have the requisite magical power, so my experiments in divination were suspended for about a dozen years.

Far less satisfactory was my earlier discovery that I could “read” people’s inner minds—not their thoughts, but their mental states, conscious and subconscious. All I need do was hear them speak a few syllables and I “had” them. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34) is a profound esoteric principle. The voice carries the vibration of the mind, which is a field of vibrating energy.

Many of the people I “read” were not very nice, and not realizing that I was really perceiving their inner nature, I thought that I was thinking evil of them. “Judge not” had been dinned into my ears by spiritual authority figures who wanted to make sure that neither I nor others would apply our intelligence and come to see their spiritual bankruptcy. I was tormented by remorse at what I felt was my own sinfulness. How could I be so negative? This was one of the horrors of my inner life until at the age of seventeen I remembered that the Beloved Disciple had written: “Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God” (I John 4:1), and the Lord Himself stated that “by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20). Obviously I was supposed to use the sense (and extra-sense) I was born with. In later years my delving into the Greek text revealed that the favorite “don’t judge” cant of the hypocrites who fear the truth being told (especially about them) is based on a mistranslation. The word *krinete*, wrongly translated “judge,” means to actively condemn with the desire to wreak injury or vengeance upon its object—not the simple evaluation or appraisal without which intelligent life would be impossible. The Bible in no way prohibits a person from discerning the state of things in relation to others’ character and deeds—though he must keep in mind that the same criteria will be applied to him as well. “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7:2).

I reveled in anything of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When a movie would turn out to be set in the Victorian era I would be delighted, for I felt so at home and comfortable with everything I would see, including the clothing. Any physical objects from that era held a fascination for me, as well. I read almost nothing but Victorian novels, as I have already mentioned. I read my first contemporary American novel when I was in junior high school, and then went happily back to my Victoriana.

A small motion picture theatre was the only center of entertainment in our town. One day I went to look at the poster and lobby cards displayed outside to see what was coming. The posters proclaimed that the next feature would be *Chandu On The Magic Isle*. Although none of us knew it, Chandu was a favorite character in an occult soap opera very popular in California. Having studied in India, Chandu (usually known as Frank Chandler) had come back into the West to do battle with evil—especially esoteric evil. He was assisted on occasion by Princess Nagi, an adept in ancient Egyptian magic. A feature-length film had been made of Chandu in the 'thirties, as well as some serials. *Chandu On The Magic Isle* was put together from the final serial of the same name. The black-and-white photos on display showed scenes from the film, in all of which the characters were clothed in ceremonial robes and surrounded by smoking censers and the trappings that Hollywood supposed were part of occult practice.

My reaction to the photographs was cataclysmic. I was seized with intense terror and an equally intense desire to learn what the real thing was behind the tawdry staginess of the pictures. Somehow I knew that although the motion picture makers knew nothing of such matters and thought that it was all simply imagination and a new twist for a plot, there *was* Something, a big Something of which the histrionics were but a hint, a satire—and that Something could shape the world. What is more, I needed to know what that Something really was and become part of it. This was deadly serious. I suppose that I unconsciously realized that the time was not yet, and therefore the momentary insight was especially frustrating. I did not go to see *Chandu On The Magic Isle*—I felt I could not deal with what it would produce in me, and I expect I was right. But throughout the years I never stopped wanting to see it, although after a while I could not even recall its name. Nearly forty years later I did see it and was appalled—though mostly amused—at its inexcusable silliness and inaccuracy. But by then I had learned the real thing, the Something I had known had to exist somewhere.

However, in that little theater I learned some very interesting, though mildly unsettling, things regarding the nature of sensory experience.

The sound came from loudspeakers on both sides of the theater. At the beginning of the projection, I always heard the sound as coming from the sides, but after a while the sound seemed to be coming from the screen, from the figures in the movie. I concluded from this that my hearing perception was not an absolute, that it could be altered—and without my intending it to.

A lot of the movies were western cowboy stories from the previous era, so stagecoaches and wagons figured in them all. In each one I saw that at first their wheels would be turning with the spokes moving in a clockwise direction. But as they

sped up, things changed and they appeared to be moving counterclockwise. So my sense of sight was not an absolute, either.

I really liked the Lucille Ball movie “Miss Grant Takes Richmond,” so when it was over I decided to stay and watch the next showing. I did, and found to my real amazement, that the second time around it seemed only half as long as it had the first time. That really struck me. My time sense was also not an absolute, and like my sense of sight and sound they could alter without my willing or wishing it. So what was real or stable about my experience of life itself?

Years later in high school I read the poem by Edgar Allan Poe, “A Dream Within a Dream,” both stanzas of which ends with the question: “Is all that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream?” I had been asking that question for years. In college I read Shelley’s much more disturbing sonnet, “Lift Not The Painted Veil Which Those Who Live.”

Lift not the painted veil which those who live  
Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,  
And it but mimic all we would believe  
With colours idly spread,—behind, lurk Fear  
And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave  
Their shadows, o’er the chasm, sightless and drear.  
I knew one who had lifted it—he sought,  
For his lost heart was tender, things to love,  
But found them not, alas! nor was there aught  
The world contains, the which he could approve.  
Through the unheeding many he did move,  
A splendour among shadows, a bright blot  
Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove  
For truth, and like the Preacher<sup>1</sup> found it not.

So I was ready for a better and deeper understanding of The Nature Of Things. But where would I find it? In the primary grades I had desperately tried to believe that Oz really existed. I failed, thank heaven. I gave up hope, not realizing that a land—real, geographical, and not in any way abstract—was awaiting me that would prove far more magical and wonderful than any mythical Oz could ever be. But that would be discovered much later.

Speaking of fantasy, one of the more ridiculous religious experiences of my life took place at this time during a trip with my parents and some of their friends to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Though it is not commonly known (and conveniently ignored), D. L. Moody, the famous nineteenth-century evangelist, was very aware of metaphysical realities and gave encouragement to the young Edgar Cayce in his beginning psychic work. His personal philosophy was far more sophisticated than that of his admirers, most of whom were entrenched Fundamentalists.

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1. A reference to the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible.

(One of Moody's closest friends was the blind, mystic hymn-writer, Fanny Crosby, famous for such songs as "Blessed Assurance," "Near the Cross," "Saved by Grace," "Pass Me Not"—and many more. At the end of every day when she was alone, Fanny Crosby practiced what she called "entering the Valley of Silence." In that mystical state she was not blind, but beheld and communicated with Jesus, the saints, and the angels, as well as many of her departed friends. This aspect of her life, as well as her spiritual philosophy, was—and is—as effectively ignored as Moody's "psychic side.")

In his memory the supremely conservative Moody Bible Institute was founded and flourishes today. My parents had of course heard of Moody and listened to the weekly broadcasts from the gigantic church housed in the Institute. I liked the place because it was a real Victorian pile of stone and pseudo-Gothic ornament. We were guided around the complex by a Dutch man who had come to America solely to become a volunteer worker there.

At the end of the tour our guide asked my parents if he could speak with me privately. They assented, and he took me down the vast upper hallway to a point where we could not be overheard. Taking a red paperbound copy of the Gospel of Saint John from his pocket he told me he wanted to give it to me. But first he wanted to show me some things in the Gospel. Turning back and forth he began reading verses, asking me after each one if I believed what he had read. Well, of course I did—it was the Bible, after all, and hardly his personal ideas. In conclusion he asked me if I accepted Christ as my Savior. Then, as now, I found the concept of salvation as being no more than "accepting" Jesus Christ as "personal Lord and Savior" preposterous egotism, as though salvation is a mere intellectual act on the part of a human being who knows absolutely nothing of spiritual realities. I remained diplomatically silent to his question. This seemed to necessitate a period of concerned prayer for my illumination, during which I was thinking desperately of a way to get away.

In my case necessity was not the mother of invention but of prevarication. I just began saying Yes to all his ridiculous questionings. The capstone came when he showed me an "acceptance of Jesus as savior" form on the back inside cover of the Gospel and asked me to sign it. How I wish now that I had then possessed the daring to let this man know what I really thought of his silly spiritual persecution. But perfidy prevailed and I literally signed on the dotted line. More prayer. Did I feel better now? Yes, since it meant I was going to get away from him. He shook my hand, God help the both of us, and congratulated me on now being one of God's children. He hurried to tell my parents the splendid news while I stood there feeling as though I had been whirled around a few dozen times and leaned against a wall to keep on spinning inwardly.

Yes, I was a confirmed alien in an environment as alien to me as I was to it, mentally and spiritually. I just could not believe in the ultimate reality of it. To me I was moving through an ugly and pointless dream that must surely be dispelled at the advent of what was real. But when would that advent take place?

Despite the foregoing experience, religion did give me glimmers of something I could consider both right and real. But what a religion! Fundamentalism of the most

determined ignorance, theory without a hope of actualization. Yet, as with the *Chandu* movie, I intuited that Something More lay behind it, and if I dug in far enough I might uncover it and bring it to light. So I set to work with determination, though blindly.

# Chapter Three

## *Called To Love*

Although I learned many lessons of spiritual import within the next five years, no particular breakthrough in consciousness occurred until shortly before my ninth birthday—an event that is considered to be of great significance in occult science.

Fortunately my family had provided me with the greatest possible wealth—a heritage of life in the spirit. Beginning with my great great grandmother on my mother's side of the family, and my great grandfathers on both side of the family, succeeding generations had been deeply involved in spiritual pursuits. Therefore I naturally realized that the relationship of God and man is the essential and dominant concern of any individual worthy of bearing the title of human being. This was reinforced by the fact that I was always somewhat aware of the all-pervading Spirit, and consequently viewed myself as a spirit within Spirit, however limited my actual scope of consciousness might be. (It is interesting that in old Slavonic the word for human being is *chelovekh*. *Chelo* is the term for the center of the forehead, the so-called “third eye,” and *vekh* is the term for eternity. Therefore a *chelovekh* is one whose spiritual eye is oriented to eternity—none else is truly a human being.)

Yet, contradictory as it was, at the same time I lacked an awareness of the necessity for my personal involvement in this relationship. Although my pondering of the picture of Christ blessing the children indicated a realization that the fact of God and Christ demanded a response of some sort on my part, I still had no idea of just what that response must be—especially in terms of my active will.

It was decided that in June of 1949 the Church of God would sponsor a “youth camp” in northern Illinois. All the churches in the state were urged to send as many of their young members as possible. My interest was nil until I learned that along with the usual camp-type routine, there would be daily church services. I did not merely like attending church, I loved it fervently. Therefore the prospect of an entire week of church sounded marvelous and I asked my parents if I could go. So go I did.

The supposedly fun activities at the camp were intensely boring to me and I managed to avoid most of them, spending much of my time either playing hymns on the piano in the building where we had the church services or reading the Bible I had earned for myself the previous winter by selling greeting cards. In the evening we had the church services that were my real motive for being there. Fortunately the speaker at the services was a man who did not believe in talking down to children or making spiritual matters simple. He spoke to us exactly as he would to adults. I must admit that I have no recollection of a single thing he said during the whole week. Nor have I any idea what he said on the second or third evening which triggered deep within me a profound spiritual response. I only remember the result.

The pattern of spiritual insights coming to me like the proverbial bolts from the

blue had already been established in my life—and this was no exception. Truly as though struck by lightning, I was given the realization that my religiosity was nothing more than a pastime of my mind. Most boys my age were engrossed in some type of amusement or hobby, but whatever it was, their involvement was simply a whim of their egoic mind. And that was true of me in relation to my “spiritual” life. I was simply amusing myself with religion while thoroughly ignoring God.

At the same time—and even more vividly—I fully perceived the fact that God loved me—not in theory but in truth. Moreover, God did not love me with the feeble and tentative emotion that human beings offered me. He loved me with a love that was total, eternal and unalterable. He cared for me, loved me and yearned for me with all the infinity of His Being. Never did He take His loving awareness from me, whereas I (and this was the really devastating part) was utterly indifferent to Him. I never gave God a first thought, much less a second one! Oh, yes, I was plenty intrigued with God and His direction of the world as a theory, a mere concept. But God as a reality—a reality that desired to relate to me in the most intimate manner—was given no place in my life and thoughts. Nine years! I had lived for nine years indifferent to God, without Whose love and will I could not have existed for the span of a moment. My debt of love loomed over me even larger than my heinous hardness of heart toward God my Eternal Lover.

When Saint Catherine of Genoa experienced a similar insight she startled the priest, whose casual blessing had instantly awakened her, by leaping up and shouting in his face: “No more sin! No more world!” If at the time my grieving heart could have formulated its resolve, it would have called out: “No more indifference! No more selfish living without giving God His due: my all!”

And so, while others around me were “going to the altar” in tearful fright to pray for God to forgive them and not send them to everlasting hell on the fearsome (and impending) Day of Judgment, I went forward to ask forgiveness also—not for anything as petty as my childish ineffectual “sins,” but for the sin of indifference to God. Nor did I petition for deliverance from some future pit of fire. I wanted deliverance right then from the present hell of isolation from God and forgetfulness of Him as a result of indifference to His love.

A minister came and talked nonsense to me about repenting, confessing, believing, and accepting salvation. He had no idea what was in my mind or my soul. I did indeed repent and confess, but it was a repentance and confession far different from those of his conception.

And something happened. There is no need to put a technical or philosophically sophisticated label on it. God responded. Heretofore I had always been aware of the all-pervading Intelligence and Life that is God, but as an impersonal Principle. Now I became aware of God as a personal, loving Being Who could and would actively communicate with me if I would allow such communication by keeping the channels open between us. It all depended on me—another rather frightening and awesome realization. I further realized that there was but one eternal question God would unceasingly—yes, and unrelentingly—ask: “Lovest thou Me?” (John 21:16-17). And it

was my *life* that must be an unwavering and continual Yes.

I experienced something far more wonderful than forgiveness, or cleansing, or a rebirth—all of which are “me”-centered. I did come to life inwardly and outwardly with the capacity to reach out and love God, to respond to Love with love, to no longer receive but to give in return, to lose the mirage of “myself” in Him, my true Self.

And the perfecting of that capacity I saw as the sole purpose of my life.

# Chapter Four

## *I Become A Saturday Ghost*

I would like to tell you that from thenceforth I passed from glory to glory in undistracted spiritual flight.

I would like to, but it would not be true.

The first snag came within little more than an hour after my interior opening. After church the last thing scheduled in the day was “Campfire.” From grave reflections about eternity and our immortal souls we were swiftly herded to the bank of the Illinois River where a gigantic fire was already blazing. Standing or sitting in a circle around the fire we were bombarded with fatuous jokes, skits, “get acquainted” games, camp songs, and other pointless nonsense.

But was it pointless? This question began to press on my mind the following night as I was walking back to the dormitory, desperately trying to reassemble into a whole the spiritual mood I had experienced before the silly—and that night slightly vulgar—barrage of Campfire had blown it into tatters.

I had a highly developed sense of humor, but I also had a highly developed sense of the appropriate, which included what did and did not go together. The spiritual perspective urged on us by each night’s church service did not fit in with the mindless goofiness of the antics at Campfire.

Why? Why did the directors of the camp—all of whom were ministers and teachers in their local churches—insist on subjecting us to the incongruous frivolity of Campfire immediately after immersing us in awesome and fearful prospects of everlasting salvation and damnation? Why did they open the gates of eternal verities only to reroute us to Coney Island? They were too intelligent to be unaware of the very real incongruities which even I, at the age of nine, found so obvious.

I decided to watch for the next days and see if I could discover the intent. So watch I did. And discover I did. It was really so simple it could have been easily missed. We were being taught to turn God—or, rather, our thoughts of God—off and on at will or “demand.” We were being conditioned to turn on the emotion and devotion upon walking through the doors of a church and then to switch it off the instant we were out the doors or the final hymn had been sung and it was time to resume “normal behavior.” Eventually we would have our “real” or “regular” life and our religious life and thought absolutely isolated from one another in positively leakproof compartments to prevent cross-pollination or contamination. But at the same time we were to sincerely be assured that God was the center of our lives which had supposedly been changed by our having been “born again.” In other words, we were to become spiritual schizophrenics, two utterly separate people with two utterly separate lives—and each one disregarding the existence of the other, whichever side was dominant at the time. Like the old Roman god, Janus, we were to have two different and opposing faces—both,

of course, acceptable and agreeable when they were “in their right place.”

And it worked. Oh, how well it worked! In dismay I watched my church friends become adept at being all dewy-eyed and “melted down in the love of the Lord,” so sincere and fervent and “determined to make heaven my home” one moment and raucous vulgarians the next, swatting one another and whispering and snickering while ogling the opposite sex. I saw that the adults had learned the same lesson long ago, though their switch-off was more dignified and therefore not so noticeable.

I did not realize until many years later that this separation of life and “faith” is essential to the survival of Protestantism. Its beliefs must not actually be applied to the lives of its adherents—in fact, they cannot be so applied without resulting in remarkable aberrations of thought and conduct. Consisting of purely theoretical and emotional elements rather than genuine—that is, life-changing—spiritual power and knowledge, if such a religion is mixed in with the life of the individual it is quickly perceived as having no actual positive effect on any practical level whatsoever.

This is why so many people have become disenchanted with Fundamentalist Protestantism within the last couple of generations. Having been told it would change their lives, its adherents have tried it—and failed. Therefore only two courses are open to them: rejection or hypocrisy and deadening of conscience.

The juxtaposition of Campfire with “evangelistic” church services was intended to produce the deadening of spiritual sensibility which is innate in the normal human psychology. In the local churches it was the “fun and fellowship” activities or the “coffee hours” that were used to effect the same desired result.

Some years later, still in agony of soul over the spiritual cul-de-sac in which I found myself, I prayed that I might know the truth about the spiritual character of the Church of God. I opened the Bible at random to the sixteenth chapter of Jeremiah in which it is said that parents and children will die but not be buried, for “the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride” are not to be found in “this place.” The verses are filled with tragic meaning, but the point that stood out the most in my first reading of them was the statement that no one would bury the dead—that is, acknowledge the truth of the spiritual death that was upon all, including me.

Unwittingly I had uncovered the perfectly embalmed—if not waxwork—heart of Protestantism in all its forms, conservative, fundamentalist, liberal, or “charismatic.” Beneath the professions of life lay nothing but death. And the louder and more insistent the false claims of life, the more intense the deadly actuality. Yet I had to experience much before finally having the good sense to say with Christ Himself: “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead” (Revelation 3:1).

In the meantime I became what the Bengalis of India call a “Saturday ghost.” The Bengalis believe that if a person dies on Saturday he will become a ghost. The Saturday ghost is very lonely, drifting in solitude, unable to communicate with anyone. Whenever he comes across someone who is seriously ill or dying, he is elated, hoping that they will die on Saturday and become his companion. But he is continually disappointed in his hope and remains alone.

So it was with me in spiritual life. Eagerly I sought for a kindred soul—hopefully my

own age—who had caught the same vision and formed the same spiritual resolve. But my search was in vain. More times than I can number I observed one or more young people who by their words or attitudes in church seemed truly “on fire.” Corny as it sounds, hope would surge upward in my heart. At last: someone I could fully relate to on a spiritual level, someone who knew exactly how I felt! And as high as I flew, just so low did I crash when upon encountering and observing them “off stage” I invariably found them to be as spiritually shallow and lifeless as they had appeared to be spiritually alive when “on stage.” In my disenchantment and frustration I would realize that they were experts at the switch-off maneuver, whereas the majority were unable to make such a flashy showing. (The Greeks do have a word for it: *agia fania*, “holy show.”) I never became cynical or lost hope, however, which simply means that I never stopped being continually disappointed.

Unfortunately I never seemed to have the wisdom to be disappointed with my religion. The simplistic and ludicrous view of God, His relation to the world, and the destiny of the world—including myself—could produce nothing but equally simplistic and ludicrous thinking and behavior. Many times I look back with acute embarrassment on various incidents in my life in which I operated according to a few of the more idiotic principles of Church of God fundamentalism.

Blasphemy was perhaps the greatest sin a person could commit. In the fifth grade music class I encountered “The Marine’s Hymn” for the first time. When we were to sing: “If the Army and the Navy ever look on heaven’s scenes, they will find the streets are guarded by United States Marines,” I inwardly balked. Not only was this flippancy, it seemed sacrilegious to say that heaven’s streets were guarded by the Marines. You just do not joke about heaven—at least not if you figure the cards are very heavily stacked against your going there and you had better safeguard yourself against what is known as “offending God” since “pleasing God” is the only ticket out of the Fire Zone.

We got into trouble if we did not sing in music class, and the prospect of explaining my objections to the teacher who was obviously “unsaved”—i.e., she did not belong to the Church of God—was too much to handle. So I sang the suspect words, albeit in anguish. The next morning I awoke in misery with a tremendous headache—almost the first I had in my life—and intense nausea. Never in my nine years of life had I felt so sick. But I was not too sick to not also be convinced that this was a blast from God for my irreverence and cowardice. Instead of going to school, I lay there in misery of mind and body, praying desperately for forgiveness. Since a dogma of Protestantism is that material prosperity and health occur as rewards for virtue whereas poverty and pain are the punishments for sin, as long as I was sick I was obviously unforgiven. It took hours to placate God and have Him withdraw the sickness—at least to my deluded way of thinking.

Protestantism being nothing less than the crassest materialism under the guise of religion, it naturally interprets the teachings of Christ in the most materialistic manner. The Bible being a book of esoteric wisdom setting forth esoteric mysteries in a veiled manner comprehensible only to the initiate, it suffers continual violence at the hands of Protestant theologians. Ironically, the more liberal Protestants who do not believe in

its divine inspiration do it much less injury than those who profess belief in its infallibility as the literal Word of God. Here, too, a kind of schizophrenia manifests. Statements meant to be taken literally are given childishly absurd symbolic interpretations, and symbolic expressions are given outrageously materialistic constructions. Foremost among the latter are their doctrines on the nature of the resurrection of the dead and the Second Coming. There is no need to outline them, they are only too well known.

Holding the materialistic concept of the Second Coming, I received a profound jolt one afternoon when walking home from school. There arching down from the sky was a brilliantly shining cloud-like band. I could not see its end because of the trees along the street. Studying this radiant curve, it occurred to me that Jesus might come to earth by walking down just such a stairway. Standing dead still, hardly able to breathe, I scrutinized the white pathway. Would Jesus be appearing at the top momentarily, or had He already made His descent? To learn that, I had better get on home and hear the news on the radio. So homeward I went, but awkwardly, for I had to walk with my head tilted back, never taking my eyes off the beginning of that mysterious arch lest I miss His first appearance.

Back home I prudently kept quiet. No news on the radio. Excursions into the front yard eventually revealed that the celestial roadway was dispersing and fading away. I kept silent, pondering the mystery.

That weekend I was in the car with my father when, behold! another arch of light appeared. "Look at that jet trail!" he exclaimed. Inquiry elicited from him the mundane facts about jets and their trails.

I always felt cheated, somehow—and possibly duped. But by whom?

Perhaps it was a kind of priggishness on my part, but frankly I liked saying to God at the end of my prayers: "But whether You grant me my requests or not, I will love You anyway!" Since I could offer Him nothing else, could I not at least give Him those words from my heart? The only thing we can really give God is our love—we possess nothing else. Life, health, possessions, etc., are things only temporarily given to us. But our love is just that—ours—and we can offer it to God. And since God is love, what else really can we receive in return from Him but love, the love that is Him? Everything else is a false appearance.

In personal life, too, I learned that my idea of love differed greatly from that of others. It did not take much observation on my part to realize that what I simply called friendship and affection was called love by everyone else. This was not original with me. In the twenty-first chapter of Saint John's Gospel he records the interchange between the Lord Jesus and Saint Peter. Three times the Lord asks Peter: "Lovest thou me?" Saint Peter answers in the affirmative, but He is not satisfied. Although they were both using the same word for love in Aramaic, Saint John uses two different Greek words in his narrative to indicate that Jesus and Saint Peter had two differing ideas as to what love was. Jesus speaks of *agape*—spiritual love—but in reply Saint Peter keeps using the word *fileo*, which is merely intense affection or liking.

To my chagrin I saw people trying to build marriages on such a shallow basis,

however sincere. On the other hand, what I called love they simply did not know—not even theoretically. I suppose that is the reason why most people ignore God. They simply cannot conceive of either the nature or the extent of the love He awaits to bestow on them. So they look everywhere else in frustration and bitterness, alleviated only by the hypnosis of momentary “love” that is doomed by its very nature to evaporate, leaving them desolate. Over and over, from life to life, they try to drink from the mirage of egoic “love” only to each time come away with ashes in their mouth—ashes that only increase their thirst. What a spectacle! Yogananda said that God, at Whose glance the universes tremble, and Who encompasses all things within but an atom of His infinite Being, is running after man like a beggar, pleading: “Don’t you want Me more than the things I have created?” But man says: “I am too busy for you. I have no time now.” And God humbly says: “I will wait.” Such is love.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare said through Polonius that those who were true to themselves could not then be false to anyone. This is an absolute. He who is false to himself is false to others. But I doubt if Shakespeare understood that God is our only real Self. So if we would be true to others, we must first be true to God. Otherwise, our life is a sham. Though I did not realize it, this was actually a spiritual struggle I was going through. For all things really are, in the ultimate assessment, spiritual matters.

# Chapter Five

## *I Remain A Saturday Ghost*

It can hardly be a surprise to learn that I remained a Saturday Ghost, searching for spiritual affinity. At the same time I sought a more communicative relationship with God. To this end I studied the Bible and religious books and also attended church three times a week. I was thoroughly satisfied with my church and its teachings. Although I was seeking a more developed spiritual life, I never questioned the church's capability to supply it, but considered that any lack I experienced was entirely my own defect.

In the middle of my eleventh year I came as close to dying as was possible, developing severe rheumatic fever. My physical heart went completely haywire—so much so that in the hospital the technicians thought the electrocardiograph machine was either broken or being interfered with by an x-ray machine in a nearby room when they saw the wildly erratic patterns on the graph interspersed with almost total paralysis of the needle as my heart nearly stopped beating for long periods only to erupt again in utterly chaotic action.

About the middle of my convalescence at home, someone gave me Fulton Oursler's *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. As I lay reading one afternoon, his account of the crucifixion struck into the marrow of my being, producing an even more intense awareness of my fundamental need to respond to the love of God in a way that was far beyond my capacity. Unsatisfactory as it was from a practical standpoint, the only reaction I seemed capable of was deep grief and the shedding of tears.

As the tears continued to run, I realized that I knew of no one who could begin to comprehend what I was feeling, and that if I expressed it I would be passed off as over-emotional, fanatical, or worse. The best I could hope for would be for some well-meaning person to decide I was not really "saved" and try to put me through the process of "taking it on faith" and such like again. What was I going to do?

This incident intensified my longing for fellow "ghosts." It also awakened in me the awareness that interior consciousness was the real part of religion. This awakening was comprised of not only the intellectual disposition of the mind—necessary though that was—but an actual alteration or extension of consciousness.

The next summer at the national convocation of the Church of God I encountered a catalyst.

Even though through the years I had lived with people of psychic development and had witnessed the miraculous, it had all been external, and there had been no thought of any personal spiritual implications. Yet, when I looked up from a case in the museum of Biblical artifacts that contained two coins like "the widow's mites" of the Bible (Mark 12:42, Luke 21:2) and saw a woman of late middle age studying me with what seemed complete familiarity, I knew that some destiny was going to unfold. I smiled at her; she smiled back and went out the door. I continued my perusal of the

displays. Upon stepping out the museum door, I found her standing to the side, obviously waiting for me. “Come where we can talk without all this crowd,” she said, and walked away with me in her wake to a spot in the shade that was in view of the passing throng but far enough away that she would not be heard.

She began stating various facts about me, pausing after each one to ask if it was true. It was evident to me that she was not doing this to impress me or convince me of her abilities, but to assure herself that she was correctly “reading” me. Time stopped as she began telling me of her visionary and intuitive perceptions of various subjects, including world prophecies that came true nearly twenty years later. She deluged me with revelations personal and global. Some of them were preparing me for eventual separation from the Church of God, though I did not realize it then. Several times she asked me: “Do you understand?” “No,” I responded to each query, and she, emoting satisfaction, would nod her head and say: “That’s all right—it doesn’t matter.”

After the lapse of nearly seventy years I recall only fragments of her prophetic monologue, but now I know in truth that it is all right and that it does not matter—the seeds so sown in the depths of my mind and heart did come to fruition, though only after a long time of slow and painful growth.

When she was finished, my new-found seeress told me that she would never be coming back to such a spiritually unprofitable gathering, that we would never meet again, but that she would be praying for me and “looking in” on me. She asked if she could give me a hug and did so, uttering words of comfort that foreshadowed the great struggles and their attendant sufferings that were to fill my life for a good many more years. Then she walked away and vanished into the ever-moving crowd.

I made the mistake of telling a little about my meeting with her and was instantly subjected to a denunciation of her as “a nut” by those who had never seen or heard of her except from me. It was the usual story of the constant enmity toward any thing or person that would bring light into the darkness desired for me.

Within an hour or so, I saw her again as I walked beside my tormentors. This surprised me, for although simply seeing her was not a “meeting,” I had somehow gotten the idea that even such a minimal encounter would not occur. But it had a purpose. As she came toward us, seemingly invisible to my companions, she fixed her eyes on them. Her face took on an expression that bespoke exactly what she thought of them. Not before or since have I seen a judgment of character so fully and glaringly written on a countenance. Then she looked at me and I got the idea: *Be on your guard and have nothing to do with these people. Do not let them in your heart. They are the enemies of your soul and will destroy you if they can. But they won’t! We won’t let them.* In that moment I assumed “we” meant she and I. Now I know that fortunately it embraced many more than us two. But I took the unspoken counsel and from that day onward saw that however abused my body and ears might be by my captors, they never penetrated into my heart to ravage and poison it. Through the years I managed to remain free from any resentment or negative feeling in regard to them. And in time I was freed from them externally as well as internally.

When I got back home, various factors began coming into the orbit of my life to

stimulate my investigation of the mind and its nature. First, I found a book on hypnotism which led me to read as deeply into the subject as was possible within the limitations of our town library and the local bookstores. Beneath the sensationalism I could perceive hints of the limitless potentials of the mind. It soon became obvious to me that hypnotism gives glimmers of the truth that the mind is rooted in the ground of infinite consciousness, that man and the world around him are not at all what they seem, but are wonders unparalleled.

In some of the books on hypnotism I had come across the idea of reincarnation and the possibility of recovering the memory of past lives through hypnotic regression. My best friend, Dick Jenkins, was also keenly interested in exploring the potentials of the mind. The two of us spent a great deal of time attempting to open the door into our past lives. It did not take long, however, to come to the conclusion that hypnotic regression was not reliable since the subject was in a state of heightened suggestion and the hypnotic “guide” was suggesting by his very presence that the subject should experience past life memory. Since under hypnosis a subject will experience whatever the hypnotist suggests, it was evident that the memories a subject might experience could really be creative—though sincere—fabrications of the mind at either the spoken or unspoken command of the hypnotist. In disappointment we had to lay the subject aside, but at least the concept of rebirth had been introduced into my consciousness although I did not accept it at the time. And I had certainly learned and experienced for myself that mind and matter are mysteries that are not two but one, and the “laws” of matter and mind are not absolutes, but learned responses.

Through my investigations I was beginning to discover both the difference and the unity of mind and consciousness, of matter and spirit. The theological implications were at first disturbing to me, for they evidently could not fit into the simplistic world view of Church of God doctrine. But how could I deny what I was seeing to be true? Even if I was perceiving or concluding wrongly, how could I deny that those perceptions and conclusions were taking place? Ignorance and evasion of truth had never appealed to me, and I was not interested in their false consolations and assurances now. I must press on.

Press on I did—into the realm of psychology. I began to read books on psychology with a hitherto unknown zest. But the zest soon faded as I realized that dealing with the mind is not the same as understanding it; and that since psychology did not take in the dimension of the spirit which is the essential substratum of the mind and its sole origin, the dogmas of psychology were as hopelessly limited and irrelevant as were the dogmatics of the Church of God.

One thing was gleaned from my incursion into psychology: the disturbing truth that when the human being becomes aware of a problem, he almost invariably adopts as a compensation or alleviation a mode of thought or behavior that will instead intensify and compound the problem, often leading to self-disintegration. It was evident that the human mind is very much like a mirror, actually showing things backwards. I realized that the mind is as untrustworthy in attempting to “see” clearly as is a photographic negative which shows light for darkness and darkness for light—the direct opposite of

the reality of the object impressed on it.

Anyone who has ridden in a boat and seen the shore appear to move and the boat to stand still, or who has sat in a train and felt it moving when in actuality the train next to it was moving, should be aware of the unreliability of the mind and senses as instruments for perceiving the truth of things. Now, through my study, I had come to see that the entire mind was incapable of perceiving or communicating the truth of things—that its impressions were more of a veiling than a revealing. I had never much believed in the absolute reality of the world outside me, anyway, and now I was coming to see that the inner world of the mind was perhaps even less real or true. In spite of this, I somehow knew that behind both the external and the internal world and my perceptions of them, there was a real world. It might be invisible and imperceptible at the time, but it could be perceived and even entered into under the right conditions. At the same time I felt deeply that the spiritual aspirant requires watchful vigilance to ensure his safe journey to higher wisdom.

My conviction that there was something more in the way of interior development than what I presently knew was confirmed by my continuing study of the Bible, most particularly the Gospels and the book of Acts, which is an extension of the Gospels. However I approached the matter, it was evident that if I was to really believe the Bible literally, my previous thinking about Christ and His purpose must be revolutionized.

Jesus of Nazareth had not come to earth to be a finger in the dike of God's wrath, to merely keep His adherents and flatterers from being burned up forever in hell while consigning those who refused to "accept and confess" Him to everlasting torments—the viewing of which was to be one of the "joys" of the "saved" according to some Protestant theologies. Nor had He come to persuade His followers to be merely virtuous human beings.

When I considered that the shadow of Saint Peter could heal the sick ("And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women. Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them" (Acts 5:14-15), that cloths touched to the body of Saint Paul could both heal and exorcise ("And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them" (Acts 19:11-12), and that they and the other Apostles and disciples could work the miracles of Christ and communicate with the invisible worlds, it was evident that they had not become mere wonder-workers or holy magicians, but had themselves become wonders—that they had been enabled by Christ to pass beyond the human condition into an exalted status far beyond my power to conceive.

But however much it might be beyond my comprehension, to truly be a Christian I would have to attain the identical state that Saint Peter and Saint Paul had. This I knew. The prospect was even more terrifying than it appeared hopeless, but on Friday, July 6 (the birth date of Aunt Faye—not, to my mind, a coincidence), 1955, at 4 p.m., I heartily vowed to God that I would direct my entire life to searching for the way to

transcend humanity and ascend to that which Christ intended for all mankind, however disinterested or resistant they (and I) might be. In what direction I should go—or even if I could succeed in my search—I had no idea.

Fortunately for me and all who may be in my dilemma, the Lord Jesus had said: “Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it; for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (Revelation 3:8).

# Chapter Six

## *Breaking Away*

The next unfoldment of my spiritual life began with the realization that my spiritual life was at a dangerous standstill. More to the point, I was in a state of interior stagnation—in other words, death. Having no spiritual methodology to apply, there was no avenue of approach to try. Even failure was denied me.

One morning before going to school (I was then sixteen and a junior in high school), I was praying in my bedroom. Uppermost in my thoughts was my spiritual emptiness. This impelled me to say to God: “Whatever it takes to be closer to Thee, I will do it. Just let me know. There is nothing I will not do to get out of this deadness.”

Instantly I had the answer: *Go! Leave this place this very day. If you do not, then you will never leave and be free. All your life you will be a slave.*

The response went through my mind like dye coursing through water, penetrating and coloring it entirely. I knelt there in horrified belief. If I had had some doubt to alleviate the shock it would not have been so traumatic. But I did not. The whole thing was manifestly an ultimatum but put me at the crossroads of life and death in the spirit.

I had never been so shaken in my life. The magnitude of the directive almost crushed me. Because of the psychological climate of my daily life, nothing could have been harder than simply walking away from it. I may have protected my inmost heart from contamination, but my lesser mind was utterly conditioned to the slavery imposed on me. With the customary perversity of the human mind, instead of it being easy to flee from what was truly a living hell of hatred and oppression, it was that much more difficult, even painful. Later I was to hear the principle that civil revolutions never take place when a people are thoroughly crushed and oppressed, but rather when there is some alleviation of the oppression. The very extremity of tyranny maintains it by paralyzing the initiative and courage of the downtrodden. Broken in spirit, they acquiesce and may in time even come to find a security in their bondage. Birds that have been caged often refuse to leave their prison even when the door is kept open. Some of them die of fear if forced out of their confinement. I knew exactly what they felt!

How could I be sure my impression was authentic? I applied three tests. Twice I prayed for guidance and opened the Bible. The first time it opened to the Psalm in which David speaks of God’s patronage upon the turning away of parents. (“When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.” Psalm 27:10) The second portion was the calling of Elisha by Elijah and his immediate departure from family and home (I Kings 19:19-21). This latter one also decided where I would go. For some time I had been in correspondence with a traveling evangelist of one of the dissident conservative Church of God groups. He needed someone to travel with him

as an assistant in music and other details. At the present he was in Bristow, Oklahoma, several hundred miles away. I would go there.

But first I applied the third test. In Bloomington there was a woman who had already become allied with the conservative faction, and I frequently visited with her and her husband. I prayed, asking that this woman give me guidance in my decision—but without my telling her anything about my situation. This was indeed a tall order, but after praying I dialed her number. Upon her answering, I only got out an opening greeting before she launched into a fervid exposition of the necessity to obey God at any cost or sacrifice. Every word fitted my situation exactly. I did not tell her what was happening, but when she was finished I thanked her and hung up. There was now no doubt in my mind: I must go. That did not make it any easier, but what had to be done had to be done. I wrote a brief note to my father saying just that.

I had never been a paragon of practicality. Taking a paper shopping bag, I put in it a change of underwear, my Bible, my interlinear Greek-English New Testament, and my toothbrush. And was ready to go!

Taking a bus downtown I drew some money out of my savings account (an experience completely new to me since I had always been treated as though such a thing was beyond my mental powers)—just enough to cover a one-way bus ticket to Bristow and about forty dollars extra. As I say, I was no model of worldly savvy.

After buying the ticket I walked a few blocks over to the home of an elderly friend, Nellie Herrin, and told her I was leaving so it would be known that I was not dead or kidnapped. However I did not tell her where I was going.

Within the hour I was on the bus and on my way. Whether it was a coincidence, my karma, or a joke of the cosmos, my seat companion was another teenager who talked all the way to Saint Louis about runaways and their interception by the police.

The ride across Missouri from northeast to southwest is the longest-seeming journey that can be made in the United States. Missouri seems bigger than Texas as the tedious and unrelieved miles stretch on. And when you are a “runaway delinquent,” it is interminable.

Naturally I was wondering what the reaction to my absence would be. How little I knew human nature! Assuming that the same self-honesty I tried to cultivate would be applied by those at home, I felt sure that the initial reaction would be extreme rage accompanied by screaming and the working of mayhem upon inanimate objects close to hand as unsatisfactory substitutes for my body. When this had run its course—and it would take hours upon hours, I knew—then the sensible reaction would set in. They would acknowledge the fact that my absence was really the removal of a nuisance and an undesirable responsibility and that my future fate was a matter of complete indifference. Although wishing it was possible to get in a few good licks at me for token retribution, the main feeling would be one of indifference and relief.

Blessed delusion!

The next morning the bus arrived in downtown Bristow. I did not know it, but my destination had been discovered and the local police had been alerted to meet the bus and detain me. As I got off the bus a policeman was standing right there. When I

looked at him the strange thought: “He can’t see me,” arose in my mind. That was silly! I went in the restaurant there on the corner and telephoned the minister I had come to assist, and was told to wait out in front for someone to pick me up. So out I went and stood there watching the policeman looking vaguely around. In a little while a police car came up and another policeman got out. I could not hear their words, but I could tell that this officer was questioning the first one, who was shaking his head and gesturing as though he had not managed to do something. The new arrival looked bewildered, gazed around—as though, he too, did not see me—and went into the cafe. After a bit he emerged with one of the cafe workers who also looked up and down the street—and through me—then shrugged and went back in. In retrospect I realized that they were trying to find me, but I really was invisible to them! I can only assume that this was the intervention of angelic guardians or God Himself since, being infinite, there is nothing too small for His attention. (For an infinite being, “small” and “large” do not exist.)

As promised, someone came to give me a ride out into the countryside to the small church where the evangelist was staying.

The saying was not in vogue then, but truly that day did feel like The First Day Of The Rest Of My Life. I had not drawn a breath in real freedom for more than eleven years. To be looked upon as a complete human being and allowed to function as one was a novelty I was quite ready to become accustomed to. I was given a side room in the church building to sleep in, and my falling asleep that night was replete with happy anticipation and real content.

My awakening was not.

I opened my eyes and heard my father’s voice calling my name. First I was amazed and then disgusted. So I was not to have a life, after all? Skipping the emotional histrionics to which I was subjected, I will encapsulize and say that after a couple of hours an understanding was arrived at. I would never again live with my father and stepmother against my will. Instead I would live with my miraculous grandmother Burge. Nor was my religion to be interfered with. (Through the years I had been subjected to varying degrees of persecution because of my wholehearted involvement in religion, and when I began investigating the conservative segments of the Church of God, it had become increasingly oppressive.) If these two provisions were violated I would simply go to the juvenile authorities and reveal the conditions under which I had lived for so many years and demand legal protection. This was no adolescent threat. I could have called upon many people to testify of the truth of my assertions.

My conditions were agreed to, and I returned with my father and an uncle who had come along with him. Naturally there were attempts to soften my demands, but I held fast. As a consequence, I went to live in my beloved little hometown of McLean with my angelic grandmother, and where Aunt Faye was just a short walk away. At last no one could separate me from those who genuinely loved me.

No one could now obstruct my religious researches either, so I explored many spiritual avenues to find over and over that they all led back to the same inner emptiness, however good the externals might be.

Somewhere in spiritual literature there is a dreadful simile: “the heavens became as brass.” This became my daily experience. Frankly, I had heretofore been coddled in my spiritual life, however miserable the other departments of my life might have been. Spiritual communication of some sort was always going on with me from birth. In the midst of my worst sufferings there was always a light and an inner awareness to sustain and guide me. Now there was only darkness and silence. Everything turned dead around me as a projection of my internal deadness. Although I never lost the primary sense of moving within the field of universal life and consciousness, it became altogether unresponsive to me. Long fastings and prayers only aggravated my frustration. All sense and conviction of spiritual actualities had evaporated, and nothing remained in its place.

No, that is not true. By the mercy of God, a terrible sense of *absence* did remain and steadily increased. Looking back now with my present perspective, I can see that God was acutely present with me, that it was His very presence that rendered me aware of the sense of absence. So I was not really dead inside, I was keenly alive, otherwise I would not have felt dead—I would not have been perceiving anything at all, which, I fear, is the common state of many human beings.

Frantically I prayed for guidance of any sort. At first I prayed for dreams that would guide me, as this is mentioned in the Bible and was claimed by other members of the church. If anything, I dreamed less.

Eventually I came to realize that what I needed was not subjective experience that could arise from my own mind and emotions, but the objective guidance of someone who had true knowledge of spiritual life. My one desire was to find someone to whom I could say: “Speak and I will act. Teach and I will learn.” This was not to be. Nor should it have been. For although advisers and teachers are definitely necessary in the pursuit of spiritual evolution, it is also necessary that the individual keep alert to all possibilities and develop intelligence and discrimination so as to eventually be able to make his own decisions and evaluations. Every step along the way must be made by us—not another. It cannot be otherwise. The help we get from men, angels, saints, and even God is like oil—it may help the wheels of the machine turn, and may even be what makes the turning possible, but the actual turning is done by us and no other. So what I really needed was someone to show me the way, even accompany me on the way, while at the same time I learned to do it all on my own.

The shell of a bird’s egg is thick and hard—at least to the chick inside. Therefore it must exert a tremendous amount of pressure to break out. Many birdlings are too weak and die, entombed in the egg. This seems terrible, but if the chick does not get the initial muscular exercise of breaking out of the egg it will not be able to develop and live a normal life. A chick for whom the hatching is done by a well-meaning human may die in a short time or never be able to sit upright, much less walk. In the same way, the questing soul must be required to exert its powers to the utmost.

This is why no responsible person ever tries to influence either the thinking or the behavior of another. That choice is in the province of the individual alone, and it is never for another’s good to impose from outside what must arise spontaneously from

within.

All this has been written to finally come to the point and say that I was like someone afloat in fathomless space. Not being a raven I could not rest on the corpses of the dead and feed contentedly as did the raven Noah sent forth from the ark. But unlike the dove, I did not know my way back “home,” either. (See Genesis 8:6-12.) Still I formed the determination that even if the heavens should remain closed against me for the rest of my life I would not cease to knock and wait. For it is better to wait at the door of God than to wander off to certain death. And so I set about watching and waiting, not realizing that this was the very thing needed to end my desolation—that all along God was really “working on” me and getting me ready. I had to abandon my mistaken ideas as to what constituted spiritual life and spiritual progress before the door to the real thing could effectively be opened to me.

But at the moment I had journeyed so far to find myself still in the same place.

# Chapter Seven

## *A Revelation Of Life*

The next turn in my road was utterly different from the preceding ones—and so was its advent and aftermath, since it centered around someone other than myself: my maternal grandmother, Docia Margaret Burge.

As I have already said, my grandmother Burge lived and moved in dimensions far beyond the mundane tides of daily life. What the world saw of her was but the tip of the iceberg. She lived in continual communication with realms invisible to earthly eyes. And that was her real life, of which her external life was only a cover. Her extreme childlikeness caused most people to look upon her as simple-minded when in truth she possessed an intellectual brilliance which she concealed as assiduously as she did her intuitional perceptions, confiding them only to me. Clairvoyant and clairaudient, she wielded seemingly limitless healing powers.

Like many great healers, Grandmother Burge herself was in poor health and rarely ventured beyond her yard—in which she grew large beds of flowers of great beauty—except to go to church. Yet she was the spiritual heart of the town, and her silent influence had shaped the destinies of all its residents to some degree. Silently she had lived, silently she had bestowed her benefits, and silently she departed. I alone knew the loss, for my love for Grandmother Burge had been the strongest force in my life. For some time when I was seven or eight years old I experienced deep concern over the degree of my love for her, fearing that I might perhaps love her even more than God.

Grief shadowed the days after my grandmother's departure, grief so intense that at least once in each day I would weep over my great loss, and every night I would dream of her. Yet, such is the inconsistency of the human mind, that on one level I did not really comprehend that she was no longer on the earth. I found it impossible to accept that if I went to her house, whose atmosphere had unfailingly given me inner healing each time I entered, I would not find her there.

Every viable—i.e., working—religion cares for those who have passed out of this earth plane just as much as it cares for those still in physical embodiment. Reaching beyond the barrier of death into the worlds to which “the living” are blinded by their material consciousness, all the valid religions of the world continue to assist their departed adherents along the evolutionary path. They are also aware that the psychic tides which facilitate this process of outreach manifest in relation to the time at which the death took place. Especially potent is the yearly anniversary of the death. At that time it is not uncommon for sensitive persons to see or receive some type of communication from the departed—especially on the first anniversary.

A little after dawn exactly one year after Grandmother Burge's departure (I was unaware of this at the time), my daily dream about her was especially vivid. Upon awakening I was, for the first time, thoroughly aware that she was truly no longer on

earth. The emotion that arose within me at this realization was so powerful I wondered if I could physically survive it. I experienced a burning sensation deep within that seemed both physical and metaphysical. Luckily, a vestige of my mind remained objective, and that fragment said: “You can’t just lie here with your tears running into your ears like the country music song. Get up and move!” So I did, for, like Alice in Wonderland, I had for years been giving myself advice.

Still in the grip of my misery, I arose and went out of my bedroom. When I had advanced about six feet into the living room two things occurred simultaneously. First, in an eye-wink, every bit of my grief over my grandmother’s death vanished, leaving me perfectly at peace. Second, a door swung open within my conscious mind that within a true “split second in eternity” revealed like a vast panorama the full knowledge regarding human birth and evolution—especially its necessary consequence: reincarnation.

I also perceived the inevitable passage of the human being into higher dimensions of existence for the purpose of evolution far beyond the human status. The soul would continue to incarnate in countless forms of ever-increasing perfection until the final Great Passage could be made. Then it would return back into the Infinite from which it had originally come forth into the great drama of Life. This did not unwind before me or arise within my mind in a continual stream. Rather, it was fully impressed into my consciousness at one lightning flash of insight that revealed four basic truths: reincarnation, karma, evolution of consciousness and a vast series of worlds through which the individual progresses as his scope of consciousness expands.

I walked over to the sofa and sat down without missing a step. There I sat and took several hours to assimilate all I had seen in that moment of illumination. If I had begun to write what I at last knew, I could have written an entire book without stopping, including how by observing his earlier life someone could see the evidences of his prior incarnations.

The longer I sat, the greater grew the wonder and the delight. This was not theological theory from an external force—this was direct knowledge from within. My soul knew it, and now my poor brain was trying to grasp it all so no precious fragment would be lost. What I had forgotten upon coming into this incarnation was once again mine. Delivered from the hell of ignorance regarding the fundamental nature of myself and my life, I feasted on the paradisaical fruit of eternal remembrance.

But there came an intruder into my paradise: what about my religion? Christianity did not teach any of the truths in which I was reveling—especially that of reincarnation. Yet I knew it was true. I might doubt the reality of the earth and the sky, but not the reality of rebirth. Well, then, the answer was simple: I was no longer a Christian.

What, then, was I? I would have to search and find out.

Currently it is considered quite clever and chic to shun religious definition or religious identity or religious commitment. “Organized religion” is anathema, a terrible bugaboo, replacing the past bugaboos of Tyranny, Poverty, and Popery. “Create your own religion” is the current coffee table cliché meaning: “Be your own God.” And of course the inane boast of being “spiritual” rather than religious.

But according to my new insight God was Someone considerably greater than I—and Someone far more worth seeking and loving than my limited egoic self. My understanding that God was in a sense my true Self only delineated this more sharply. Of this I was assured: whatever religion I might eventually follow, I was now and had always been a seeker for His face, a quester for the vision in which seer and Seen become one, though eternally distinct.

# Chapter Eight

## *I Search For A Religion*

Religion was the basis of my existence and had been from the moment of my present birth.

To me, religion is not a set of doctrines or allegiance to a group of some sort. Religion is a system of knowledge revealed by God that shows the errant soul how to return home to the Bosom, the Depths, of the Father, re-establishing its conscious unity with God.

Union with God does not need to be attained, for it has never been lost. God being infinite, where could we possibly go to be separated from Him? But the consciousness of the unity and the demonstration of it have indeed become lost to us to such a degree that we have come to disbelieve and deny it in every way.

The human being is incapable on his own of retracing his steps and entering back into what Jesus described as “the glory which I had with thee before the world was” (John 17:5). He must have a guide. Even more, he must be given the ability to make the journey back to the Father, as well as knowledge of the way that leads back. For that he must have a religion which can effectively enable him to make the return. *Religere*, the word from which the English word “religion” is derived, means just that: “to secure or return back.” Without religion the return is impossible. And God must be the source of religion, even though it be revealed through an intermediary.

Nothing is more evil or more asinine than the assertion that we should make up and follow our own religion. Not that it cannot be done—it can. But to no good whatsoever. True religion is revealed from the Absolute, not worked up out of our finite and conditioned minds at the whim of our ego. A good honest look at those who are trying it should be sufficient to keep us from making the same mistake.

Real religion, as the Great Messengers originally present it, is mystical religion. Real religion also includes both the power and the knowledge needed to effect the Great Work of the passage to divinity.

Without it there is nothing.

Therefore, in response to my new insights, a little past my twentieth birthday, I began my search for a religion that could accommodate—and affirm—them. For that they were the first truths I had ever really known, I knew without the slightest shade of doubt.

I had always been interested in contemporary “novelty” (at least in the context of my provincial Protestant background) religions that held metaphysical beliefs, and enjoyed reading about their history and tenets. But I was an ingrained traditionalist, so I never gave any of the newly-fashioned philosophies a moment’s consideration. Instead I went to the library of the university where I was enrolled and began looking into the ancient traditions, reading the wisdom of philosophers preceding the Christian

era.

Please do not think that I had become in any way inimical to Christianity. It would not even be correct to say that I had rejected Christ or Christianity. Since my new knowledge was not consistent with what I knew of Christ or Christianity, I had regretfully concluded that truth could not be found in any Christian church. I was glad to be freed from my old limiting ignorance, but it was no cause of rejoicing that I could no longer believe in Jesus. Christianity and ignorance were synonyms to me, but I was sorry it was so, however much I continued to rejoice in my expanding understanding.

At the same time awareness of the need to cultivate my innate inner wisdom also arose within me. My revelation had demonstrated incontrovertibly to me that real knowledge came from within, that ideas gathered from outside sources needed to be tested in the laboratory of interior life. External concepts, I realized, should only be the stimuli to evoke the spirit's eternal wisdom. Therefore I resolved to devote at least one hour a day in meditation. My meditational procedure was to take a principle of wisdom and set it in silence before my mental mirror and see what the response might be. I now see that this practice was little better than dropping stones into a well and waiting for the splash, but at least it was an attempt to evoke the consciousness of the spirit which lies beyond the intellect, and it did result in satisfying insights regarding philosophical precepts. But I had to concede that I was not getting beyond the intellect, however rarefied might be the realms of my incursions. I was stymied with no prospect of egress.

(In the West mental reflection is often confused with meditation. In Sanskrit there is a sharp distinction made between meditation (*dhyana*) and mere intellection (*manana*). Meditation is defined as "the flow of the mind toward God like a continuous stream of oil." Oil is used in this simile instead of water because a stream of water splashes, but a stream of oil is silent. Also, because of its viscosity, a stream of oil appears to not be moving. Correct meditation thus is indicated as being both silent and so subtle of movement that it appears to be completely unmoving.)

Then an old urging awoke within me with renewed force.

During my three years in junior high school my daily walk to school took me past a drugstore whose two revolving racks of paperback books could be clearly seen through the window. One morning a new acquisition seemed to leap out into my attention and draw me to it. But I had to hasten on to school, so I resolved to look at it on my return trek. Busily talking with a good friend, I walked on by that afternoon. The next morning I made sure I had time to stop in. The brightly-colored cover bore the title *The Song of God*. That confirmed my inmost feeling that the book was of spiritual significance. The promotional material, however, stated that the Bhagavad Gita (its name in Sanskrit) was part of an Indian epic poem. Opening to the beginning I found a narrative about the beginning of an ancient battle. So I put the book back on the rack and left. Deeply disappointed, I told my friend who was waiting for me outside, "I hoped it would be a holy scripture, but it is just poetry!"

For the next two years (!) I would occasionally see *The Song of God* through the drug store window. Each time I would feel the urge to buy it. And each time I would

“reasonably” resist the urge. After I was in high school I no longer passed by that way, so I never saw it any more.

Just before the anniversary of grandmother Burge’s death and my interior opening, I encountered *The Song of God* in the university bookstore. The inner pull toward it was undiminished after the intervening years, yet I turned it aside. Shortly after my awakening, however, I decided to buy the book and read it, whatever its nature might ultimately prove to be. I expressed this decision to a classmate during lunch one day and his reaction was immediate: “Don’t bother—it is pure nonsense! We just finished ploughing through it in my Oriental Philosophy course. Everybody hated it, including the teacher.”

To corroborate his assertions, Terry drew forth a heavy volume, an anthology of Oriental Philosophy containing a translation of the Bhagavad Gita. I leafed through the Gita translation in astonishment. It was indeed the most turgid mess of pomposity and philosophical obscurity I had ever seen. So I decided not to buy *The Song of God* after all.

*The Song of God* was not the only book that had recently drawn my attention. An advertisement for *Autobiography of a Yogi* seen in the Saturday Review had also intrigued me. More accurately, the photo of the author, Paramhansa Yogananda, had affected me profoundly. I had known that face from birth—literally. Throughout my life those eyes looked back at me in my memory. There was nothing I knew better than that image—and nothing I knew less, either. Especially when I was very small I would see that face upon closing my eyes. Even in the primary grades, sometimes as I studied the page of a book intently that face would flash before me. Now I could put a name to it—admittedly, a name I had no idea how to pronounce!

Plain undiluted spiritual snobbery had risen up, however, and protested that surely no book of spiritual worth would be advertised in the Saturday Review—what could be more out of place? As you can see, my intellect was good at maneuvering me out of reading the books my intuition called for.

A day or so after Terry’s warning on the Bhagavad Gita, I went into the small town library to while away some time between classes. Right inside the door was the magazine section, and since I liked to look for odd religious magazines, I went to investigate. And was rewarded. Right at hand I found a copy of Self-Realization Magazine. The title was not particularly interesting, but on the cover was a photograph of Yogananda. Further examination revealed that the magazine was published by Self-Realization Fellowship, an organization founded by Yogananda to propagate the methods of yogic meditation. This was definitely a find. Turning through it I came upon a few pages of commentary by Yogananda on the Gita. Both the text and the commentary were clear and sensible, making it evident that the translator of Terry’s version had known little Sanskrit and much less English. That decided it. Without delay I went to the bookstore and bought *The Song of God*.

Exactly forty-eight hours later I was walking home with my briefcase of textbooks in one hand and the Gita in the other, reading as I went. Interruptions had prevented my reading it straight through, but now I was in the final chapters. I was walking in another world as each page of the Gita became a door to new dimensions of

understanding.

My understanding was not intellectual—far from it. Rather, my reading of the Gita was like hearing my own soul speaking freely to me for the first time. Thousands of years before, those immortal words had been spoken by the avatar (Sanskrit for “descender”—an incarnation of God) Krishna to the warrior-yogi Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, setting forth a philosophy revealing life itself as the path to enlightenment when lived consciously and correctly. But, as I have said, the voice speaking in the Gita was not from the past but from the Eternal Present, speaking not to my egoic mind but to the Eternal in me—far beyond any conceptualizations or conditionings. I was not learning anything new: I was remembering it.

As I came to the final chapter I was at the door of my house. Stopping only to get out my key and open the door, I entered and sat down on the floor just inside and continued to read.

“Where Lord Krishna is, and Arjuna, great among archers, there, I know, is goodness and peace, and triumph, and glory” (Bhagavad Gita 18:78). These closing words of the Gita were but a beginning for me. Within the chariot of my own being there must be Arjuna, the intelligent will, and Krishna, the light of my own soul, living, breathing, and speaking without hindrance. Then in me, also, there would be goodness and peace, and triumph, and glory.

Sitting on the floor I shed tears of pure soul-relief. At last I had found the truth about the Real—a truth as eternal, pure, and beyond taint or shadow as was He to Whom it led. And to Him I offered the gratitude of my spirit for having at long last found that truth. The agony of nearly seven years was ended. Now I could hope again.

When I finally did get up off the floor and resume a semblance of normal behavior, it was with the conviction that if Yogananda was right about the Gita, then his book likely contained spiritual wisdom that might be relevant to me. For however glorious the concepts of the Gita might be, its message was to pass beyond theology into direct experience of God. That would be the work of a lifetime at the least, so I had better get all the counsel I could on the matter!

Consequently, the next day I filled a grocery bag with books I no longer wanted and trekked downtown to the tiny structure that housed our only used bookstore. There I traded in the bag of books plus fifty cents for a new copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi*. (I could have gotten a used copy for an even trade, but it seemed right to get a new one.) Over the next few days I carefully read the *Autobiography*, savoring each thought it contained. Whereas I usually read a good book with the avidity of an addict, I read this with a calm sense of inevitability. And I believed every word. Not a single idea evoked the slightest hesitation within me. It was all true. I knew.

The most immediate effect of Yogananda’s life story was to restore my faith in Jesus Christ and give me an understanding of him far beyond anything I had previously held. Of course this was the intention of the author: to point Christians in the West to a true knowledge of Jesus. And now I had that knowledge—or the beginnings at least—but ironically it could find no welcome within the boundaries of any Christian church I knew of. Therefore my renewed faith in Jesus alienated me further from what I knew as

Christianity. What a contradiction—and an indictment against so much of what unworthily bears his name as a cover for sheer ignorance and opportunism.

Perhaps the most important result of my reading, however, was the arousal of my interest in the practice of yogic meditation. According to Yogananda, through meditation God could be directly found and experienced—even more, God could be entered into in a permanent union of spirit with Spirit. This union alone was the purpose of our being, he asserted, and was the inevitable predestined goal for every conscious entity within relative existence.

But Yogananda did not just present this as theory. He offered instruction in meditation through a correspondence course known as the Self-Realization Fellowship Lessons. Those who studied the lessons and qualified could further apply for initiation into the methodology of yoga. Why delay the inevitable? Taking what was exactly the last cent I had (I did not even have the extra pennies needed to buy a money order), I sent off for the SRF Lessons.

In the ensuing days I waited for the mailman with impatient eagerness, but it was three weeks before the oversize gray envelope appeared in the mailbox. My first lesson in yoga! Now I would embark on my journey to the Infinite. Never before had I read anything with such attention, determined to extract full value from each word. However, it was not until Lesson Three that some basic instructions on meditation were given. I was ready! Or so I thought. I read the instructions straight through. Then I reread them. For the third reading I sat cross-legged on my bed, ready to apply the practice step by step. And immediately bogged down in my mistaken interpretation of what was really quite simple.

The lesson said to inhale slowly during the practice of a simple breathing exercise. Simple it might be, but my over-careful mind interpreted “slowly” as meaning so slow as to be barely perceptible. So I inhaled as slowly as I could—like a sea turtle. Even before the exaggerated inhalation was completed, my lungs were calling for air. The very thought of holding the breath for more than a few seconds was ludicrous. Oh, well, practice supposedly makes perfect, so I exhaled fully and began again. After about twenty respiratory fiascos, I gave up, dazed and miserable.

“I don’t have what it takes to practice yoga.” This self-indictment echoed dismally in my inner ear as a spiritual death knell—my death knell. The facts were simple. Yoga was the way to God. If I could not practice yoga, I could not find God.

Through the intervening years I have been continually astounded at how easily people allow themselves to be deflected from the spiritual path—especially esoteric practice—by a little difficulty or inconvenience. The fatuous excuses I have heard from the lips of perfectly intelligent people would have been funny if they had not had the tragic effect of causing those people to willingly—almost complacently—abandon the cultivation of their interior consciousness.

My reaction was quite different. If I could not practice meditation and find God, then my life was pointless. The thought of living out a normal lifespan devoid of spiritual development was intolerable. Surely God could not be turning me away in this manner. But so it certainly seemed to be.

In my desperation I formulated the short prayer: “Open unto me Thy door of meditation.” Because of my Fundamentalist Protestant beliefs, someone had once given me a tiny toy Catholic rosary as a joke. Now in dead earnestness I dredged up that “joke” and kept it in my pocket, secretly fingering it every free moment of my waking hours, repeating my brief petition over and over. Where now was my past smug assurance when quoting the Bible about “vain repetition” in refutation of the Roman Catholic practice of the rosary with its continuous repetitions of the Hail Mary? (“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” Matthew 6:7.) Like all the rest of my Protestant beliefs, it vanished before confrontation with spiritual realities. Instead I was putting my hope in Jesus’ parable of the unjust judge where the woman was heard and helped simply because she kept on entreating! (Luke 18:1-8a)

Throughout the following days I filled every spare moment with my agonized pleading. Every evening I would attempt the recommended breathing—always with the same frustration. On the fifth evening while once again reading over the instructions, good sense dawned. “Slowly” did not mean imperceptibly. It just meant... slowly. So I tried it again, this time breathing at a reasonably slow rate. Of course I succeeded, and the exercise had the intended effect of greatly calming my mind. Eureka! And Excelsior! too.

But why had this happened? “Simple stupidity” is not an adequate answer, although it certainly leaps to mind. The conscious taking up of spiritual life in a practical, methodical manner may appear to be an activity of the mind and will just like any other, but it is not. “The desire for God is itself the way to God,” the enlightened have assured their disciples. If this is so, then the desire for God is something truly transcendental, not at all in the same class as other desires of the human heart.

Likewise, spiritual practice—and especially meditation—is not a normal activity of the human being, nor is it on the human level of endeavor, however much it might appear to be. Rather, it is itself an intervention and direction from the divine Self. However natural the implements of practice may be, such as the body and the mind, the actual doing of the practice is a supernatural occurrence, and as such is evidence of the working of God within the individual life. This is why Swami Sriyuktswar, Yogananda’s guru, often said that everything in the future is bound to improve if we are making an effort now. And why Saint Paul asserted (I Corinthians 12:3) that just to be able to say “Lord Jesus!” is the action of the Holy Spirit, “and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). Therefore, my attempts at meditation were taking place in a realm far beyond the mundane, however earthbound they might seem to be at the moment.

Initiates of all ages have been warned by their teachers about The Dweller At The Threshold, that entity which rises up to oppose any endeavor to lift “the painted veil which those who live call Life” according to the poet Shelley. Call it ego, or ignorance, or negative will, or negative karma, it is the enemy within that must be confronted, the microcosmic Satan (force of delusion and illusion) that must be recognized for what it really is, and passed beyond. (I hesitate to say that at the first conflict it is—or even can

be-conquered or destroyed.)

The first weapon of the Dweller is simple misunderstanding-illusion not so negative as to raise an alarm and result in its source being revealed, yet a force that effectively stymies the aspirant's efforts to move up to higher planes of awareness. Therefore those who tread the path of conscious evolution must at all times beware and be wary of this basic tool of the Enemy Within The Gates.

This was my first encounter with The Dweller At The Threshold. Fortunately it had ended favorably. The only catch was that no more instruction in meditation was going to be given until Lesson Twenty One-more than four months in the future. Until then all I had was my breathing exercise. My spiritual Rome was definitely not going to be built in one or even in many days.

*Note:* Satan is the force of cosmic ignorance, not an actual person, as is Lucifer, the fallen archangel. The accumulated ignorance of our many lifetimes is our own personal Satan, discomfiting as that thought may be.

# Chapter Nine

## *A Beginner's Experiences*

Perhaps the most vexing question in spiritual life is that of “experiences” either in or out of meditation that are definitely not part of normal human life. The masters of the spiritual life tell us to ignore all experiences and press on, refusing to be satisfied with anything less than the plenitude of God, Who is beyond all phenomena—and at the same time the source of all phenomena.

The esoteric Biblical teaching regarding psychic experiences in contrast to spiritual consciousness is found in the nineteenth chapter of First Kings. Elijah is living in a cave up in the hills, when God speaks to him.

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake:

And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him. (I Kings 19:11-13)

And Elijah communed there with God.

There are many mystical principles embodied in this account, but the overall purpose is to show that God is not to be found in striking phenomena, but beyond all such. That which calls us into direct communication with God is “a still small voice.” In Hebrew the expression literally means a subtle, virtually silent, voice, and in Septuagint Greek it means “the sound of a gentle breeze.” (To understand and experience this for yourself, see my book *Soham Yoga: The Yoga of the Self*.)

Divine communion is the subtlest of spiritual perceptions, a “knowing beyond knowing” which is called in Western Christian mysticism Unknowing. This makes sense when we realize that authentic spiritual experience is beyond thought and conception, but not beyond the subtlest, purely spiritual perception that becomes a transcendent Knowing. This is experienced in our interior consciousness, which is the essence of our being, our true Self, which can see without seeing and know without knowing. We can experience the reality that we are one and inseparable from the Divine Being that Itself has said to all sentient beings: “Ye are gods” (Psalms 82:6). Since God is everything, we are part of God: gods. The limited intellect cannot conceive of it, but the pure spirit-essence of our being, our Self, can experience it and live it. We

are even now gods within God, but we must come to know and manifest it by Self-experience. And that is the beginning and end of yoga: Knowing. Anything less is unworthy of us.

Although the passing scenery is definitely not the destination of the traveler, if he does not experience its landmarks in journeying he cannot be assured he is on the correct road. If he sees no scenery at all he must not even be traveling. So for that reason, after all the foregoing, I am going to recount some of my experiences when beginning meditation.

In the late afternoon a day or so after finishing the *Autobiography*, just as dusk was coming on I was pondering the revelations I had received from my reading while at the same time getting ready to go out with my parents and some of their friends. Suddenly I felt a great peace descend upon—and within—me. It was the “good and perfect gift from above, coming down from the Father of Lights” (James 1:17), of that I had no doubt. I realized that for the first time in this life I was finding out what it was to be truly blessed. Although I was absorbed in my extraordinary experience, I was able to behave as usual.

A couple of hours later as I sat in a restaurant savoring my inner banquet, the words came into my mind: “You do not hurt inside any more,” referring to the internal pain that had been with me without interruption since my mother’s death. My grief had not only been inexpressible, it had proven ineradicable. I had never “gotten over” my mother’s death, but continued to mourn through the years. Naturally, in order to function with a semblance of normality I had to submerge my interior suffering beneath my ordinary consciousness. I learned to genuinely laugh and enjoy things, but if I became very still and turned my awareness inside I would find a continuous sorrow flowing within me. Inwardly I shed perpetual tears of desolation.

As I say, I had adjusted to this through the years, so to be told by some mysterious intuition that I no longer had any inner anguish was the most incredible idea that could have occurred to me. Yet it was true. I turned my attention within and probed around. Profound peace alone was to be encountered. I was healed. It was as simple as that. My gratitude and amazement were equally without limit.

My first meditation session involved very little meditation. No sooner had I sat upon my bed and begun to meditate, than I began to feel warm. In a matter of moments I was very warm indeed, so I removed my shirt. This gave no relief at all, so I took off my undershirt. Still no alleviation. So off went my trousers. The heat continued to mount in intensity. Finally, I was sitting completely naked on my bed as sweat streamed off of me as heavily as though I were sitting in a sauna. The bedclothes and mattress became soaked. As best I could I ignored my discomfort and kept trying to broadcast my wordless invocation to God.

For several meditation periods the above scenario was repeated. Later on that year, Swami Bimalananda, a direct disciple of Paramhansa Yogananda and one of the monks of Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles, told me that Yogananda had said that very often the burning of karmas will manifest in this very literal way at the beginning of the yogi’s efforts in meditation. Whatever the actual reason, it was certainly

memorable.

Two or three weeks after my inner fires had calmed down and my meditation experiences were mostly confined to itchings, twingings, mental racings, and a few astral lights, I had a very definite vision. The possibility of it being autosuggestion or the projection of subconscious imagery was obviated by its seeming absurdity. For when I opened my eyes at the end of meditation, there in the northeast corner of my bedroom stood an image of Jesus, four or five feet high, dressed in pink robes. I was not having a vision of Jesus, but only of a *statue* of Jesus? And dressed in *pink*, for heaven's sake? The only sensible response was disbelief. But the apparition did not go away. There it stood, radiating a strong vibration of loving calm. The atmosphere pervading the room persuaded me that it must be real—strange as it seemed. Now all I had to do was figure out *why* I was seeing such a thing. I finally decided that it was a sign that I should get myself a statue of Jesus and meditate before it. I did so, but in the ordering of the statue I learned that there was no such thing as a statue of Jesus with pink robes. Oh, well. So I settled for red.

The mystery was solved more than a year later when I went to visit my aunt Faye in Saint Joseph's Hospital. There in the waiting room was the statue of my vision! Yes, pink robes and all. As I stood in front of it, I felt such love for Him Whom it represented that I wanted to embrace and kiss it—and would have done so if there had not been other people present. When I went into Aunt Faye's room I told her: "I really love that statue out in the hallway. I just want to hug and kiss it." "Well, that is no surprise," she answered—certainly to *my* surprise. "That is the statue you asked to take you when you were a baby." I have already told of that incident which was upsetting to my mother, since she considered it an omen of death, but which was perfectly sensible to Aunt Faye, for what else does the human being need—of whatever age—other than to be taken into the arms of God? And now after so many years we had met again. I went right back out into the hall and, finding it empty, embraced and kissed the Friend of my infancy.

Whatever might have been the purpose of my peculiar vision, I became convinced that spiritual imagery was an invaluable tool in the search for God, neither idolatrous nor materialistic as I had formerly thought. Later I learned the esoteric principles behind the use of images as a means of communication with the realms of spirit.

In the recesses of my secret heart I had always been an idolater. When I was eight years old an antique dealer whose shop was next door to my Aunt Erma's home had given me a small crucifix of the kind that is worn around the neck. How I loved it! The crucifix has never seemed to me a symbol of death, but of divine love. Of course, it is an important esoteric symbol, as well, but that was unknown to me at the time. Even now, with the intellectual knowledge of its inner significance, a crucifix still evokes in me the awareness that, as the song says: "He wrote His love in crimson red,...." Therefore I often kissed my crucifix and kept it with me. It was always beneath my pillow when I slept. Like so much of my *real* life, I kept this a secret until one day I forgot to take it from under the pillow and it was discovered and confiscated with righteous admonitions about idolatry and how Jesus was alive and should not be

shown as dead. Of course the real motivation was the aversion of Protestantism—the merchant class’s religion of profit and business—to the idea of sacrifice and inconvenience in any form, what to speak of outright suffering.

I had grieved long over the loss of my crucifix, and now that I had shed the superstitious fear of imagery, I indulged myself in recompense, laying in quite a stock of holy images, both two and three dimensional. As I meditated before them daily, I came to perceive them as extensions of the perfected consciousness of their immortal prototypes.

Since we are considering the subject of experiences, I would like to jump ahead a bit and relate two other incidents in meditation that could have resulted in spiritual disaster if I had misunderstood and misinterpreted them.

When I first began meditating, my karma brought me into the orbit of those who tirelessly expounded upon the horrible dangers of meditation. According to their cosmology, just about every demon, astral wanderer, earthbound soul, and inter-dimensional monster that had ever existed was waiting and poised to seize, possess, mangle and destroy anyone who set foot across the threshold of meditation. Pleasant prospect, indeed! But since I felt sure that the inward call was the call of God into His kingdom which is only within, I also felt that crossing that threshold was my destiny—even my birthright as a (sleeping) son of God. So I went ahead and crossed over daily.

One evening I was sitting alone in the Hollywood SRF Church practicing a method for control of the subtle life forces, the prana. For some reason I felt like opening my eyes. When I did so, I was amazed to see that a subtle, blue-white light was pervading everywhere. At first I assumed it was an optical illusion, so I rubbed and blinked my eyes to dispel it. No change resulted. So I continued the pranayama with open eyes. Slowly the light increased in brightness and density until in a moment everything vanished and only the light remained. After a short while forms once more became distinguishable, but they were shapes of light within the light. Then again all melted into the single light. The alternating of pure light with form seemed to be occurring in a definite rhythm or pattern. The practice I was engaged in consisted of several aspects, so I began dropping them one by one to ascertain if one particular factor was producing these phenomena. I did indeed isolate the major component, much to my satisfaction and increase of yogic knowledge. After about an hour of experimentation I ended my meditation. Gradually things returned to “normal” and I went home.

Leaving aside the possible conclusion that my experience was total nonsense, there are two ways of evaluating it. One is to conclude that I had attained what is known as *Jyotir Samadhi*, an exalted state in which the individual beholds the undifferentiated Light of God and experiences his oneness with it beyond all duality. The other is the correct evaluation. I had simply beheld the *Vishwaprana*, the universal life force or biomagnetic energy. It is true that all “things” are formed out of it, and that it pervades the universe—actually is the universe on a certain level. But that level is quite elementary, merely one step up from atomic matter. My awareness had been attuned to it by my practice, and I had seen it with rarefied vision. The real question I put to myself after it was all over was this: Was my level of functioning consciousness in any

way changed? The answer was simple: No. Yes, my philosophical outlook was somewhat strengthened and I had come to understand some of the inner workings of yogic technique, but frankly, as Omar Khayyam would have put it, I still went out the same door I came in. The experience was not altogether useless, but it was of minimal significance, spiritually speaking.

What was not minimal was my very real apprehension afterward. How easily I might have foolishly assumed that I had attained some great state of realization. Merging into boundless light certainly can seem like enlightenment, especially if the ego is grasping for such a claim. Religions have been founded on much lesser phenomena. It was a very sobering thing to realize that deep self-delusion could be a possibility for the indiscriminating meditator.

My next experience was even more dramatic. While meditating one day all ordinary physical sensation vanished. Spatial relation ceased to exist and I found myself keenly aware of being beyond dimension, neither large nor small, but infinite (for infinity is beyond size). Although the terminology is inappropriate to such a state, to make it somewhat understandable I have to say that I perceived an infinity of worlds “within” me. Suns—some solo and others surrounded by planets—glimmered inside my spaceless space. Not that I saw the light, but I felt or intuited it. Actually, I did not “see” anything—and yet I did. It is not expressible in terms of ordinary sense experience, yet I must use those terms. I experienced myself as everything that existed within the relative material universe. Or so it seemed, for here, also, there were two interpretations, one dramatic and self-glorifying, and one the simple truth. The wrong opinion would be that I had come to experience myself as the totality of universal being, that I had realized that I myself was the Absolute Being, that God and I were the same entity, that I was God and God was All. And then the truth: The human body is a miniature universe, a microcosmic model of the macrocosm. The physical human body is a reflection of the universal womb that conceived it. I had experienced the subtle level of the physical body that is its ideational (i.e., causal) blueprint. On that level it can be experienced as a map of the material creation. Having experienced that for myself I now knew it to be true, but was it particularly important to be assured of such a fact? The important thing was the complete absence of any significant alteration of my state of consciousness. I was still going out through the same door I had entered. Furthermore, some months later Dr. Judith Tyberg of the East-West Cultural Center in Hollywood told me that when she was a student at the Benares Hindu University in India a lecturer had come who displayed a life-size diagram of the human body and a diagram of the universe and showed that the human body was a miniature model, a reflection, of the universe.

I could list a few more experiences, but these two should suffice. And thus my “flashforward” is concluded.

Simple as my beginning meditation practice was, it still yielded what to me were far more than satisfactory results. God rewarded my unskilled endeavor with great mercy, seeing that the intention of my heart, however feeble, was the actual effort being expended.

At the same time, coming to see my need for some form of religious expression I began attending the services of a local church. But it soon became evident that if I was going to progress in my interior quest I would have to do more than attend a church where my beliefs would have to be kept secret.

It did not take long for me to understand that the seeker greatly needs the benefits accruing from keeping company with those who are like-minded. Paramhansa Yogananda often told his followers: "Company is stronger than will power." In India, *satsanga*, the company of other seekers for truth, is considered indispensable for successful spiritual life.

From the town library I checked out all the *Self Realization* magazines from the previous decade and read them hungrily. There I learned that the members of SRF celebrated spiritual Christmas by meditating the entire day on Christmas Eve. When Christmas of 1960 arrived, I found the external festivities extremely uninteresting, for I was thinking of those blessed ones who had spent their time seeking communion with Christ the day before. By the time Christmas Day was expended I had formed the resolve to move to California as soon as possible in order to benefit from association with others who followed the inner path.

# Chapter Ten

## *Exploring The Forbidden*

Laudable as my decision was, there remained some loose ends that I needed to tie up before I would be ready to launch out into the psychic sea of Southern California.

To the people of the Middle West at that time the very name of California evoked complete mystification. In 1961, California seemed as remote as the moon to the citizens of Illinois. This is no exaggeration. We all thought that California was a blasted desert, blistering hot, populated by movie stars, gangsters, religious freaks, and people who should have known better. In short, the inhabitants of California were either dissolute, criminal, or crazy.

I learned that one of my fellow-students, a middle aged woman getting a teaching degree, had lived in California for two years. One afternoon as we were sitting outside the classroom building waiting for the bell, I approached her and asked if she could give me advice about moving to California. Both she and the people near us who heard the query regarded me with profound awe. Really? Was I really going to go all the way out to California—to live? Indeed I was. “What is California like?” I asked, and received the inexplicable yet ultimately significant reply: “Well,... they have mushroomburgers!” I was genuinely flabbergasted at this response, for I had learned from my reading that “mushroomburgers” were the invention of Yogananda and an exclusive specialty of the restaurants he had begun in Hollywood and Encinitas. This was one of the first of those little touches which were to become well known to me as the path opened up before me.

Conferring with her over the next few days did not elicit much worthwhile information, but I found that she had eaten at the SRF cafe in Encinitas, though she had no idea where she had really been, spiritually speaking. It was her desire to return to California permanently. This latter fact assured me that things might not be as terrible “out there” as I had been supposing. Nevertheless, I had many fantasies about California that took a while to dispel, even after I was living there.

My first illusion was that everyone in California was sophisticated—that there were no “hillbillies” whatsoever. In fact, when I got on the plane that would take me to Chicago to get a flight to California, I said to myself with self-congratulatory satisfaction: “Now I will never see another hillbilly again or ever hear ‘country music’ anymore.” Those who know anything about California will pity me, aware that since dust bowl days California had been flooded with “hillikins” from various states, and that “country music” was certainly heard anywhere in Southern California. When I had access to Los Angeles television I discovered that one “country music” program lasted for three continuous hours every Sunday afternoon—with most of the performers being amateur you-know-whats, fresh from the hills of home.

My funniest supposition, though, was that a large percentage of the populace would

be enlightened metaphysicians. The first few times I rode on a bus I told myself: "I had better watch my thoughts, because about of third of these people can no doubt read minds." Innocent, wasn't I? But I have gone too far ahead.

The greatest horror of my life in the Church of God, both moderate and conservative, was the intellectual bondage imposed on all "believers." Everything outside its constricted purview was "of the devil" and to be shunned assiduously. But a person can believe in stupidity only for just so long, since truth is part of our essential nature. In time rebellion will set in and the mind will be set free. In my case I had been slapped into consciousness by my insight into rebirth. Whatever the process may have been, once I was awake I was determined to sleep no more.

One symptom of my awakening was my freedom to investigate and explore hitherto forbidden regions of thought. My first excursion was into the world of astrology. The method was simple: I bought some magazines that contained predictions for the various birth signs and looked at them at the end of each day—not the beginning—to see if the predictions had proven accurate. They were miserably inept. At the stores where I bought the magazines there were also small booklets and sealed packets of predictions labeled according to birth signs. I got three or four of these and followed the same procedure. A couple of them were occasionally correct, but not enough to warrant taking them seriously. One, however, was remarkably on target. At the end of every day I would look and see printed there at least the basic character of the day, and sometimes an incident that had taken place. For two or three months I bought this particular publication, but quit when it became evident that even knowing beforehand the general climate of a day would in no way change anything. Although accurate, it was useless in a practical sense.

Before anyone can ascertain the value of astrology for himself personally, he must have an accurate chart drawn up based on the exact time and place of his birth. Then he must find a competent astrologer to interpret it. And that is not an easy matter. If he is fortunate, he will come to see for himself that astrology is a valuable tool for both self-understanding and self-direction—not fatalism at all. Although it is true that for the yogi predictive astrology becomes irrelevant as he transmutes his karma through yoga sadhana, nevertheless astrology in its many applications is one of the most valuable sciences.

Prediction of the future has always intrigued the unfettered human mind, and if such a thing is possible it is folly not to pursue it. Having come across an ad for Tarot cards and a book on how to read them, right away I sent off for both and began to experiment with reading the Tarot for myself. The results were stupendous. Not only were the predictions totally accurate, the details given, such as the astrological signs of the persons involved, were perfect in every way. (Not all Tarot decks will provide this much detail.)

A friend had become estranged from her daughter, a former classmate of mine, who refused to write or speak to her parents. But through the Tarot I was able to tell her mother in detail the events of her daily life—including both her marriage and her suing for divorce on the day after!

One Saturday afternoon I did a reading for a fellow college student whose best friend had gone to Springfield, Illinois, with his girlfriend—a member of the local Church of God whom I knew quite well—to meet her parents and ask their approval to get married. When I laid out the cards they showed that ferocious conflicts had arisen between the two and that they had permanently broken up with no possibility of reconciliation. My “client” did not believe me, but the next morning he phoned to say that my reading was accurate. The love-birds had a tremendous fight even before they got to Springfield. As a result “he” dropped “her” off at her parents’ home and drove directly back without her. They never made up or even became nominal friends.

Why, then, did I not go on to become a famous and wealthy reader of the cards for the millions? Because I quit altogether! Here is why, and it ties in with my own reincarnation.

Before my experience of the reality of reincarnation, whenever I encountered the concept (something that was rare in those days), like nearly everyone else in the West I would counter with the feeble and unthinking objection: “If I have lived on earth before, why don’t I remember it now?” That objection is feeble and unthinking because none of those who make it remember their birth into this life or even much of their very early life at all, so they obviously would not remember back to centuries before. Most people cannot remember what they ate three or four days ago—but that hardly means they did not eat. Also a little reflection ought to reveal that since the seat of conscious memory is in the brain, and we get a new brain in every life, then it is natural not to remember our previous lives, the memories of which are stored in our subconscious, the astral levels of our being. Nobody ever gave me this simple and obvious explanation to my objection, so I tracked on in my obscurity.

(However, we can remember our past lives, and there are methods to do so, but it has been my observation that it is best to let the past life memories surface of their own accord—which they will do spontaneously whenever they are really needed, if the person is practicing a viable method of meditation.)

This being so, it was not long until the memory of a life lived a few centuries ago came to me spontaneously—and naturally. Just as long-forgotten memories of childhood can come to mind seemingly unbidden, so it was with those memories. How did I know they were real? Because they were just that: memories. There is a vast difference between imagining or fantasizing something and actually remembering it. Those memories were not created on the surface of the conscious mind by my will, but came from deep within as impressions that had originally been impressed upon my mind by external factors. Also, odd as it may sound, they were me—that is, they were part of what had shaped me into my present personality. There was something deeply personal, profoundly intimate, about them.

My memories of that past life were not just a curiosity for my mind to wonder at. They had a practical purpose, showing me to a degree just how I had come to the point of development at which I found myself and further giving me an indication as to the way I should now choose to go.

They also gave indication of the way I should not go, as well. In my remembered life

I had been very involved in psychic phenomena of a practical nature. The entire culture was based on the psychic abilities of the priesthood. For example, there was no crime because no one could go (psychically) undetected. Communication was possible throughout the entire country through the temple oracles. All the people could converse with others at a distance through the mediation of the temple oracles who would relay the messages coming from either end. All in all, it had been a remarkable civilization, but it had lacked genuine spiritual life, all the energies of the people and priests being absorbed in the lesser levels of psychic manifestations. As a result, the religious philosophy was simplistic and of little value. Observing my memories, I understood that I must take care not to get sidetracked into the psychic wanderings that so many people mistake for spiritual life and development.

Another aspect of that past psychic life had been the linking of our awareness with psychic entities who could communicate knowledge of past, present, future, and far distances. Thus, when the limits of our innate psychic faculties were reached, we then utilized contact with discarnate intelligences to supply the needed information or extension of psychic abilities. The links made with such entities are not easily broken, since they usually create a karmic debt on the part of the human being who benefits from the contact. Furthermore, these links can last for centuries—even millennia—until either dissolved or the debt is paid. We can pass through many incarnations completely unaware of them until we suddenly come up against them as we progress in our development. Almost always they are blocks to our further evolution, and distractions from the path.

It was in working with the Tarot cards that one of my ancient psychic links became manifest. Lacking skill with my hands, I could not shuffle the cards but would just spread them out, “mess” them around for a while, then gather them up, cut them, and lay out the spread. Through my past life recall I had learned how to put myself into a psychically receptive state of mind to enhance both the operation of the cards and my interpretation of them. During one session, while in that state I saw a being enter the room and position itself opposite me with the cards between us. The entity was extremely odd in appearance, having taken on the form attributed to “gods” in some ancient civilization. I understood that this being was not at all on the path of evolution which we humans traverse, but must have somehow wandered into our dimension and gotten stuck here. Desiring intelligent contact, it had “played” with human beings for ages, taking on the form they desired to see without in any way intending to perpetrate a deception. Such entities in no way reason the way we do, nor can they really comprehend anything about us. As a result they are always lonely and isolated however much they have interchange with us.

Anyhow, I understood that the entity would exert a psychic influence to ensure that the right cards would turn up in the reading. Also, the entity would help me interpret the cards correctly. This latter would involve a kind of mental touching that did not appeal to me, so I would not agree to it. However, I was plenty glad to have help in the cards coming up in the best sequence.

For several weeks, whenever I began to work with the cards my helper would come—

and my readings were perfect. But I was aware that the entity wanted a more active mental bond with me. Also, at times the entity would appear and want to do readings when I was involved in something else. It never became coercive or hostile, but I sensed real danger, aware that if I went along with these overtures I could end up bound and dominated by this thing. Nor did I want to play magician and command the entity to do my will. It had just shown up and I had been cooperative—no more than that. But much more than that was desired by it, evidently, so I took the only line of action I knew. I stopped reading Tarot cards altogether and told the entity that it should go its own way. Over the next months it would appear periodically (not often) and want to “do” the cards. As gently and politely as I could I would refuse, and in time the visitations ceased. And so did my career as a Tarot reader.

(My experience with the Tarot is not at all typical, but a result of past life psychic involvements. Many years later I learned to consult the Tarot in a manner that had none of the earlier-encountered dangers. Eventually I wrote a book, *How to Read the Tarot*, relaying what I had learned.)

One of my last Tarot readings had been especially significant, though, as I had asked about the future of my trek to California to study yoga with Self-Realization Fellowship. Because of my lifelong interest in odd religious groups (“odd” in the context of my limited provincial experience, that is), I had decided that since I was going to be landing splash dash in the midst of the sea of lunacy that is the Southern California “spiritual scene,” I would take advantage of the situation by waiting one year before settling down to study with SRF. Instead I would go to a different exotic religious group each week. Then after all the fun I would get serious.

Nothing doing, said the cards. After a short time in California I would go to SRF and become completely involved in yoga. I would not visit a single “nut group.” No, not one. My response to the reading was a cynical “phooey” and a redoubled intention to enjoy the psychic circus of Southern California before even going near an SRF center. Nevertheless, within a month after my arrival in California I was living right across the alley from the Hollywood SRF center and enthusiastically attending all lectures and activities. I never made it to even one spiritual funny-farm. Blessed deprivation!

Besides that one stupid—and fortunately unfulfilled—resolve, however, I had made another one that I believe was a major factor in my spiritual endeavors though I never realized its great importance at first. That was my decision to become a vegetarian.

Diet and consciousness are inseparable. Every object is composed of several layers of energies, each of which corresponds to the levels of the human being. That is, just as an item of food has a level of atomic matter which will be assimilated into the physical body of whoever eats it, it also has other subtler energies which will in turn be assimilated into the subtler levels of the eater. This is especially important in the matter of mental energies, for the mind is not the brain but a field of energy which pervades the entire body, manifesting throughout the body even though the brain is its main instrument.

In point of fact there is nothing in our makeup, physical or otherwise, which does not come directly from food. Our original bodies come from the food eaten by our

mothers, and all the subsequent matter of our bodies comes from the food we eat ourselves. For this reason one Upanishad says: “All is food.”

Although “we are what we eat” is easily said, the implications are colossal—and to a degree worrying—for that means that the quality of our food will determine the quality of everything about us. Our body, our neurological energies, our minds, our intellects, and our wills—the quality of each and every one of these will be the quality of the food we eat. We can realize from this that eating is perhaps one of the most significant acts in which we can engage, that eating is not a matter of satisfying hunger or greed, but is the very process of creation—the creation of our entire manifested being.

If we build a house with bricks we end up with a house of bricks. If we build with wood we end up with a wooden house. If the energies absorbed by our mind are light and malleable, capable of picking up and reflecting subtle impulses, this will result in our becoming intuitive and refined in intellect. The opposite will result, however, if the energies absorbed are heavy and coarse. Experiments have established that plants can read minds—that is, they are responsive to thought. Animals, in contrast, are not. If sensitive instruments are hooked up to a plant and to an animal and violent thoughts are projected at them, the plant will react with agitation, but the animal will not. Although the animal is obviously more evolved and aware on a physical, sensory level, yet for that very reason it is locked into the pattern of just being an animal, whereas the plant is more easily influenced by external forces, especially the force of intelligent thought. Thus, if we eat animal flesh our minds will absorb the conditioned energies of the animals’ minds and will tend to remain in that configuration. Our own consciousness will then become dull and heavy. On the other hand, if we eat grains, fruits, and vegetables, the diet originally mandated to the human being, we will find that our minds become more sensitive and efficient, capable of perceiving subtleties with both the senses and the intellect. In other words, we will become more alive—that is, aware. Even more important, we will be able to transmute those energies into increasingly refined levels.

This is why we read in Genesis: “And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat [*brosis*: food]” (Genesis 1:29). Deviation from this dietary regimen has produced grievous results for the human race both mentally and physically.

Jesus counseled a return to this diet in his public teaching. Although altered in the Greek text by those who had betrayed the original principles of Christianity, the oldest text of the Gospels, which is in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, gives us the following: “Now take care in your souls that you never make your hearts heavy by eating flesh and by drinking wine” (Luke 21:34). “Heart” in this context means the interior consciousness which is made heavy and dull through the eating of meat and the drinking of alcohol. Saint Paul uses much stronger terminology, saying: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy” (Corinthians 3:16-17). “God” in these statements means the divine law of evolution of which our bodies are the temple-instruments. Those who corrupt these

instruments, rendering them incapable of functioning in the process of evolution of consciousness will find themselves destroyed by that same law, propelled backwards into the darkness of lowered consciousness.

Also, since the body of an incarnate being is produced by its personal karmic force, those who eat the flesh of that being will also absorb its karma. This can even lead to rebirth as the type of animal that was commonly eaten by the human being. This is, of course, very rare, but the chance is not worth the taking. (Many people think that reincarnation means that we are reborn as animals or human beings at random, but this is not correct. Once we reach the human level all of our karmas are human karmas and therefore require a human body for their manifestation. If, however, we are so intensely involved with animals that we become mentally obsessed with them, or if we are cruel to animals and create much negative karma in relation to them, we may come back as an animal, but with fully human consciousness as to why we are in that exotic situation. Since eating murdered animals is certainly both abnormal and cruel, the resulting karma could in certain cases impel a person back into animal form.)

A year before this, I had read a book which explained how the meat produced by commercial methods was unfit for human consumption, being filled with dangerous chemicals. I could tell for myself that this was the case, especially in the case of chicken which often tasted more like spoiled fish than chicken. Later on this was brought home to me when I had the misfortune to work in the office of a meat packing plant and see for myself the state of the meat which was being provided to an unsuspecting public.

For reasons of good health I had begun eliminating meat from my diet, but now I cut it out altogether for much higher and more important reasons. Some of the beneficial results were immediately perceptible, while some took place over the next few years as my body gradually eliminated the filth I had been putting into it in the form of dead animal bodies.

The most dramatic effect of my vegetarian diet was the increased sensitivity and capacity of my mind and senses, and I came to believe firmly that realization of the full potential of the human being was rendered impossible through the eating of meat. (By "meat" I mean fish and eggs as well as other types of animal flesh.)

Since meditation is intended to bring within the reach of the questing mind the most subtle and profound states of consciousness (states obviously far beyond the capacity of the undeveloped mental energies of animals), if I had not right away adopted this first step to wisdom I might not have persevered in my practice because of being unable to perceive its effects—effects that would also have been rendered minimal by the eating of meat.

I have made such a long exposition of this because I have become increasingly convinced through these intervening years that purity of diet is the foundation of conscious spiritual pursuit. Of this I have no doubt whatsoever.

In the early part of the sixth century a young man named Dositheus went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In one of the churches there he saw a fresco of the judgment of the soul, and was very drawn to it. As he stood, studying it, a woman robed in purple (something prohibited to anyone but the Emperor or Empress) came up to him

and began to speak to him about spiritual life. In conclusion she told him that if he sought salvation he must never eat meat. She then vanished, and he realized that he had been speaking to the Virgin Mary! He followed Her advice and is remembered as a saint on the nineteenth day of February every year. So there is certainly no doubt as to the value of vegetarianism in his case!

# Chapter Eleven

## *Blessings and Mercy*

My approaching twenty-first birthday held the promise of my fulfilling the desire to transplant myself to a more spiritually fertile field, for then I would receive a small inheritance from my grandmother which would enable me to move to California. As a justification to my family I said I wanted to continue my university education in a better school. This was true, but of course was not my primary reason.

To scout out the land I attended the summer session of 1961 at UCLA. Not having lived in a big city, much less a megalopolis like Los Angeles, it did not occur to me to consider distances. So after I was settled in an apartment in Westwood near UCLA, it was quite a surprise to learn that the SRF Center in Hollywood was many miles away. Since I had no auto, it was more than an hour by bus. I remedied this by moving on the Fourth of July to an apartment adjacent to the SRF Center, for it was more important to live in a spiritual atmosphere and commute to school than the other way round. It was also a statement of priority—of what I wanted my life’s center of gravity to be.

Although I enjoyed my summer at UCLA, I decided to enroll in the fall at California State University in Alhambra. This was even further than UCLA and took three busses to reach.

I will not be giving you an account of my academic career—not out of modesty, but simply because I did not have one. My attendance at class was perfunctory to say the least, because I had found a far more important source of knowledge—a school of the spirit. From life to life we have to learn the basic lessons over and over—what a waste of precious time! But if we learn the Great Lesson there will be no more lives—a blessed economy indeed.

Living next door to the Hollywood Self-Realization Fellowship Church I had the opportunity for daily contact with direct disciples of Paramhansa Yogananda. Also I could attend three meditation sessions and two public lectures each week. The India Center restaurant established by Yoganandaji was also on the church property, and after a while I began to regularly do volunteer work in the kitchen. The blessing of working with such dedicated people as the SRF nuns and monks who staffed the church and restaurant was beyond price. They were living gospels, embodying the ideals of their beloved guru, and worthy of all praise.

My life was absolutely idyllic—there is no other word for it. Daily I lived, moved, and breathed in spiritual contact. Being a Saturday Ghost, I had never had more than two or three friends at a time. Now I had many—all fellow travelers on the “Highway to the Infinite.” Loving God first, we loved one another as His temples. Yogananda often ended his letters with the phrase “In divine friendship.” I now knew what divine friendship really was.

An altogether new dimension of life was opened to me. One remarkable symptom

was my beginning to be taught by my higher Self. This seemed in direct contradiction to my realization that I had no capacity to guide myself along the unknown and perilous path of spiritual unfoldment. Yet it is absolutely true that everything we need is within us. But we do not know how to reach that inner storehouse and unlock it. That is why we need a teacher to show us the way. The outer teacher puts us in contact with the inner teacher. Yet, we still need the outer teacher to monitor our progress. We especially need to check the teachings of the inner voice with that of the outer guide, for only when they are in harmony can we be assured that we are being taught by the divine principle in us rather than being led astray by our egos and fantasies.

Yet I could not deny the fact that whenever I needed to know something, I would simply set the question before my mind and the answer would come—usually in great detail. There was no voice or anything like that, nor was it at all like the modern process of “channeling” an external source. The knowledge simply arose from deep within where it had always been. Unlike my insight into reincarnation, it would not come in a moment like a lightning flash, but would effortlessly rise gradually upon the horizon of my consciousness, very much like my past life memories would emerge from within. I only accepted my perceptions provisionally, however, until I had a chance to check with the teachings of those whom I felt I could believe implicitly. And they were always in perfect accord.

Since the inner and outer are truly one, when a person finds a reliable outer guide the inner teacher also begins to function so that the progress of the disciple is harmonious. Through most of my life, however much I wanted everything to be spelled out for me, and just wanted to hear the word and obey, I was always forced to work it out for myself.

Slavish submission and inveterate independence are both destructive to spiritual progress. Only through the intelligent and willing following of an experienced guide can the inner light be revealed to the seeker. Indeed, most of today’s seekers are never finders simply because they have not been followers first. To put it colloquially, you cannot be a Chief unless you are first an Indian. No one has ever been a fit leader who has not first proven himself to be an excellent follower.

After years of deadness in ignorant religion I was so rapidly coming to life that every day was a resurrection for me—and I was ready for it! The awakening of psychic perceptions was dramatic. Born under the sign of Cancer, I had all my life perceived (though never understood) psychic energies through sensations in the stomach area—an experience I disliked very much. Right away this was shifted from such a low center to the third eye area at the point between my eyebrows. After a while I began using that new eye to see the inner realities of things. Concurrently I developed a strong sensitivity to the phases and movements of the moon, the ruling planet of my “sign.” I could almost always tell with accuracy the phase and location of the moon at that time. This in itself was no great thing, but it was symptomatic that at last things were happening—and I did not need to “take it on faith,” either.

So many wonderful things happened to me, it would take a separate book just to record them. Let it suffice to say that like Saint Paul I had “come unto mount Zion, and

unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels” (Hebrews 12:22).

# Chapter Twelve

## *God Becomes My Mother*

Yogananda usually referred to God as “Divine Mother.” In India the worship of God as Mother is the special genius of the Bengalis—those who live in the northeastern Indian state of Bengal. Although the Goddess Durga is revered by all Hindus, the Bengalis are Her supreme devotees. To be in Bengal during the entire month of October which is dedicated to the worship of God the Mother in Her various aspects is unforgettable. Nor is it coincidence that in Western Christianity the month of October is dedicated to the veneration of the Virgin Mary—as is the month of May, which in India is the second most important season for worship of the Goddess. This is a demonstration of the profound inner ties between Christianity and India. (See my book, *The Christ of India*.)

The Bengalis especially love the form of Durga known as Kali. Whereas Durga, holding weapons in Her ten hands and riding on a tiger, is intimidating enough to the uninitiated, Kali is much more so. Garlanded with severed heads and clothed in a skirt of severed arms, She presents the enigma of creation through Her four arms. With her left arms She carries a bloody sword and a bowl of wine (or sometimes blood) and with Her right arms She makes the two mudras—ceremonial gestures—signifying: “Fear not,” and “Draw near.” The message is that for the ignorant who tread the “lefthand path,” this world is a place of forgetfulness and death, but to the wise upon the “righthand path” it is the evolving Ark of God intended to carry us safely back home. Whatever a person may think of such startling symbolization, a little observance definitely reveals that human beings live in drastically differing worlds while walking the same planet. It is a matter of consciousness.

As a Protestant I had been especially prejudiced against the honor shown to the Virgin Mary by Catholics. Therefore I was ill prepared to comprehend Yogananda’s preoccupation with the concept of God as Mother. Even after reading his booklet *The Cosmic Mother*, on the Motherhood of God, I was unconvinced and uninterested. But if Prayer Changes Things like the motto says, then meditation recreates them.

Some changes are gradual, both perceptible and imperceptible, and some are instant. In this case I awoke one morning with full and enthusiastic comprehension of the Divine Motherhood. What produced this change I never knew, but the change was permanent. Uppermost in my mind as I got out of bed was the desire to obtain and wear an emblem of the Mother. Immediately the memory of what is known as the “Miraculous Medal,” on which the Virgin Mary is depicted, came to mind.

The Miraculous Medal has a supernatural history. In the last century the Virgin Mary appeared to Saint Catherine Laboure, a French nun, and showed her a special medal which she was to have made and distributed. Saint Catherine obeyed, and so many and so astounding were the miracles worked for those who wore it that the

medal came to be called “The Miraculous Medal.”

(When I was ten or eleven years old I saw a miracle worked by the Virgin Mary through the Miraculous Medal. In the summer I was taking swimming lessons at the local YMCA in a class of more than twenty boys my age, one of whom was a Roman Catholic who always wore a Miraculous Medal. One day, before any of us had yet learned to swim, he fell into the deep end of the pool. Instead of thrashing around, he grabbed on to the medal with both hands. As though lifted by a giant hand, he rose right up out of the water to just below his waist. Kicking his feet in a walking motion, he moved right through the water and over to the side where he was lifted out by the instructor.)

A mile or so west of where I lived I had noticed a Catholic religious supply store next to the Blessed Sacrament Church, so I took a bus down Sunset Boulevard right to its door. First I went into the church, visited the chapels, and sat for a while in meditation. Later in the shop I found exactly the type of medal I wanted in a Miraculous Medal. I bought it and began to “wear my Mother.”

“We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). So wrote Saint Paul and so testify those who have striven to truly love God. It has been my consistent experience that whenever something is needed, especially in the matter of spiritual “equipment,” it is provided at exactly the right time—often from many sources independent of one another. And so it was to be as I began to be drawn into the arms of the Great Mother.

From his autobiography and other writings I knew that Yogananda had meditated upon the Mother. Why should I not do the same? I left determined to do so, but how? The only thing that came to mind was the Rosary of the Virgin Mary. Perhaps I could use that in some way. So after a few days I again went to the store next to Blessed Sacrament after entering the church and praying to the Virgin that I would be able to learn how to meditate on God as Mother.

In the store I found a rosary to my liking as well as a book of instructions on how to pray with it. Returning to my apartment I set about memorizing the various prayers and directions. And thus began one of the most blessed phases of my interior life. For on the wings of the Rosary I was lifted up to contemplate the heavenly mystery of God With Us.

That God has walked the earth in human form is perhaps the single most important truth the questing soul can grasp. For after the mind is able to encompass such a wonder, nothing else remains too hard for it to accept. Abstract philosophical principles seem childish when viewed in the light of a love so great that it draws God down from heaven to draw His straying children back to their true home. Emily Dickinson wrote of Death coming to her since she was too busy to seek it out. In Christ the opposite took place: Life came into this world of birth and death, of time and space, to awaken, to resurrect us, and gather us back into the infinite Bosom of the Father from whence we came. This is the love for which the soul blindly searches from aeon to aeon until it discovers it in a face-to-face encounter with God Who has also been searching for that encounter all that time. It is indeed true that when God and the

soul meet at last it is in fulfillment of an ancient—yes, an eternal—love.

Through the Rosary the seed of meditation on the Mother began to grow and manifest in a way I could never have conceived, indeed in a way that it took me a goodly while to recognize.

After one Sunday morning service at the Hollywood Self-Realization Church, I noticed a group of people gathered by the steps to the parking lot looking at something held by a man in their midst. Going over, I saw that he was showing them many photographs of a woman, obviously in India. “What is this?” I whispered into the ear of a friend. The man, whose name was Elwood Decker, heard my query and answered: “These are photographs of Sri Anandamayi Ma, a great saint living in India.” (“Mata” means “mother” and “Ma” means “mama.” Devotees usually use “Ma” in reference to their own mother and other women they love or revere.) He then added: “She is the ‘Joy-Permeated Mother of Bengal’ Yogananda wrote about in *Autobiography of a Yogi*.”

Naturally this intrigued me, so I, too, looked at the photos as they were passed around. They were certainly striking, and yet I felt no particular interest. A few people bought some of the photographs and after a while most of us went into the SRF Cafe to eat lunch. The conversation at our joined tables was mostly about the woman saint. Nothing that was said made any impression on me, but it was good to know that not everyone Yogananda had written about had been swept away by the inevitable waves of death.

Every Sunday I would idly join the little troop around Elwood, and eventually made the acquaintance of another SRF member, Charles Carter, who had become very much interested in Anandamayi Ma. We spent a lot of time together conversing on various spiritual topics, and on occasion we meditated together. When we would meditate in my apartment, he would bring a photograph of Anandamayi Ma.

I had a rather elaborate meditation altar with photographs of the SRF Masters and other religious images, but there was no room for Ma’s photo on my altar! Incredible as it is to remember now, Charlie would have to place her photograph on a kitchen chair that could be seen from where we meditated in my living room. Whenever we would meditate together, upon opening my eyes I would look at the photograph of Anandamayi Ma in its kitchen exile. The photo showed Ma looking down, with eyes almost closed. Yet, when I would look at the photo after meditating, the eyes would open fully and look directly at me as the mouth shaped itself into a loving smile. “Why are you looking at me?” I would protest inwardly, “Charlie is your devotee, not me.”

Things continued on in this way for really quite a long while, until one evening when I was sitting in a small vegetarian restaurant a couple of blocks from SRF. I was talking with a medical doctor from India who had met many saints there and was himself the disciple of a great Master of Western India. He was telling me about the various holy men and women he had met, and I was enjoying it immensely. He told me about his meeting with Anandamayi Ma, and in conclusion he said: “You know, they say that if anyone thinks of her, speaks of her, or hears her being spoken about, she instantly sees them.” To my astonishment, at his simple words the restaurant was suddenly flooded with a Presence that was emanating from a point just a few feet away

from us. So strong was the holy atmosphere, we were both stunned into a long silence. As the sacred vibrations continued to flow around us, I asked myself wonderingly: “Has Anandamayi Ma really come here, since we are thinking of Her?” (Later I learned that Ma had said, “Often from the other side of the world I hear the cry, ‘Ma!’”)

All desire for conversation was ended, and with the minimum of words we both left for our respective homes. Although the Presence did not accompany me, I continued to vibrate with its echo.

At some hour in the deep of night I found myself no longer in Los Angeles, but on the other side of the world in a place unknown to me. I was entering a room, and in that room I saw the living form of Ma Anandamayi. I bowed down at her feet in the Hindu manner of saluting holy people, but she backed away so I could not touch them. (I did not know it then, but this was her custom. Rarely was anyone allowed to touch her.)

So moved was I by seeing her that I was not offended. I simply got up and, placing my hands together in salutation, exclaimed: “Oh, my Mother!” In the silence of eternal moments I looked into her eyes as her form was engraved indelibly within my heart. Then She smiled and made some gesture of dismissal, and I was back in the Edgemont Apartments once more. But not all of me. Something vital remained in her keeping; and still remains even as I write this.

There was no need for reasoning or working it out—from that moment I knew two things: Anandamayi Ma was incarnate God; and I must go to her. Every day, if not every moment, this awareness increased in me. Occasionally Ma would give me her darshan (the Sanskrit word for “sight”) and this would spur me on in my determination to travel to India and meet her. God was walking the earth, and one day I must witness that for myself by being there. After a while this was not a simple desire but a conviction that personal contact with her was essential to my spiritual existence. In time this became a desperate yearning whose intensity eclipsed all other factors in my life.

The factor that pushed me into action was the growing conviction that either Swami Sivananda, founder of the mammoth Sivananda Ashram in the Himalayas and head of the worldwide Divine Life Society, or Anandamayi Ma would not be remaining much longer on the earth. If I did not hurry I would miss one or both of them. And the very idea was unendurable. (My intuition was correct. Sivananda left his body a few months after our first meeting.)

One beautiful Southern California day found me walking down Santa Monica Boulevard. My destination was the dentist, but a far more pressing matter was on my mind: should I go to India or not? That I wanted to do so wholeheartedly was beyond a doubt, but was it the right thing to do? Since the rest of the world was in pursuit of whimsical goals, how could I consider myself an exception? I took seriously the sage counsel: “Do what you will, not what you merely want.”

As I walked along I was reading a small book of excerpts from letters of Anandamayi Ma. Stopping dead still, uncaring as to what the passers-by might think was going on with me, I held the tiny book upright between the palms of my hands,

closed my eyes, and prayed: “Ma, I have to know what is the right thing to do. I am going to open this book, and I beg You to make me find definite words as to what I ought to do about coming to India to meet You. I will not be satisfied with some vague stuff that I can interpret as to its meaning. Please make it specific!” Good sense should have told me that it was preposterous to expect that the little book would yield a direct statement that Roger Burke should or should not buy a plane ticket to India, but I was beyond the point of good sense. I was desperate.

With fervent hope I opened the book. Then I opened my eyes. And I read: “Why does he think that what he desires cannot be accomplished?” At that time there were intense border problems between India and China, and it was not unlikely that any day the Indian government would stop allowing tourists into India. So these words might mean that it was foolish for me to think I could not manage to get to Ma. But it was not satisfactory.

Again I closed my eyes. “Ma, I am only going to do this one more time. Those words are not definite enough. So I am going to open the book again. I am begging you: give me a positive answer!” I repeated the process and the book opened to these words: “They imagine This Body [Anandamayi Ma almost always referred to her physical presence as “This Body.” Rarely did She use the term “I” since the conditioned ego did not exist for her] to be far away, but actually it is always very, very near. How could it possibly leave anyone? The question of distance arises solely from their point of view. Whenever they can get a holiday let them come and meet This Body.”

It was settled. Ever after I have marveled at both my absurdity in demanding such a specific fiat to my desire and at the divine grace in granting it. Not that anything is beyond possibility in the realm of our search for God. When Jesus said: “Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7), he meant it! No one seeks or calls in vain. But it is God Who knows whether the seeking or the calling is genuine or only apparent. None need fear any refusal to respond on God’s part. God is like an expert safecracker. The entire attention of the safecracker is engaged in listening for the sound of the tumblers falling into place. He immediately reacts to the slightest sound. In the same way God is listening with His whole being for even the tiniest response from mankind. And He comes running at the slightest call of our heart.

It is an esoteric law that the subconscious mind cannot store and reproduce in dream the form of a deity or a master. Therefore if we dream of a divine form, or of a saint or Master, and they look exactly as they really do or did, then that is not a dream but a superconscious vision granted to us in the undistracted hours of sleep. If, on the other hand, upon awakening we realize that the form we saw was not really accurate, then it was only a subconscious meandering of the mind.

That night, no doubt as part of her response to my earlier demands, I saw Ma Anandamayi in a dream-vision. I found myself coming up some steps that led into a small white structure. Entering, I found Ma standing just inside in the middle of a room. After bowing down at her feet, I rose up and while still kneeling begged: “Ma, please don’t ever let me forget you.” In reply she smiled and said in English: “Don’t worry! I have lit the flame, and I will keep it burning.”

From that moment on, every step I took was a step to Ma.

# Chapter Thirteen

## *Holy Company*

In India it is considered that for spiritual life to be fruitful it must include satsanga—company with truth: association with those who also seek the True. In California I had satsanga in abundance, but two persons particularly stand out in my recollections of this time.

It was with great anticipation of a new experience that one morning I found myself in the car of an acquaintance on the way to Ananda Ashrama to meet with Brother Philip (Brahmachari Paramachaitanya), a monk whose reputation for divine wisdom was well established among the knowlegous yogis of Southern California. I knew nothing of him myself, but the driver of the car claimed to have seen Brother Philip in some kind of visionary experience, which was resulting in our pilgrimage.

Finding the ashram was easier than finding its inhabitants. As is common in most monastic establishments, everyone was scattered hither and yon in their daily work with no one to spare for the job of sitting around waiting for guests that may or may not appear. As we wandered in search of someone to make contact with, I felt deeply moved at all I saw.

It took a while, but we did find someone—who had no idea where Brother Philip might be. (This is also usual in monasteries and convents!) We were told to stand in one spot and wait for whoever might be able to direct us to him. Waiting was no chore, for the surroundings vibrated with the sacred consciousness that had accumulated from the spiritual disciplines of so many people there throughout the years.

As we stood savoring the invisible blessings radiating from all around us, a little figure in white came out of a distant door and headed straight for us. This was Sister Vimala. her external was undeniably comic. She looked like one of the Seven Dwarfs—or a sister of one—dressed up like a World War I nurse. When she was right in front of us I could see all the holes she had made in her wrinkled headdress by not putting the gigantic safety pin through the same place whenever she fastened it on. Yes, her appearance was comic, but I did not laugh, for something within me was convinced that this was a Someone worthy of respect.

After introducing herself, she went flying off to find Brother Philip, admonishing us to go back to the parking lot where she would send him to meet us.

While we were approaching the parking lot Sister Vimala came skimming up over a small rise and over to us, calling out that Brother Philip would be with us soon.

The residents of Ananda Ashrama were all devotees of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, the divine incarnation who manifested in India in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Brother Philip had gone to India as a very young man and become the disciple of Swami Akhandananda, the last living direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Nearly all of the eleventh chapter of *The Call of the Spirit*, a record of conversations with

Swami Akhandananda, is devoted to Brother Philip (there called “Philips”).

Time ceased as the three of us beheld the radiant form of Brother Philip coming toward us. He seemed to shine with an ineffable light as his face beamed with the same bliss that is seen on the countenance of Sri Ramakrishna in his photograph. Hardly daring to breathe, I inwardly asked myself: “Is this really Brother Philip, or has Sri Ramakrishna come to us temporarily in Brother Philip’s form?” What my two companions were experiencing I cannot say, but for me it was a momentary entry into eternity.

Reluctantly Sister Vimala left us, asking that we not leave before finding her to say farewell. Then Brother Philip directed us to a nearby bench and the two of us sat down with him between us.

First my fellow pilgrim told Brother Philip of the visionary experience in which he had seen him. There was silence. Then Brother Philip spoke: “A lot of things like that happen,” he commented simply, then turned his radiant face toward me and continued, “but who knows whether they are real or not?” I had a pretty good idea that Brother Philip knew, and that the just-recounted experience was not real or true in his estimation.

The ensuing colloquy definitely took place on differing levels. Mostly I was just being a happy sponge, soaking up the wonder of Brother Philip’s presence. My counterpart made a few attempts to impress Brother Philip, all of which failed, as anyone who knew Brother Philip could have predicted. Then Brother Philip began to speak quietly of the souls within the universe and their return to God. His voice changing subtly, he stated with a marked firmness: “God meditates on them and they change. They have to!” Turning to me he added, as his eyes brimmed with supernal joy: “They don’t have a choice!” The very idea he expressed was thrilling, but what he communicated to me in his glance was immeasurably more so.

At one point in the conversation to which I was a silent but contented witness, Brother Philip turned again to me and asked: “Why carry around a lot of empty space?” Now the man on the other side of Brother Philip took the inquiry as referring to his station wagon that seemed roomier than necessary for economy in gas expenditure. To me it meant just what it was: a challenge as to why I was carrying around things in my life, both internal and external, that in the context of eternal verities were nothing more than empty space, useless and to my ultimate detriment. And being Irish, my inborn misanthropy and satirical cast of mind suggested to me that he might also be indicating that my companion was a lot of empty space, too. Of course I pushed that naughty interpretation out of my thoughts, but as he was bidding us farewell, Brother Philip looked up at me and, inclining his head significantly toward my associate, repeated: “Why carry around a lot of empty space?” Indeed!

Keeping our promise to Sister Vimala we went in search of her, only to find her coming in quest of us.

“Let’s go in the library where nobody will bother us,” she said, so we proceeded to do just that. As we settled ourselves in massive chairs around a table, she remarked: “I spent many hours in here with Swami Paramananda as he was writing his books. He

would write and I would weave on a loom. He called it ‘painting in wool,’ and liked to watch the patterns take shape.”

“I don’t feel like we are strangers at all,” she continued, “and though it seems odd to me, I would like to tell you about my spiritual life—if you don’t mind.” I definitely did not mind, so she began the narrative of her own search for the divine.

Sister Vimala was born in a very wealthy and aristocratic family in the Boston area. From childhood she was deeply responsive to music and by her teens had conceived the wish to study classical organ in Paris. Since she evidenced a true genius for music, her father agreed that she and her mother should go to Paris and live there for three years while she studied the organ under a master teacher.

Almost on the eve of her departure for Europe, Sister Vimala and her mother went to a lecture by Swami Paramananda, about whom they knew nothing except that he was a Hindu monk from India. Their motivation was simple curiosity. Hardly were they seated toward the back of the hall than a young man came bustling up to them. “The Swami asks that you please remain after the lecture and come ‘backstage’ to speak with him.” This invitation went contrary to the Victorian grain of Sister Vimala’s mother, who was already apprehensive about listening to “a heathen” preach his pagan doctrines. She emphatically refused the invitation, sealing her refusal with the declaration that since they did not “know” the Swami, he could not possibly be asking them to meet him afterwards. “Yes,” insisted the messenger, “the Swami pointed you out to me the moment you entered.” Then, seeing that this only unsettled the poor woman all the more, he pressed on: “Please comply with the Swami’s request. It must be very important, for I have never before known him to ask to speak with anyone.” This elicited a reluctant promise to meet with the Swami afterward.

After the lecture—which to Sister Vimala opened a world she had not known existed, but which she recognized as her native home—she and her mother made their way to back of the stage from whence they were conducted to a tiny room where the Swami was waiting. A conversation of sorts ensued, but Sister Vimala never afterward was able to remember anything about it except that she was literally stricken mute and her mother had to answer the Swami’s questions about her daughter. Seeing that nothing could be gotten out of Sister Vimala at that time, the Swami asked her: “Will you come and see me tomorrow? Bring your mother, of course.” Sister Vimala nodded, and it was settled.

The next day the pair found their way to Swami Paramananda’s residence. Again Sister Vimala was incapable of speech, so the Swami and her mother maintained the conversation while the young girl stared with adoration and wonder at the Swami. After some time her mother fell silent, looked intently at her daughter, then at the Swami, then at her daughter, then at the Swami. After a truly “pregnant” silence, she simply gestured toward her daughter and said to the Swami: “Obviously she belongs to you—take her!” The Swami turned to Sister Vimala. “I am beginning an ashram in California. Would you like to come and live there?” Sister Vimala still could not speak, but answered with her eyes.

So her mother took her home, told her father that their daughter would not be a

concert organist, but would be a nun in a Hindu ashram, and sent her by train to Los Angeles! And here she was.

“Do you ever miss your music?” I inquired.

“Why, I have it!” she rejoined. “Someone donated us an organ, and I play it every Sunday before and after our service, and sometimes during the week for an hour or so. As you know, it takes hours of practice each day to be able to play classical organ, especially Bach, whom I adore and whose music I mostly play. Yet I never practice. I do not have to. When I sit down, I just play and it comes out perfect, without a single mistake. Maybe I work with a new piece for about twenty or thirty minutes, and then I’ve ‘got’ it. Many professional musicians have come here to hear me play and none of them can believe it. But it’s so.”

I believed it. “‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you’” (Matthew 6:33), I quoted.

“Exactly,” she agreed. “Do you want to hear me play?”

“Indeed I do!”

The organ in the temple was an old Wurlitzer electrified reed organ exactly like the one I had learned to play in the Bloomington, Illinois, Church of God. But never had that one emitted such music as Sister Vimala produced for us. Standing there surrounded by a torrent of beautiful sound that was indeed the mighty breath of the Spirit of God, I was reminded of an incident in the life of the great master of Indian music, Tan Sen.

As the court musician for the Emperor Akbar, Tan Sen was universally revered. One day after a particularly spectacular performance, Akbar told him: “You are the greatest musician in the world!” “No, your majesty,” protested Tan Sen, “my guru is a far greater musician than I.” “Impossible!” objected the Emperor. Tan Sen insisted that his guru was indeed greater than he, and as a result the Emperor demanded to meet Tan Sen’s guru and hear his playing. “My guru is a monk, a hermit living in isolation far from here. Even if we go there, he will not agree to play ‘on demand,’ and he certainly will not receive you as Emperor. You will have to dress like a common person if we go to him. And you must not ask him to play for us!”

So great was Akbar’s love of music—and his curiosity—that he agreed to the conditions laid down by Tan Sen. Together they went on foot to the mountain cave in which the guru dwelt. To their relief the master received them very kindly and spoke with them at length on matters of the spirit. Then, unbidden, he brought forth an instrument and began to play for them. Akbar was transfixed. Never had he heard such music. In comparison, Tan Sen’s genius was infantile. When the master ceased playing, Tan Sen and Akbar bowed before him in silent homage and left. After hours of walking in silence, Akbar turned to Tan Sen and demanded: “How is it that you cannot make such music as that?” “It is simple, your majesty,” replied Tan Sen, “I only play for a mere Emperor, but my master plays for the Lord of the Universe.”

Through “giving up” all to follow her master, Sister Vimala had gained a musical ability that could only be dreamed of by those who instead “gave themselves to their art.” And she had gained so much more, besides. In our conversation she had also

revealed to me in confidence some of her spiritual experiences—experiences that only come to those whose citizenship has already been transferred from earth to the heavens.

Why Sister Vimala and I felt so close to one another—so close that we revealed to each other profound aspects of our hearts that are usually kept secret and revealed to no one—I cannot say. Perhaps our paths had crossed in my previous life, since music had been a passion for both of us until our call to a far greater and truer love.

It has been over half a century since that day, yet Brother Philip and Sister Vimala are as fresh and green in my heart as ever. They can never die, for in them “Death is swallowed up in victory” (I Corinthians 15:54).

In the early fall of 1962, Sri A. B. Purani, administrative head of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, India, came to give a series of lectures at the East-West Cultural Center. I attended most of the lectures, which were priceless in content. This made me all the more determined to go to India and find out for myself the straight facts on yoga and Hindu philosophy, for Purani’s marvelous lectures revealed what I had suspected for some time—that we Americans were receiving only an “export brand” of Indian philosophy and yoga, rather than the complete authentic thing. Having no desire for American disciples (translate that “American money”) or notoriety, Sri Purani “told it like it was,” and I soaked it up and called for more.

# Chapter Fourteen

## *Home!*

I had my passport. I had taken my immunization shots. My airline ticket to Calcutta was ready to be picked up. All my “stuff” had been stored with various friends. And with the characteristic contradictory craziness of my life and mind—I did not want to go. That is, I wanted to meet Mother, but I did not want to go to India. I simply had no interest whatever in India as a place—my indifference was as intense as my involvement in India’s philosophy.

I had never felt any affinity for India, ever. Furthermore, all I had heard about the physical conditions there was far from enticing. Indian friends had told me: “No matter how bad you might think it is—it is much worse.” They did not realize what a vivid imagination I have! So my expectations were thoroughly gruesome. I fully expected to dislike India as much as I would like being with Anandamayi Ma. Nevertheless, a day or so after Thanksgiving of 1962, I flew from Los Angeles to Calcutta. This was quite daring, for in 1962 almost no one went to India from the West except diplomats, missionaries, and retired schoolteachers on around-the-world tours.

Mahendra Nath Gupta, a disciple of the avatar Sri Ramakrishna and himself an enlightened Master, once said in conversation: “Undoubtedly there are good people in all the countries of the world, but they all have their faces turned toward India.” At first encounter that may sound a bit chauvinistic, but reflection upon the fact that archeology and history seem to point more and more to India as the source of all human civilization, it only follows that the collective unconscious of humanity is rooted in—and therefore oriented toward—the very soil of India.

According to the scriptures of Sanatana Dharma (The Eternal Religion—Hinduism) the first human beings were Manu and Satarupa who lived in the sacred forest of Naimisharanya in what is now north central India. Therefore India is the primeval home of the human race. It is a spiritual point of entry as well as departure. The mystery of India is the mystery of the evolving soul.

My response to India was all the more dramatic because of the fact that in this present incarnation I had never felt at home anywhere, nor had I ever felt a real kinship with those around me. I loved my family and appreciated their goodness to me, yet I clearly remember sitting on my mother’s lap, looking at the assembled relatives, and asking myself: “Who are these people? They are not mine. And I don’t belong in this place at all. As soon as I can I am going to find the place where I belong and my people.” When at the age of nine I read in *The Man Without a Country* the words of Sir Walter Scott: “Breathes there a man with soul so dead that never to himself has said, ‘This is my own, my native land’?” I looked up from the page and inwardly answered: “Yes. I am such a ‘man.’ I have no country that is mine, no people that are mine.” Yet, in nightly dreams I wandered in a land far different from what I knew, and I wandered

through buildings of an architecture strange to me. And I attributed it all to the vagaries of my subconscious.

I was convinced that I had no home on earth nor any people that belonged to me and to whom I belonged. I held that conviction through the years, and even as my plane landed in the predawn darkness of Calcutta. I held it as I went through the tedium of customs and immigration. However, as I stood in the customs shed and watched the three officials there, I thought, "I have never seen anyone like these men. Their minds are *right*." I held it as I waited for daylight before calling an SRF-YSS member in Calcutta as to my further procedure, and then called for a taxi. I held it as I stepped through the doorway of Dumdum Airport, which then was literally not one percent of the size of the present great international terminal. But I held it no longer once both feet were through the door and I was seeing my India for the first time in this life, illumined by the rays of a sun that had shone down upon me in countless previous lives as I walked on its blessed soil.

I had come home.

As the taxi pulled out through the circular drive, I looked over the fields and wept unashamedly. "Oh, God," I called out within my heart, "I thank Thee that this place really exists. I always thought it was only a dream!"

(I was to find that many places in India were familiar to me from my dreams. I knew my way around Benares to a goodly extent, having walked those sacred streets in countless dreams throughout my present life. The next well-known place was Prayagraj, where the sacred Yamuna, Saraswati, and Ganges rivers converge, making it the most auspicious place for pilgrimage next to Benares itself.)

In after times I heard quite a few of my Indian friends complain that the road from Dumdum into Calcutta went through the worst of the Calcutta slums and therefore gave a bad impression to foreign visitors. I always smiled and inwardly laughed in joy. Not to me! I am writing this account over sixty years after that homecoming, and I can still see in my mind's eye the sights of that ride. It was paradise regained. Everything looked normal to me—not odd or exotic. I was used to it. I had chafed for years against the "advantages" of the West, and now I was seeing real life! Nothing surprised me except my lack of surprise.

Relief: my soul was immersed in soothing relief. The Indian people were my very own. Each face I saw was that of a beloved brother or sister. There is a terrible expression in Judaism: "lost to his people." I had been living, lost to my people, for over twenty-two years in this life and for a lifetime before that. But now I was lost no longer.

A saint, Raihana Tyabji (an associate of Gandhi and a great devotee of Krishna), startled me at our second meeting by saying emphatically: "You know, you are a fraud!" As I sat, speechless, she continued: "Here you are sitting in front of me claiming to be an American when in reality you are an old sadhu [Hindu monk] who has wandered through India in many lives!" I was both relieved and pleased.

Glorious as are my spiritual memories of India, a supremely treasured moment of my heart is the time when, a few weeks after my arrival in India, I was sitting in the

dining hall of the Yogoda Ashram in Lakshmanpur, a village in the plains of Bengal.

About a dozen of us were sitting there waiting to be served lunch. An elderly man had asked me a few questions about my life in America. Then with loving emphasis the headmaster of the local school said to him: "He belongs to *us*, now."

Many words of kindness have been spoken to me since then, and many words and deeds of respect have been offered me. Yet none, none have ever equaled those wonderful words.

I had been accepted by my own.

# Chapter Fifteen

## *At Home*

Two or three days after landing in Calcutta I took a train to Ranchi where the headquarters of Yogoda Satsanga, the Indian branch of Self-Realization Fellowship, was located. In the sleeper compartment I had one fellow-traveler, an elderly man. Naturally he was curious about me and so we talked about East-West matters and ways. He had a noble and religious character that was very evident. When I lay down to sleep he sat and meditated for some time. I fell asleep until morning. In a short time we reached the Ranchi train station. My fellow-traveler was ready to disembark, but first he came took my face in his hands and said with great force: "I love you, boy!" And went out. Even now as I write this I can hear his voice. With heartfelt gratitude I realized that I have not just come to another country, I had come to another world. And it was a great relief. I had never felt I belonged anywhere, but now I was where I certainly belonged.

The Yogoda Ashram was visible at a distance from the train station so I walked there and in a short time was in a room in the ashram guest house. When I went to the office, the two resident monks, one American and the other German, told me I was free to wander where I would. So I wandered through the building and into the kitchen. There I met Shibu the teenage ashram cook. We were instant friends. So I sat and we talked for quite a long time as he did the cooking. Everything was so right in every way. I felt totally at home and more alive than ever before. Shibu did not consider me a foreigner, but called me Raju Bhai—Brother Roger.

We talked for a long time about his home village and his spiritual ideals. Then he told me that he had a great deal of things to do because the next day was a minor holiday, and he asked if I would go to the bazaar and buy the needed food since he was so busy there in the kitchen. Me? Seeing my hesitation he said that he would send one of the school students to go with me. So Angad Chandra Mahato found himself recruited to accompany a completely ignorant newcomer who had never seen a bazaar or bargained—to do the shopping for the ashram.

Angad and I walked to the gate of the ashram. A rickshaw was passing and Angad hailed it. As we got in, the rickshaw man said something to Angad, who relayed it to me. Even though I was dressed like "Joe college" and obviously not an Indian, the man had told Angad, "I will not charge you much money because he is a sannyasi."

To my amazement I found that I was a bargaineer also. At the bazaar, through Angad I haggled over everything and got half of the original price each time. I had read that Yogananda loved bargaining so much that he would go across the border to Mexico and shop in the bazaars there so he could bargain and match wits with the vendors and get everything at a lower price. Now I understood why he did that. It was fun and intellectually challenging! I returned to the ashram in triumph.

That evening I had a most intriguing experience. There were quite a few hired

workers that lived in the ashram, and Shibu took me in the evening to where some of the workers were sitting together and talking. I did not understand the language but I was at home. (Later in my pilgrimage a saint told someone about me, “He does not know our language, but he understands everything.”) After some time one of the foreign monks came out of the main building and came over. Until then we had all been sitting comfortably, at ease and enjoying each others’ company, but suddenly that evaporated and everyone stood up with blank, closed faces in silence. The monk gave some instructions for the next day’s work and then left. When he was out of sight everyone sat down, relaxed and resumed talking and being a family. They acted like I was one of them, but at the advent of the European they had closed down completely, hiding inside themselves. My family was very close and very loving and I loved them deeply, but I had never felt as close to them as I did with these people whom I had met just an hour ago, because our souls were one. I was with my own kind after twenty-two years. I could say with Paramhansa Yogananda in his poem “My India”:

Better than Heaven or Arcadia  
I love Thee, O my India!...

Hail, mother of religions, lotus, scenic beauty,  
And sages!  
Thy wide doors are open,  
Welcoming God’s true sons through all ages.  
Where Ganges, woods, Himalayan caves, and men dream God –  
I am hallowed; my body touched that sod.

Yogananda, a true son of India, often said, “I am not going to die in bed. I am going to die with my boots on, speaking of God and India.” In 1952, he gave a public talk in which he quoted the last two lines of “My India,” turned slightly to the right, looked up, smiled and left his body by his illumined and omnipotent will.

I knew just how he felt, because I felt the same.

# Chapter Sixteen

## *I Meet God In Stone*

I had always been an “idolator.” I expect I caught it in this life from my Aunt Faye who loved religious imagery of all kinds and—as already related—had encouraged me as an infant to embrace and kiss the statues in the chapel at Saint Joseph’s Hospital. In every room of her house, including the storage room, there was a picture of Jesus. When I gave her a three-dimensional photograph of a very beautiful statue of the Virgin Mary, she put it opposite the front door of the house and told me, “Now every one who comes through that door will see her.”

To the ignorant, name and form veil the Sole Reality, but to the wise, name and form reveal that Reality—are recognized as manifestations of that Reality. I well remember being taken on a walk by Manmatha, the priest of the Anandamayi Ashram Kali temple in Ranchi, India. As we went down the street at the side of the ashram, he pointed to a yellow-painted wall on our right and asked me: “Do you believe that God is inside that wall?” “No,” I told him, “I believe that God has *become* that wall!” “Thank you! Thank you!” he replied with intense satisfaction, and proceeded to teach me how to say “Everything is God,” in Bengali.

Spiritual imagery can be one of the most potent tools in awakening and transforming our inmost consciousness. It should be understood that all Hindus understand that there is but one Supreme Consciousness, Parambrahman. But this one Consciousness has manifested in many forms, including devatas, or gods. Therefore, although it is usual to speak of “gods” and “goddesses,” it is done so for ease of expression, but always with the understanding that in reality all gods and goddesses are but the multiform “faces” of the Formless Absolute.

It is also realized that an image of clay, stone, or metal is just that—an image. But the image can be used as a point of concentration on higher spiritual realities which are conveyed by the symbolism of the image. Since the One Consciousness is all-pervading and within everything, it only follows that It is within the image as well, and by concentrated attention through ritualistic worship, the image can be made into a point of communication with That. For the Hindu, the image is a means of reaching beyond the world of name and form into the real world of the Absolute. At no time is there a question of idolatry, though I have used the term jokingly in the opening sentence of this chapter. (For a marvelous explanation/exposition of this, see the tenth chapter of *Hinduism The Universal Religion*, entitled “The Pitha—The Mystic Circle (Chakra).”

A few days after my arrival in Ranchi some of my new friends suggested that I attend the arati at the Anandamayi Ashram. So one heavenly beautiful evening, such as I have experienced only in India, I walked with them down the road toward the main street of Ranchi on which the Anandamayi Ashram was located. By this time I was wearing Indian clothing, and some well-meaning washerman had put starch in my

dhoti—a kind of wraparound “skirt” worn by Indian men. This had the undesirable effect of the slick thing falling off me every few yards, much to the amusement of my companions, none of whom could read minds and perceive my extremely profane inner tirade at the boob who had done this to my dhoti. I was furious, and their eventual suggestion to give it up and try going on another evening only compounded my volcanic state.

Somehow we got to the ashram, and were even ahead of time—a marvel never repeated in that or any subsequent trips to India, where it is well known that “Indian Standard Time” is at least thirty minutes behind the clock time. (The Vietnamese have a more graphic expression: “Rubber Band Time.”) Introductions to the head of the ashram, Sri Kalachandji (called “Kalachand-da” by everyone, the suffix “da” meaning “elder brother”), and Swami Jnanananda Giri, who was supervising the extensive construction going on at the time, helped to put me back in balance. Kalachand-da excused himself and said that because of a very important meeting regarding ashram business he would not be able to attend the arati that evening, but that we should go on into the temple.

The temple, which was less than half completed at the time, was a huge hall. The walls were cement-covered brick, unpainted. My guides positioned me facing large wooden doors fronted by heavy locked grillwork. With gratings and grindings the ponderous doors were eventually opened from within by the priest, who then unlocked the grillwork and pushed it back against the doorway on both sides.

Within the shrine room beyond the threshold I saw a remarkable image of the goddess Kali which, as I later learned, had been made according to a detailed description given by Anandamayi Ma of a vision She once had of the goddess. Unlike most images of Kali, this one was a dark royal blue, rather than the usual black (“Kali” means “the black one”). Her black hair streamed down behind her as She raised one left hand on high holding a bloody sword while with the other She held a severed head. Her upper right hand was raised, palm outward, in the ritual gesture (mudra) of blessing known as abhaya, “fear not.” Her lower right hand was extended, also palm outward, in a mudra which meant “draw near.” In this way the dual aspect of the Divine Power the Hindus call Maha Shakti—The Great Power—was revealed through symbols which I have earlier explained.

To the Bengalis an image of Kali is far more revealing than any ink blots from the Rorschach test could ever be. Those who are “left-handers” shudder and shrink back in fear upon seeing Her, while those who are “right-handers” respond instinctively with admiration and trust, drawing near just as She wants, however strange She may appear to them. The Divine Power is the enemy of ignorance and the loving Mother of truth and knowledge. Those who dwell in “the shadow of death” of the ego, see Her as the bearer of their death, not realizing that it is the ego She will slay, and not them. Those who yearn for the light see Her as their merciful Liberator from the bondage of the lying ego, and hasten to place their necks beneath Her sword to be set free.

So when someone presents himself in Bengal with the claim to be seeking higher consciousness, the Bengalis just trundle him off to the nearest Kali temple and watch

his reaction. If he fears or dislikes the goddess, then he is lying to himself and them. If he is attracted to or feels comfortable at the sight of Her, then he means what he says—and chances are, will succeed in his search. If he is physically left-handed, all the better, for that means he has a natural aptitude for the worship of God as Mother. (Fortunately, I am left-handed.) I did not realize it as I gazed upon Her image that evening, but my new friends had brought me to undergo the Kali Test.

The priest had moved away from us after opening the doors, and was evidently doing some last moment preparation and blessing of the intended offerings. Then he picked up the lights and the bell.

Immediately, upon the first note that rang out from the bell, the image of Kali turned several shades darker. Even more dramatic, Her eyes began to shine with a dazzling whiteness that sparked—not just sparkled. Suddenly She was immense, far larger than the material image, and She was coming towards me with an inexorable and inescapable motion. I knew her purpose: it was nothing less than the death of Roger Burke, son of an earthly mother, in order for him to be reborn as a son of the Heavenly Mother. And I wanted it—O, how I wanted it! I opened my entire being to Her—at least as much as was in my province. Terrible as it was, I offered myself to Her sacrificial sword. This, I knew, was the only path to life. I cannot describe or explain any more than this.

At the end of the arati and the sounding of the bell, Kali Devi was once again “just” an image that had instantly resumed the color painted by human hands, Her eyes the simple white of earthly pigments. The offered light was passed around and each one of us warmed our hands in the flames and touched our eyes as a petition for divine enlightenment.

When we all sat down I entered into a profound interior state which heightened my external awareness at the same time. My consciousness descended into what the yogis call “the cave of the heart.” Other things occurred that are inexpressible. I started to fall over to one side, but someone caught me and held me upright. A hurried colloquy ensued as to what was happening. “Be quiet! This happens to yogis sometimes!” I heard a man tell the others. Ordinarily I would have been mortified at being “a spectacle,” but at this time I did not care: Kali Ma alone was real, not my little drama.

Several songs were sung, led by a junior monk with an exquisite voice. Then I felt a gentle pressure of some object against my legs. Not opening my eyes I reached out and discovered that a harmonium had been placed before me. “Brother,” spoke a voice softly, “please sing.” So I began to sing a song by Yogananda—a version of an ancient Bengali hymn to Kali, with the refrain: “What lightning flash glimmers in Thy face, Mother! Seeing Thee I am thrilled through and through!” A couple of nights before I had been awakened by a drunk man staggering past the Yogoda Ashram, loudly singing: “Jai, Shiva-Kali!” (Shiva is the Lord, the perfect Consciousness behind all phenomena, and Kali is the Lady, the universal energy that manifests as that phenomena.) Now I was both drunk and crazy, and my singing showed it.

I did not know it until others told me later, but as I was singing Kalachand-da came into the temple in an ecstatic state, his arms held out before him and his eyes turned

upward so that only the whites were visible as he looked out through the inner single eye of spirit. As the people made way, he came to stand before me, immobile, wrapt in interior contemplation of the Mother I was calling by my song.

The intensity of my condition eventually rendered me incapable of singing, though I needed no support to remain upright.

Slowly, still facing me with eyes upturned, Kalachand-da moved backwards, retracing his steps until the shadows beyond the side door of the temple received him.

The final mantras of salutation were sung, and had the effect of bringing me to an external semblance of normality. My interior state was another matter, altogether.

Before leaving the temple I went to stand before the image of Kali. Although the grill had been closed and locked, She could be seen between the diamond-shaped openings.

I clutched the ironwork and with all the fervor of my soul silently entreated: "Mother, break this jar! Break this jar! Let 'me' be dissolved, and You only remain. There has never been any 'me' anyway; there has only and always been You. Let it be so!"

Then we left in silence.

I assume I had passed the test.

# Chapter Seventeen

## *I Meet God In Flesh*

Not many days after my “meeting” with Kali Ma, I moved to the Anandamayi Ashram. Morning, noon, and evening I took part in the worship of the goddess, meditating in Her presence as well. Before Her image all yogic practices could be done with perfect ease. Even more, further knowledge of yoga and meditation came spontaneously to mind. I did not know it then, but Ma Anandamayi frequently told the Ranchi devotees to meditate as much as possible before this Kali image. I found no other place in India as favorable for meditation as the Anandamayi Ashram Kali temple in Ranchi. Auspicious as the Himalayas may be, a person need only step in out of the noisy main street of Ranchi to find a haven of spiritual consciousness unparalleled anywhere.

Most of the time my room in the ashram was just that—mine. But for a few hours a day it became a free dispensary for homeopathic medicines, presided over by Dr. Mukherji, a devotee of Anandamayi Ma and a disciple of Swami Purnananda, a direct disciple of Babaji Brahmananda who is written about in *Autobiography of a Yogi* as “Mahavatar Babaji.” (“Baba” means “father” or sometimes “grandfather” and is a title, not a name.)

From Dr. Mukherji I learned about the deathless Master and his system of yoga, as well as information regarding the various “lines” of yoga teachers who traced their spiritual geneologies back to the divine Babaji. He revealed to me that the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore had lived in the Himalayas with Babaji Brahmananda in his late teen years, having been sent there by his renowned father, Devendranath Tagore, who was also a disciple of the Master.

From Swami Jnanananda Giri, a genuine adept who had known Yogananda’s guru, Swami Sriyukteswar Giri, quite well, I learned much about Himalayan yogis, cobras, and tigers. And from Brahmachari Bhajan-bhai I learned how to wear Indian clothing (without starch) and devotional music.

Every afternoon, upon the departure of Dr. Mukherji, about twenty neighborhood children would assemble in my room and we would have a session of rousing religious music. Most of them would also attend the evening arati, singing with great enthusiasm under the leadership of Bhajan-bhai. At the insistence of the devotees, each evening’s musical session would close with my singing of some song I had learned. But whatever I might sing, every night before I was released from my duty, one of Sri Ma Anandamayi’s oldest and most beloved devotees, a frail angelic woman known to all as “Baby” (actually: “Babyji”) would look at me shyly and say: “Divine Mother.” And so I would sing Yogananda’s refrain:

Engrossed is the bee of my mind

On the blue lotus feet of my Divine Mother....

Yogananda had told his disciples that whoever sang that song with sincere intention would unfailingly gain the loving attention of the Divine Mother aspect of God. This proved to be true, for later whenever I would mentally sing that song in the presence of Ma Anandamayi, she would fix her gaze steadily on me until I stopped. Once I realized this, I no longer did so, as I had no desire to “hoodoo” Ma. I hoped she would do that to me, instead. One time though, in the Calcutta train station, Ma entered her compartment in the train and lay down. No one could see her except me, since I was very tall and also right up against the window. She was lying with her back to me, completely motionless. Forgetting my rule, I began to inwardly sing Yoganandaji’s song. Immediately she turned over to face me and lay looking directly into my eyes. I just could not bear to stop! After a few minutes Ma arose and came to stand in the doorway of the compartment so all could see her until the train pulled away. As one of her devotees once said: “If you yearn for her, she yearns for you—that is the trick! But if at heart you do not love, then you are speaking sweet words to a dead woman!”

More than fifteen years later I was with a group of American devotees at the Anandamayi Ashram in Hardwar/Kankhal, sacred twin-citie in the Himalayan foothills. That day Ma was very ill, having taken on the evil karmas of many devotees during a recent festival. (This was common with Ma. After large gatherings of people she would often become very ill from having absorbed so much of their negative karmas in order to give them a spiritual lift.) It was announced that no one would be able to see Ma the rest of that day.

When the time for the evening worship came, we Americans all sat before one of the temples and sang the usual evening devotional music. When it was over, word was sent that Ma was listening to our singing and wanted us to continue. We moved further out into the courtyard where we could sit looking up at Ma’s windows. For several years I had been having a recurring “waking dream” in which I was sitting with a group of Americans in just this way, singing a particular hymn requesting the vision of the Lord. So I began singing that very song: “O Lord of the Universe, kindly be visible to me,” in Sanskrit. Everyone joined in, and after about ten minutes of fervent singing, someone called out from Ma’s window: “Come up! Ma wants to see you!” and so that day we saw the Lord of the Universe in the form of our Joy-permeated Mother.

But I have gone ahead of myself.

My days in Ranchi were indescribably glorious. Moment by moment I felt myself awakened on inner levels.

Although I had come to India to learn of Hinduism and yoga, in Ranchi I learned much about the true meaning of the Bible from Manmatha, the priest of Kali. Sitting on the roof of the ashram, Manmatha would recite passage after passage from the Gospels, pausing after each one to exclaim in a voice athrob with spiritual delight: “Very good! Very good!” Then he would expound the meaning. How amazed I was to find a Bible scholar in the plains of Northern India who was not a Christian in the formal sense, but a Brahmin of the strictest Hindu orthodoxy, one who would be a

“heathen” and an “idolater” in the eyes of those “Christians” of whom the Master of Galilee said: “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

I was rejoicing and reveling every moment in my homecoming, but Someone was waiting for me, having called me home. Throughout everything, my heart was always pulling me to hasten on to her. Oddly enough, no one seemed to know where Anandamayi Ma was. It was her custom to travel continuously throughout Northern India, and keeping track of her schedule was not always possible even to her devotees. After a few weeks I returned to Calcutta and went to the Yogoda Math in Dakshineswar for several days. I kept trying to find out where Ma might be, but to no avail. One morning, just before awakening, I saw Ma standing before me in blazing light. She smiled at me and then laughed joyfully. I opened my eyes, with ears and soul vibrating with that luminous sound. Still savoring Ma’s Presence, I got up, dressed, and went downstairs. Just outside the door of the guest house my friend Angad was standing with a man. Pointing to his companion, Angad told me: “This man knows where Anandamayi Ma is.” From him I learned that Ma was in Modinagar, a town somewhere northeast of New Delhi.

Within less than half an hour I found myself in the print shop speaking to a man who knew someone in Delhi who would help me get to Modinagar. The next morning I was on the train, jolting my way diagonally across the Gangetic plains toward the capitol of India. And forty-eight hours later I was encountering the mad confusion in the Old Delhi railway station for the first—but not the last—time. After a few hours’ search I found the home of some relatives of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who promised to take me to Modinagar the following Saturday. Luckily for me, my hostess Mrs. T. N. (Rani) Bhan was an avid seeker of saints and yogis. Through her I met three major saints in just about as many days, all three of whom became dear and life-long friends.

Thrilled as I was to at last meet the kind of beings about whom I had heretofore only read, my inner compass was daily pointing more insistently toward Modinagar and my Mother. At times I would be utterly overwhelmed at the thought: “God incarnate is walking the earth in Modinagar at this very moment, yet throughout the world people are running along in the hamster wheels of their pitiful (and pitifully) little lives. How is it that everyone is not running there to see God?” How could it be that the Supreme Being would take form and move among mankind and hardly a fraction of a percent of the world’s population would either know about it or care? I had been called from across the world, and here in India only a comparatively few were hearing that voice.

For many years as a Protestant I had felt a peculiar kind of urgency—even desperation—whenever I would sing in church:

Pass me not, O gentle Savior,  
Hear my humble cry:  
While on others Thou art calling,  
Do not pass me by.

I can think of nothing more horrible than that God should come to earth and manifest to men while I would remain unaware of it. Better ten thousand ages in as many hells rather than to have God come and go and I not know of it. To not see the face of God upon the earth! What greater curse could there be than that? But my cry had been heard, and she had not passed me by. Soon I would see God in the flesh. Sometimes I thought I could not bear the wait.

Saturday morning a car drove up before the Bhan residence and we all piled into it and set out on our way. At last!

The further we went toward our goal the more I began to panic. What if it all proved to not be true? What if Ma was not really who I thought she was? Might it be only an aberration of my mind? Or what if she was indeed all I thought her to be, but she would not want anything to do with me? What claim did I have on her? Just because I had come halfway around the world and spent every penny I had in doing so, put her under no obligation. What did I have to offer? Nothing. I became as miserable as heretofore I had been happy.

The place where Ma was staying was at the edge of Modinagar, so our driver turned in there. As we spilled out of the car, someone clutched my arm and said, pointing to an auto several yards ahead: "Go quickly, Ma is in that car!" I ran. But when I reached there I saw immediately that Ma was not there at all. Instead, sitting in the front seat was a tiny woman swathed in the orange (gerua) clothing of a monastic. In retrospect I have no idea how I knew the little figure was a woman, for her hair was cut short—almost shaven—and she looked for all the world just like my great uncle Riley Maxey. But that is how I had my first darshan of Sri Swami Muktananda Giri, Ma's venerable mother.

It did not take long for my friends to learn that Ma was in the town at the new Lakshmi-Narayan temple which she had come to bless at its inauguration. Back in the car, which like a suitcase was harder to repack than pack, someone remarked that the town would be too crowded, since it was a weekend, and suggested that we go back to Delhi immediately. Then I was asked how I felt about it! Just what I said I do not know, but we proceeded on in quest of Ma.

Outside the temple gates loudspeakers were blaring, relaying the sounds of a religious drama that was going on in a gigantic flat-roofed tent (called a pandal) next to the temple itself. Only those who have experienced an Asiatic crowd can know what it was like in the dusty street, fighting our way toward the temple gates and trying not to lose track of one another. Actually, we did lose most of our group, and finally only Rani and her son, Indu, were standing with me at the back of the pandal. "Where is Ma?" I demanded. "Somewhere up there," Indu replied, indicated a stage running along the far (and I do mean far) end of the pandal. I looked and looked. Nothing. Neither Rani nor Indu could see her, either.

This would never do, so I worked my way, with them in my wake, over to the right side and up toward the front. "Coincidentally" we came to a halt right where there was a rip in the tent canvas large enough for me to step through right into the path of

anyone coming from the platform. It was fastened by the biggest safety pin I had ever seen, but it only took a moment to take care of that.

There was nothing else to do but watch the play being enacted on the stage. It was amazing. The narrator was wearing a wig and beard made out of a string mop. As he waved his arms around wildly he shrieked exhortations to the audience in a falsetto voice beyond endurance. Others were bumbling about the stage to no apparent purpose. Suddenly the narrator and backup went wild! The narrator began to screech a staccato barrage as a figure stepped out from the side and proceeded to the middle of the stage. Indu told me that it was a goddess appearing to a devotee. The crowd was truly going wild with enthusiasm. I alone seemed to care—or even observe—that the “goddess” was a man with hairy arms, a full black mustache, and a face that in my childhood would have been called “plug-ugly.” (Although women acted in motion pictures and television in India, in the traditional folk and religious dramas they did not.) Wonderingly I tapped Indu on the shoulder and asked if this was supposed to be good. He looked back at me in equal amazement about me. Although a supreme court lawyer, he apparently had the dramatic sophistication of a villager. As I retreated with the sense that I might have been rude, everyone began singing with enthusiasm, and those seated on the platform began to come down the canvas passageway right by me.

Eagerly I studied each person as they came in sight, recognizing some as devotees of Ma, having seen them in photographs back in America.

And then there were no more. Could I have possibly missed seeing Ma? Rani had been looking through the rip, too, and assured me that Ma had not passed by. Might the people back at the edge of town have misinformed us? My heart and nerves were ajangle.

Suddenly three women appeared at the end of the passageway. The One in the middle was Ma Anandamayi.

I stepped through the rip and stood, holding out my right hand, pleading for Ma to touch me. (Do not ask me why—I do not know. It seems rather silly so many years later.) Ma rarely touched anyone, and no one was allowed to touch her. I knew this, but did not care. She *must* touch me. I walked backwards in front of Ma, holding out my hand and crying: “Ma, Ma,” continuously. Although She said “No” very firmly, I still insisted until she reached out both hands and lightly touched me on both sides of my hand. Every cell in me erupted as a magnetic current swept upward through me, and continued doing so without diminishing.

Now I remembered reading of those who had touched Ma when she was in a special state of bhava (exalted spiritual consciousness). It had knocked them out of their heads in a divine sort of way—but they were still out of their heads. So was I.

Besides the incredible physical cataclysm, my mind was impelled toward one object only: MA. I followed after her, and stood by the auto She got into, shaking and crying, definitely out of sync. Or else I was “in sync” for the first time in this life, for I knew that God/Ma alone was real and that everything, including “me,” was just a shadow. Seeing Ma Kali in Ranchi had given me a touch of this, but now I was totally immersed in it.

Ma on the other hand was completely nonchalant, glancing at me every so often with an expression that indicated I was nothing new to her, that she had been seeing me all the time—even for ages. The “meeting” was only on my part. She had always been with me.

Her car pulled away, and as it passed through the gates all the volcanic activity stopped as though switched off—as indeed it had been, by Ma. Although I became calm, I was desolated at not being with Ma.

Rani and Indu tried to distract me by showing me the temple complex and even introducing me to some of the major spiritual leaders of Northern India who were also there. But it was no sale. I wanted to have nothing to do with anything that was not Ma. I felt condemned to hell. Finally they gave up and took me back to where Ma was staying.

Rani tried to impress Sri Gurupriya Devi, the closest of Ma’s devotees and known to all as Didi (Elder Sister), by telling her that I had come all the way from America just to see Ma. Didi shrugged and said the equivalent of “So what?” in Bengali and did not give me a glance. She was right. Only Ma was real or significant.

The rest of that day I stood outside Ma’s door, waiting for it to open, even if only a crack, so I could get a glimpse of her. There is no way I can convey the way that seeing Ma caused the beholder to come alive inside in a manner hitherto undreamed of. Conversely, the moment Ma was out of sight, the “normal” state—that now was seen as quite empty—returned.

What does salt taste like? What does light look like? No one can say, because there is nothing like salt but salt and there is nothing like light but light. So, too, there is nothing like Ma but Ma herself. I could write volumes of the experiences I and others have had with Ma, and I expect I could engage in lengthy poetical reflections about her. But none of it would convey even an inkling of What or Who Ma is. She is Ma. And she is mine. Although her earthly form has withdrawn from physical sight in the semblance of death, I speak of her in present tense because she ever Is.

One evening when I was sitting with her on the roof of the Anandamayi Ashram in Brindaban, one of the holiest sites of Hinduism, being the childhood home of the avatar, Sri Krishna, she said to me: “Every day say to yourself: ‘Ma has been with me in all the past. Ma is always with me now. And Ma will always be with me in the future.’” By following her direction, I have found it to be so.

Ma often said things that were inexplicable until years later when it became evident that in her foreknowledge she had spoken advice to be followed when her meaning had become clear. She also did and said things that reflected our previous births, though they, too, would not be comprehended until we gained the memories of those distant lives.

“He who knows...knows. None else knows.” This cryptic statement, which Paramhansa Yogananda even set to music, sums up all I can say about Ma Anandamayi. Who or what was she? Whenever anyone asked her, “Who are you?” She would reply, “I am whatever you think I am.”

An executive of one of the many European/American agencies whose purpose was

supposedly to “help” India in her development, once asked me why I “believed” in Anandamayi Ma. “Because she wants me to,” was the only intelligent or possible answer I could give. But this I can say: God has walked the earth—and still pervades the universe—as Sri Sri Ma Anandamayi, the Joy-Filled Mother.

Until I met Ma I secretly wondered if the disciples of the Great Ones such as Jesus, Buddha, and Krishna, might not have waxed poetic after the deaths of their masters and begun to exaggerate their nature and to embellish and extend their descriptions beyond the actual. After meeting Ma I knew that those disciples had not exaggerated in the least. Rather, their eulogies and rhapsodies had fallen far short of the glorious reality, a wonder that no words can convey, the marvel of God With Us.

About thirty years before I met Ma, Her greatest devotee, Sri Jyotish Chandra Roy, had gotten into one of the crazes that hit devotees every so often. He had decided that he was getting too dependent on Ma, and had stopped going to see her altogether. After some weeks of this foolishness, an old man came into his office during working hours. “Tell me,” he asked, “what is this ‘Mother’ really like?” Instantly Bhaji (as he was known to Ma’s devotees) was flooded with the memory of Ma’s presence. Unable to speak in response to the old man’s query, he simply sat as the tears streamed down his face. After a long while the old man quietly spoke. “My question is answered,” he said, “now why don’t you take me to her?” And so he did, never again to stay away.

As I have said, I hung about Ma’s door all day like a bee on a flower, every so often drinking the sweetness of Her sight. Sometimes people began going in by groups, and I would slip in with them—well, as much as a man over six feet tall can “slip in” among a crowd of Indians that are all markedly shorter than he. How I blessed my height! I could always get a good look at Ma in crowds.

During one of the happy invasions of Ma’s room, she looked at me and asked if I wanted to speak with her. I did, indeed. She told me to return in the evening for a private talk. I agreed with profound appreciation, but still kept haunting her door the rest of the day.

At one time Ma’s door was open for quite a while as Didi sat speaking to Her before returning to the Anandamayi Ashram in Benares. When Didi got up to leave, Ma began speaking intently to another person in the room. When she reached the doorway, just a few inches from me, Didi turned back and put her hands together in salutation of Ma. The force of her loving devotion was tangible, almost pushing me back a step. It spread out from her, and in two or three seconds it “hit” Ma, who actually jumped and looked up to detect its source, then put her hands together in salutation to Didi, accompanied by a smile of dazzling grace. From then onward my life’s ambition was to love Ma with the same intensity and strength as Didi.

(Several years later I was in the New Delhi ashram when Ma left for another city. Didi came out and stood halfway up the outer steps, watching Ma enter the car and depart. I was wanting to speak with Didi, who by now was very much my older sister and spiritual patron. Not wanting to approach her directly, I asked a friend, Doctor Ghosh of Ranchi, to ask Didi when I might visit with her. He went up the steps and spoke to her, but no response came. She stood without motion, her eyes fixed on the

departing car. Doctor Ghosh called to her loudly, almost shouting. Still no response, as she continued to gaze unwinkingly at the distant vehicle. Touching her arm, Doctor Ghosh loudly called her name. Nothing. Turning to me, he asked: “What can I do? Didi is with Ma.” I well knew what *I* could do: strive to keep my mind as fixed on Ma as Didi’s was at that moment.)

As the sun began to set, the evening kirtan (devotional music) started with the great hymn to Ma written by Jyotish Chandra Roy, beginning: “Glory to Thee, Indweller of the heart, Eternal Purity, Sri Anandamayi Ma....” I sat with the singers, but right away someone gestured for me to get up and follow him to Ma’s room. I knew the way!

Entering the room I bowed and touched my head to the ground before Ma as she sat on a wooden cot.

Then there took place the most agonizing struggle of my life. I had read in *Autobiography of a Yogi* that aspirants must often engage in a virtual wrangle with the masters to get them to agree to accept them as disciples, but what sounded just fine on paper was not so tasty when served up to me.

At their first meeting, Sri Yukteswar had been all attention and love to Yogananda, but at its close he warned him: “You will have to reawaken my interest next time.” And it had taken a wrestling match worthy of Jacob (Genesis 32:24-30) for Yogananda to do so at the second encounter.

Ma had offered of her own volition to speak with me, but now she was adamantly indifferent. Didi’s disinterest was the welcoming of the prodigal son in comparison.

First Ma asked me what spiritual organizations and teachers I either knew personally or was somewhat acquainted with. Each time I named one, She would demand to know why I did not belong to or follow them. It was not sufficient to simply say: “I don’t want to,” or “I don’t feel that is for me.” Instead I had to prove to Ma why such groups or individuals were not able to guide me in my spiritual life.

The litany went on and on, frequently punctuated with the demand to know what I expected Mataji to do about my incapacity to find guidance elsewhere. It was worse than beating on gates of brass or walls of stone—there was nothing to assault! Ma remained inflexible, insisting that I should be able to find some mentor other than herself.

Woven throughout this fabric of frustration was the recurring theme of my membership in Self-Realization Fellowship. Ma kept coming back to this again and again: Why was I, a member of SRF-YSS, even coming to see Ma and asking for advice? Eventually I listed every single SRF minister and teacher I had ever spoken to even superficially on spiritual subjects and had explained how, according to SRF policy, they could not be my guru—nor did I want them to be, anyway. Somewhere along this string of returns to the Square One of my SRF affiliation (which, I explained to Mataji, I had already terminated in my mind before meeting her) it was revealed to me by my translator that Ma had received more than one complaint from the SRF-YSS officials regarding her “interference” with and “stealing” of their members. This was a stunning bit of news for me, since in the SRF Magazine I had read such glowing accounts of Ma written by SRF officials. But apparently that had been before several readers of the

magazine had come to meet Ma and consequently decided to become her devotees. It was the old story of professional jealousy that occurs even in religion. Ma wanted it made clear to me that she was not gathering followers or forming a sect of her own. Even the Anandamayi ashrams had been built by devotees on their own initiative, and Ma only went there as a guest like anyone else. (I later learned that Ma refused to allow a single pice [penny] of the money contributed to the ashrams to be spent on her personal needs, but that she maintained her own completely independent source of financial support.)

Looking back on the whole dialogue with the ability to see the humor of it, I realize it was like a game of spiritual Parchesi, with Ma continually returning me to the “home base” question of Self-Realization Fellowship.

So far I have not mentioned much of Ma’s conduct. In writings by devotees I had read that Ma was always gracious to everyone and that she was happy and contented at all times and in all situations. Hah! All day long Ma had been acting more rudely to people than anyone I had ever seen before.

Fruit and flowers are the usual gifts presented to holy people in India—especially garlands of flowers. Frequently the holy one allows the garland to be put on them for a short while and then they give it back, or they give the offerer one they are already wearing when presented with a new one. They distribute the fruit to the devotees, as well. But when people would offer Ma a garland of flowers, she would desultorily toss it back at them with a look of profound disgust. Often as people bowed before her she would look at them with an expression of thorough distaste. If someone tried to be humorous, she would respond with a sarcastic laugh that was like a whiplash. In short, her behavior was atrocious. This was the ever-gracious Mother? She who was said to be always contented and happy in all circumstances?

About twenty minutes into my interview, she brusquely told me to stop speaking and began demanding to see Swami Paramananda and another man. When they came in, Ma let loose on them. She was being given no consideration at all, she told them. (Brahmacharini Atmananda, who was translating for me, relayed what Ma was saying to them.)

Ma complained that all day long people (ulp! that included me!) had been in and out of her room non-stop. Her room was no better than a railway station! Didn’t they remember that she had not even wanted to come to this function, but that they had insisted, and she had agreed to come only because they promised her that most of the time she would be able to be alone? Was this the keeping of their promise? What regard had they or anyone for her? It had better change and quick, or she would be leaving. Then she told *them* to leave.

After a while a young girl came to inquire about when Ma wanted to eat. Sitting upright, Ma forcefully told her that she would not be eating anything for the rest of the day, nor would she drink even water. Everyone had neglected her, so it was no time to get concerned now. Out ran the girl. Wow!

Turning back to me, Ma demanded for the umpteenth time why as a member of SRF-YSS I did not live in their ashram and follow their ways.

Ten more minutes of haggling ensued, and then another young nun entered and knelt behind Ma's cot. Atmananda remarked to Ma that we should perhaps leave since this girl was to give Ma a massage. (Massage in India does not mean what it does in the West. Rather, it is a slow pressing of the feet and legs to relax the muscles.) When she voiced this, Ma snapped at Atmananda to shut up and sit still. Turning to the girl, Ma proceeded to relay the message that she should go away and not come back—that Ma was not interested in seeing any of them now or later. So begone.

Contented and happy under all circumstances, my foot.

It was a black hour for me. Had I come halfway around the world only to be turned away? Had I made a mistake? Had Ma not called me after all, despite the visions and other experiences? Frankly, I did not care. If Ma did not want me, I still wanted her, however unpleasant she might be. I was going to stake my life on all levels in the following of her. I would never accept an alternative.

This verbal and internal struggle did not take place in one continuous flow. It was several times interrupted by people entering and speaking with Mataji on a number of matters, at the end of which Ma would turn back to me with an air of determined boredom.

Finally, after one of these interruptions, as Ma half reclined on her cot, watching a departing ashramite with languid indifference, I said to Atmananda: "Please tell Ma that I will do anything she tells me to do. Whatever she says, I will do it. I will not go anywhere else for guidance!"

Like a flash Ma sat up, her demeanor altogether transformed into one of lively interest and acquiescence. In a steady stream of words she outlined what I should do: go to Hardwar or Rishikesh (two major spiritual centers in the Himalayan foothills), live in solitude, meditate, study spiritual texts, and every so often come to see her after writing for permission to do so. Then she blessed me with great kindness and I departed—truly in peace.

I was "in"!

Throughout the ensuing twenty years of my association with Ma, I never saw her act rudely or heard her speak unpleasantly as she had that day. Evidently it had been a "private showing" just for me, as a test, for Ma truly was gracious and kind to all, and she was indeed happy and contented under all circumstances and in all situations.

Jai Ma! (Glory To Ma!)

# Chapter Eighteen

## *Himalayan Idyll*

A week later I was sitting in a bicycle rickshaw, slowly moving forward on the road north of Hardwar. My destination was Sapta Rishi (Seven Sages) Ashram a few miles outside of town. When the Ganges originally flowed out on to the plain from the Himalayas, seven great sages (rishis) were living in the area of the present-day ashram. Therefore the sacred stream divided itself into seven branches passing right by the hut of each sage, thus providing each one with his own private Ganges. Just beyond their place of abode the Ganges reunited into one stream. This was my destination, arrangements having been made by one of Ma Anandamayi's devotees for me to live there.

The rickshaw man was definitely losing the race with the setting sun. As we turned into the long lane leading up to Sapta Rishi Ashram, dusk was settling all around, but by some trick of the light reflecting off the clouds overhead, the buildings of the ashram seemed to glow from within, a little city of light in the encompassing darkness.

By the time we reached the ashram itself, darkness reigned, the towers of the temple standing out black against a dark blue sky spangled with winking points of light. The worship was going on, accompanied by gongs and bells in a rhythmic medley that seemed to emanate from a supramundane plane, lifting all within hearing into another realm of consciousness.

Just as we came around to the front of the temple, the gongs and bells ceased. The light shining out from the inner sanctum revealed the radiant forms of the deities within. As I approached to salute them, the students of the brahminical school located within the ashram began to sing hymns and mantras in their praise.

After my salutations I turned to find a monk of remarkable appearance approaching. Introducing himself as Swami Yogiraj, he took me to meet the administrator of the ashram. Unlike most ashrams, Sapta Rishi Ashram was not a gathering place for disciples of a particular guru, but had been founded by pious Hindus to provide a place for sadhus to live and engage in spiritual practice. (A sadhu is one who seeks union with God the Real—Sat—through spiritual practice—sadhana.) All, including food, was provided free of charge to those approved by the ashram authorities. Since I was bearing a letter from the chief official who lived in New Delhi, my acceptance was already settled, and within the hour I found myself occupying the Atri Kutir on the north side of the temple complex. ("Kutir" means "room" literally, but is used to designate a small house or hut.) Each kutir in the ashram was named for a renowned figure of ancient Hinduism. The kutir consisted of one large room and some smaller rooms for meditating, cooking, and bathing, plus a toilet. Outside the front door, a porch supported by pillars ran the width of the building. My "furnishings" were a wooden platform for sleeping, a table, and a single chair.

But I found there was more to my little kutir than met the eye on the outside. The moment I entered it I recognized it as the place where in my vision back in America I had seen Ma Anandamayi. She had been standing in the middle of the main room of the kutir. As already related, when I bowed at her feet and pleaded that she never let me forget her, she smiled and said in English: “Don’t worry! I have lit the flame, and I will keep it burning.” And here I was in the place of my vision! What could it mean?

“To whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48). So, however idyllic my external situation might be, I settled myself down to engage in intense interior work: meditation.

Whether in this world or in another one less material, there are no real shortcuts to God-realization. As Mirabai wrote: “I have sold all in the marketplace of this world and bought my Khannaiya [Krishna]. Many laugh at me and say the price was too high. Others scorn me and say I did not pay enough. But I only know that it took all I had.” Anyone who studies the Bible or other sacred histories can see plainly that when God gets serious with someone He demands his all. Conversely, when someone gets serious with God he is willing to give his all.

The crux of the matter is quite simple: Where there is a will there is a way; and where there is no will there is no way. Meditation is the way.

Like a psychic drill, meditation began piercing through the layers of my inner consciousness. At times the going was easy, but often it was like slogging along through cold mud, while at other times it was like drilling into granite. The one thing needful was to press on and not let up. There were times when I felt like I was banging my head on rocks, and other times I experienced great ease and clarity of mind and heart. (At that time I did not know Soham sadhana.)

The spiritual life of an individual can be gauged by observing his involvement with the inner work of meditation. No other test is reliable. Those who do not meditate are separated from inner life. There is no such thing as preparation for meditation. Just Do It. How simple, and how excruciating to the egoic mind and intellect. Like a caged or cornered animal the negatively-polarized mind and intellect will search in frantic desperation for a way to escape from the inner work—and will usually find it if we are not vigilant and determined.

Although this all reads like a lecture, I am citing to you the things I learned in my little Hardwar kutir. “Sit in your room and this will teach you everything,” the Eastern Christian mystics have said about meditation. Those who have tried, really tried, have proven the truth of their words. Much more was also taught to me within the haven of those whitewashed walls, but this book is not for that recounting.

Throughout this first pilgrimage to India, wherever I might be I was never out of walking distance from at least one saint. India opened her spiritual treasury to show me her precious jewels—men and women whose very presence breathed forth the Life that is God. Some of these treasures I met in large and beautiful ashrams where pilgrims constantly came and went like divinely-wise bees intent on the nectar of holy wisdom. Others I met tucked away in obscure back alleys of teeming cities or in villages to which no road or even a worn track led. Some I met in crowded places who

spoke with me for a time and then vanished into the throng. One I encountered as she wandered the byroads of Bengal, dressed in rags and pretending to be insane.

Except for Anandamayi Ma (who was really far beyond just being a saint), the greatest of these was Swami Sivananda (pronounced “Shivananda”) of Rishikesh, another holy city about twenty miles north of Hardwar. Truly in a class by himself, Sivananda was the Lord of life and death, holding the keys of immortality. Although I could describe the other holy ones to some degree, Sivanandaji was beyond description or classification, as was Ma Anandamayi. Also as with Ma Anandamayi, I found that the moment I entered his presence I became increasingly self-aware rather than drawn out to experience him.

I had read some of Sivananda’s books in America, had heard some recordings of him and had heard one of his disciples, Swami Shivapremananda, speak one Sunday at the SRF Hollywood church. Then one morning while still sleeping I “found” myself in India. A bullock cart, a common manner of conveyance in rural India, was coming toward me. It stopped and suddenly the bullocks disappeared and Sivananda appeared and walked down the tongue of the cart. I bowed down and touched his feet. He put the fourth finger of his right hand at the point between my eyebrows and a tremendous current poured out of his finger and into me. Everything became brilliant light, and I felt like I was passing out, but instead I opened my physical eyes, fully awake and with that light vibrating in every cell of my body. From that moment I knew I should meet him in India, just as I should meet Anandamayi Ma.

In India, to my surprise I was told by more than one person that it would be a waste of time for me to bother going to Sivanandashram because Sivananda had become senile and basically useless, that he no longer gave spiritual discourses but only told jokes and behaved strangely—not at all like a sadhu should. The kinder ones told me that he was a great karma yogi, but not a “real” yogi otherwise, that he was more like a kindly grandfather than anyone else. “Although he will give you a lot of things—books and ayurvedic medicine—but it won’t be worth your while.” But I had seen him for myself in vision and knew it would only be wisdom for me to meet him. And so it was.

Sivananda was golden, gauranga. His voice was the sweetest sound I have ever heard. His eyes were streams of love and joy combined. They healed and uplifted all that they looked at. A song about him written by Swami Sivananda-Hridayanana (Doctor Mother) says that his smile was like the moon. The moon is not blazing and hurting our eyes like the sun. Just the opposite. The moon is cooling and soothing. No one thinks of the sun being fascinating, but the moon is; and people have been writing poems about it for thousands of years. Furthermore, it is the moon that fosters growth, which is why wise farmers and gardener plant according to the phases of the moon. It is life giving, life fostering and life increasing. That was the smile and the very sight of Sivananda. Everything about him brought peace, brought harmony, to the beholder.

When Sivananda entered a room, radiant with divine luster, the place was transformed into a heaven-world. I am not exaggerating in the least. Many times during the morning satsangs I would look out through the open door and be amazed that I saw the trees and building of the ashram instead of infinite space, because it felt as

though we had been lifted far, far above the earth into a heavenly space.

Amazingly, it was easy to get an appointment to speak with Sivananda privately. I say it was amazing because it was not unusual to wait some weeks before speaking to Ma Anandamayi alone. But the day after I asked for an interview I went in the late morning to Sivananda's kutir by the Ganges.

Sitting near him brought me such a feeling of well-being and contentment that any questions I may have had evaporated from my memory. So I just sat and looked at him. After a while he made a motion that I should speak, so I said the first thing that came to mind, namely: "You know, I saw you in a vision in America." A mischievous smile like that of a little boy caught "in the act" appeared on his face. "Oh?" was his only rejoinder, as he kept on smiling.

Then he asked me very seriously: "What do you want?" I knew this was not a simple question, that the being sitting before me was capable of granting me anything I might ask. So my answer had better be good. But my mind was a blissful blank. Then I heard myself saying: "I want to love God so much that even if I fall head first down a well, instead of trying to get out I will just stay there praying: 'O Lord, let me love Thee more!'" The smile that dawned on his face was one of pure joy. In silence he gazed into my eyes as he emitted waves of light and blessing. "I am so glad. I am so glad," he finally said. Then I bowed before him and left.

Several days later Steven Wyland, an American who was visiting Sivananda Ashram, also had an appointment, and to my delight and gratitude asked me if I would like to come along with him to see Sivananda. No need to think that one over! So in his wake I entered Sivananda's kutir for the second time.

Once we were seated before the Master, my friend began plying him with question after question regarding spiritual practice—or rather mechanical external aids to spiritual practice. Sivananda had written dozens of books, and this young man had read most of them while in the United States, scouring used bookstores and ferreting out whatever he could find. As a result, he had a list of things that were recommended in the books as helps to sadhana. Sivananda had written on every type of yoga and philosophy, so his list of what might legitimately be called "spiritual gimmicks" was long.

Much to Steven's amazement, every time he mentioned a particular "gimmick" Sivananda would wave his hand with a look and a gesture of disgust, saying: "Ah! Don't bother!" Finally the list was gone through and Sivananda had dismissed each recommended practice with the same contempt. His attitude seemed to say: "Don't even speak of such nonsensical trash." But all the "trash" had come out of his own writings, having been seriously recommended to the readers!

As Steven sat there stunned and bewildered, the mischievous smile again appeared on Sivananda's glowing face. This time he looked like a naughty little boy about to whisk a rat or a snake out of his pocket. Then he spoke with measured deliberation, every word vibrating with His joy: "Just say God's Name! That will do everything!" My friend was confused, but I was relieved. For the second time I had heard from lips that spoke from infinite consciousness—that were in truth the mouths of God—that to call on

the Name of God in the form of a mantra was the secret to success in the search for God. (I had a few month before read Sivananda's book, *Japa Yoga*, at the East-West Cultural Center after being introduced to the subject by a smaller book offered for sale there simply entitled *Japa*, written by M. P. Pandit, an advanced disciple of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh. And I was thoroughly convinced that mantra japa was The Way.)

Stepping back a bit, I should tell you how Steven and I began staying at Sivanandashram. First we got a room on the east side of the Ganges opposite the ashram. The only way to get back and forth over the river was by boats that did not ply until just before the morning satsang at the ashram, and stopped before the time of the evening satsang. So we were missing half of the time that could be spent with Sivananda.

(At this time Sivananda was in poor health. Before then he would sit for hours in his office where he would talk with a constant stream of visitors and at the same time write book after book on spiritual subjects.)

Deciding that we must move to the west side of the Ganges, we searched and found a filthy room at a small temple north of the ashram. It was really a storeroom, but it had two wooden platforms that could be used as beds. That was all. One window (no shutters) opened on the street and the weather was incredibly cold. And we were being charged a ridiculously high rent, equal to that of a first class hotel in New Delhi. But it was worth the misery and robbery to have more time with Sivananda.

On the second or third day of our sojourn, in the morning satsang Sivananda asked us where we were staying. When we told him about our situation he asked why were not staying at the ashram. When we told him we had asked and been told there were no rooms available, and how much we were paying at the temple, he called for Shivadas the guest master. A conversation (monologue, actually) took place in forceful Tamil in which Sivananda was obviously laying down the law. Shivadas just stood there and said "Swamiji" frequently. Then Sivananda told us: "You will move into Kailash Kutirs this afternoon. It will be made ready for you." And so we did. Later someone told us that Sivananda had demanded why we had not been invited to stay at Sivanandashram. Shivadas told him there were no free rooms. Sivananda, who at that time was confined to his kutir except for coming to satsangs, proceeded to tell him: "You should be ashamed of yourself. There is a room in Kailash Kutirs meant for guests and you are using it for a storeroom. You should be ashamed of yourself. These people have come across the ocean and you tell them there is no room here!" Such was his omniscience and his loving heart; and such was our taking up residence at the ashram.

It was sublime being with Sivananda, but here I want to tell you about a drama in which both Sivananda and Steven figure as principles with me as stage director. First of all, some of Sivananda's detractors were right: he no longer gave any spiritual talks and he loved to tell jokes and "cut japes" as the parlance of an earlier time would put it.

Now Steven was worthy of great respect and his life was truly oriented toward God-realization, but although he had a wonderful sense of humor, in matters religious he was extremely serious and therefore in that area humorless. One day in Hardwar he had told me: "Sivananda asked me a question the last time I was in India, and I can't

understand it. I've been puzzling over it and puzzling over it, and I can't understand what it means." "Well what is it?" I asked. "Maybe I can figure it out." "Well, he asked me: 'What is the difference between ammonia and pneumonia?'" "Oh, Steven!" I exclaimed, "It's a riddle. I heard it when I was about eight or nine years old, but I don't remember the answer. But it's just a kids' riddle!" "No, no, no," said Steven, "I know it's got a meaning, it must have inner symbolism." "No," I insisted, "It's a joke; a riddle." He would not believe me, so I had to take matters in hand.

Satsangs with Sivananda were extraordinary. He had quit giving talks so the superficial and "serious seekers" who thought they were dedicated to seeking wisdom alone would go away and leave only those who loved him and knew he loved them. Although there was a minimal order to the morning and evening satsangs, most of it was like the parties given when I was young in which a kind of punchboard was passed around and each person pushed out a tiny, tightly rolled piece of paper on which a stunt of some kind was printed. Each person had to do right then what the paper said. Sivananda would just point unexpectedly to a person and say: "Give a short talk on the Gita," or "Sing a song," "Recite stotras." He said to me early on: "Stand up and tell us what you have learned here in India." When I was done he said: "Very good. Now be prepared to give a talk every day on some spiritual subject." I obeyed, but he never again called on me to talk!

One morning a woman came with a camera and told Sivanandaji that she had some color film and wanted to take photos of him. At that time color film was extremely expensive and so was the processing, which in the entire subcontinent could only be done by one studio in Bombay at great cost. Sivananda suggested they go outside the satsang hall so the light would be better. The rest of us stayed inside watching through the door. Sivananda walked to the far wall, sat down and told the woman to tell him she was ready. She squatted down at one side and after a bit said she was ready. Immediately his composed smile was replaced by a series of incredibly creative funny faces, each one he insisted she photograph. In my mind's eye I can see it most clearly. I doubt that she had the film developed and printed, but oh how I wish I had them.

One evening satsang Sivananda was in great form and had been especially funny, doing imitations, asking people to tell jokes and asking riddles. When he was walking out of the satsang area, I pushed Steven forward and whispered: "Ask him what is the difference between ammonia and pneumonia! Go on! Do it!" Then I pushed him right into Sivananda's pathway. So he called out: "Swamji!" Sivananda stopped and waited. Finally Steven got it out: "What is the difference between ammonia and pneumonia?" Regally, Swami Sivananda turned and walked on as he said: "One is in a bottle and the other is in a chest." Steven was devastated, chagrined and astounded. An honored guest that evening was a European princess of some kind, who was laughing delightedly along with the rest of us. As Sivananda passed her he turned and said solemnly: "Long live Swami Sivananda Saraswati!" And walked on to his kutir.

In India God is referred to as Dina Bandhu—Friend of the Lowly. Sivananda, being one with God, was absolutely a friend of the lowly. One time a group of poor, illiterate villagers come to the morning satsang on their way to Badrinath. Sivananda spoke to

them with such love and respect it was wonderful to witness. A few asked for initiation and he initiated them right there. The process was interesting. He called for japa malas to be brought. He would take a mala and do some silent japa on it. Then he would ask the person what mantra they wanted. After being told he would tell them to listen carefully. Then he would intone the mantra aloud three times. Next he would have them intone it with him three times. Finally he would have then intone it alone three times. Then he handed them the mala and it appeared to be over, but for those who were faithful, it was only the beginning as the word initiation indicates.

He asked if anyone was ill, and told those who were to be sure and be examined at the free clinic run by the ashram. (Sivananda was himself a doctor and had even edited a medical journal before becoming a monk.) He also gave various things to them that would be of help in their pilgrimage.

The amazing thing was his abundant, boundless love for them and everyone he met. His heart was with the whole world and open to everyone who came to him. More than once I sat looking at him and thinking: "If there is anyone in this world who loves me it is Sivananda." I never doubted it.

There was an army base in Rishikesh, and one morning two soldiers of the lowest rank came to the satsang. How delighted Sivananda was to see them. He asked them to come stand by him and questioned them about themselves and their life in the army. "I am so happy you came to see me," he told them. He had someone bring books, which he gave to them. Then he spoke to Swami Devananda who reached into his ever-present bag and brought out two pencils, handing them to each one as he told them: "Swamiji's Be Good Do Good pencils." (That motto was painted on a large sign above the door. And Sivananda had pencils made with the motto on them as well.) Then they stood smiling at him as he smiled at them radiating his great love, more than the love of a mother. To the world they were of no importance, but to him they were deities because he saw God in them. "Please be sure to come and see me again," he said, and they promised they would.

At one evening satsang prizes were to be given out for a sadhana contest that had taken place that day. I had never heard of a sadhana contest, but assumed that it was a creation of Sivananda to inspire spiritual practice.

Apparently the contestants did various forms of sadhana such as likhit (written) japa. Those that had taken part in the contest lined up at the front. Swami Devananda named someone and announced, "First Prize." He handed the prize to Sivananda, who gave it to the winner. Then Devananda named another person and announced, "First Prize," and Sivananda gave it to them. Every participant got First Prize from Sivananda!

Obviously there were two reasons for this. First, so that no one would be disappointed at not getting First Prize and at the implication that they were less than a first class sadhaka. And second, because those who engage in sadhana all get the same result: the First Prize of Self-Realization. One of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Matthew (20:1-15) is exactly about this principle.

Such was the kindness and wisdom of Sivananda.

Another satsang things were somewhat different. I am sorry to say that there are

supposed sadhus who follow around rich people, fawning on them and often going with them to holy places. That morning one of them ushered in with all undue reverence a man with a big turban, big beard, big mustache, two big revolvers in holsters and two big belts of bullets crossed over his chest. The “swami” seemed at every moment about to fall at the man’s feet and worship him. Of course he had the man sit down in front directly before Sivananda, and kept fussing around him like a silly mother or nanny. Naturally the man had nothing to say to or ask Sivananda because he was empty of all but himself (ego, that is).

Now when he had come in Sivananda had caught a glimpse of him and turned his head slightly away and covered his eyes with his hand. The “sadhu” began reciting a litany of praise of his deity. “He is a bank president” was the first praise. Sivananda briefly turned his head back, lifted his hand for a moment, responded “Unh” then turned back and covered his eyes. At each phrase meant to impress him he did the same. When the glorification came to an end, Sivananda took away his hand and looked intently at the man. “What is the purpose of the guns and the bullets?” he asked. Immediately the devotee jumped in and declared: “Oh, where he lives there are many tigers, and he often hunts tigers!” There are no tigers in this ashram,” Sivananda quietly observed and that was the end of the matter. Though the man and his entourage were supposed to stay for a few days at the ashram we never saw any of them again.

Each morning satsang was ended in the same way. Sitting there in his chair Sivananda would look a bit mischievous and say slowly: “Kindly, sweetly, carefully, quietly, softly, politely... leave the hall at once.” (Sometimes the words were changed, but they always ended in “ly.”) And everyone would go to stand outside except for one. I could not bear to leave him, so I would sit looking at him as he looked back at me. When he stood, I stood and watched him walk through the door as I followed to watch him go out of sight and then hurry with Steven (who had politely left the hall when told to) to stand by the road he would be coming down. Those were immortal moments and they are present to me as I write to tell you about them.

Many are the reminiscences I could record here, but there is one further incident, though, which was particularly meaningful for me, and that I will include.

Rice had never been a favorite with me, perhaps because except for rice pudding it is unknown in the cuisine of the American Midwest. After a short while in India I had come to really dislike it. The very smell of boiled rice nauseated me. This was no small problem, because in Northern India rice comprises most of the diet. Poor people often have nothing but rice with a little salt, date sugar, or yogurt sprinkled on it. Nothing repulsed me more.

One morning Swami Sivananda spoke to a visitor and asked him: “Will you have lunch with me tomorrow?” “Yes, Swamiji,” eagerly replied the fortunate man. “Just plain boiled rice. All right?” “Yes, Swamiji.”

My detestation of plain boiled rice in no way diminished my envy of that blessed man. I assumed that Sivananda was not well and that his diet was restricted to the horrid stuff. But who would care? I would eat dirt to spend time in his presence.

A second person was invited, and again the litany about plain boiled rice was repeated.

The third person declined, saying that his physician had forbidden him to eat rice. I was flabbergasted. Would someone really refuse the invitation of such a great soul for such a flimsy reason? Why not eat the (ugh) stuff and enjoy the Master's divine company and get sick later?

In a moment my astonishment was replaced by even greater wonder as Sivananda looked at me and asked: "Gopaldas [my name as a brahmachari-junior monk], will you have lunch with me tomorrow?" "Yes!" "Just plain boiled rice. Nothing else. Is that all right?" "That is just fine, Swamiji!" "Are you sure? Just plain boiled rice?" "Oh, yes, Swamiji, thank you." "Then come right at noon." I could not believe it—I had been invited, too. My anticipation filled my thoughts for the rest of the day and the early morning hours of the next.

I was on time for the plain boiled rice, I can assure you. But the plain boiled rice turned out to be the most elaborate meal I have ever eaten. Over sixty different dishes—and not one of them plain boiled rice! Cautioning me to only take a little, since I must be sure to eat some of everything, Sivananda supervised my eating. "Just plain boiled rice," he commented meaningfully, and I knew that he knew.

When the time came for me to leave Sivananda and return to Hardwar, he asked me: "When will you see Anandamayi Ma next?" "I don't know, Swamiji." He looked extremely serious and said emphatically: "You must from now on try to spend as much time with her as you can." As I wondered why he was saying this—not realizing, as he did, that my time in India was running out—he added a more surprising statement: "You should take sannyas just as soon as possible."

Confident that his words were wisdom, I determined in that very moment to go directly to see Ma. How I would work out the part about sannyas I had no idea. Nearly all my life I had known I would lead the life of a monk, but I was only twenty-two and the Hindu monastic ideal was extremely high, I knew. Yet, here was a God-realized Master telling me to become a Swami—and soon.

As I saluted him, Sivananda repeated his counsel, emphasizing the part about sannyas.

"Will you do this?"

"Yes, Swamiji."

"Very good."

Very good, indeed.

# Chapter Nineteen

## *The Die Is Cast*

In the week after Easter, Ma Anandamayi came to New Delhi for the celebration of Didima's Sannyas Utsava—the anniversary of her becoming Swami Muktananda Giri.

Although a great many things were going on, and many people had gathered there, I asked to speak to Ma, and got an immediate chance to do so. Ma went into a small room and told everyone to leave. So there I was alone with Ma and my questions. Ma asked me in Bengali what my questions were—and I understood her. And so it was: I would ask a question in English, Ma would reply in Bengali and I would understand her. Her understanding me did not surprise me, because Ma was omniscient. What did surprise me was my ability to understand her Bengali replies.

As I say, Ma was omniscient and was “omni-noticing” also. In America I had bought a string of supposed rudraksha beads and was wearing them. They were not genuine rudraksha, but some kind of seeds that only resembled rudraksha. Ma asked me where I got them, and told me to take them off as they were not truly rudraksha. She then spoke to someone nearby who went and came back with real rudrakshas which Ma handed to me and told me to throw away the fakes. This was a foreshadowing of how my life would be through the years with Ma. She would dispel the false and give me the real. After all, the great prayer says, “Lead me from the unreal to the Real.” And she did.

Why I did not right then ask Ma about my becoming a monk I really do not know, but somehow I had decided to ask her during Her birthday observances which that year would be in Calcutta. Of course, first I had to get permission to go to Calcutta.

This brought out an interesting aspect of Ma's “ways.” Because of the large numbers of people thronging the ashram day and night, it was impossible to get a chance to speak privately with Mataji, so I asked a friend, Omkar Sahai, to ask Her for permission to attend her birthday celebrations. When he did so, he used my secular name. Mataji seemed to know no such person. But when he used my brahmachari name, Gopaldas, She immediately responded and gave Her permission. This heartened me, to learn that Mataji no longer “knew” me as Roger Burke, but as Gopaldas, the servant of the Lord.

After Ma's departure for Calcutta, Omkar and I took the train to Benares where we stayed for a few days in the Benares Anandamayi Ashram. For me the most important incidents of the visit were our pilgrimage to the home of Shyama Charan Lahiri and to the temple where his ashes were enshrined. Although the fires of Manikarnika Ghat had turned his body into charred fragments, when I approached the pillar in which they were enclosed I entered into an aura of dynamic holiness. A third blessing was my solitary trek to Dasashwamedh Ghat where the sister of Babaji Brahmananda lives in an underground cave. I had no trouble finding the spot, and sitting there entered into a

meditative conversation with her in which certain key aspects of my future were revealed.

Reluctantly I left Benares for Calcutta, and went north from there to the city of Shyamnagar that is noted for its magnificent temple of the Goddess Kali. There I enjoyed the hospitality of Durgaprasad Sahai, a devoted disciple of Swami Keshavananda, a leading disciple of Shyama Charan Lahiri who, like his great Master, often came to his devotees in resurrected form after his seeming death. (Swami Keshavananda is written about in *Autobiography of a Yogi*. There is also a photograph of him with Yogananda and Richard Wright.) The Swami had left his body when he was more than one hundred years old, but by his own experience Durgaprasad had found that “death hath no more dominion over him” (Romans 6:9b).

One of Durgaprasad’s best friends was Swami Satyananda, a young monastic disciple of Swami Keshavananda the same age as Durgaprasad. (He is also in the photograph I had just mentioned.) Satyananda’s parents lived in Benares, so when Durgaprasad was studying at Benares Hindu University, he often stayed with them when Satyananda was visiting. During hot weather it was their custom to sleep, not in a small bedroom, but in a large living room with open windows. At the back of the room was a large platform cot on which they slept.

One night Durgaprasad just could not sleep. It must have been the same with Satyananda, because after a while he sat up and began to meditate. Not wanting to disturb him, Durgaprasad lay very still, hoping to eventually drift off to sleep.

But it was not to be. To his surprise Satyananda began to speak to some invisible presence! First, he asked a series of questions about yogic practice and experience. Then he asked questions regarding passages of scriptures that puzzled him. Although he could hear no other voice but Satyananda’s, Durgaprasad could tell from the pauses between the questions and comments from Satyananda such as “Oh, I see that now,” that the Swami was somehow hearing replies to his queries.

Finished with his questioning, Satyananda began on another subject. “It has been so long since I have seen you,” he complained. “I want to see you now!” Apparently the response was negative, for he began insisting that his wish be granted. At one point in his entreaties he suddenly turned toward Durgaprasad and demanded: “Is he awake? Is that why you will not show yourself to me?” And he leaned over and studied his companion’s face and put his hand by his nose to gauge his rate of breathing. Durgaprasad kept his eyes shut and deliberately slowed his breathing. His ruse worked, and Satyananda sat upright and resumed his demands.

Through his barely opened eyes, Durgaprasad saw a tiny point of light appear in the corner of the room—hardly a pinpoint. But it began to increase in size and brilliance until it was as blinding as the sun. Unable to bear the light, Durgaprasad closed his eyes and instantly fell asleep.

The next morning at breakfast, Swami Satyananda asked Durgaprasad if he had slept well—obviously to see if his nocturnal colloquy had been monitored. “I had the same sleep that you did,” was the reply. Immediately Satyananda dragged Durgaprasad out of the room. “What do you mean?” he demanded. “As I said, I had the same sleep

as you.” After looking at Durgaprasad for a while in silence, Satyananda quietly asked: “What did you see?” When Durgaprasad described what he had heard, and how he had seen the light, Satyananda confided to him that Swami Keshavananda had indeed appeared to him, not in a visionary form but in a materialized body—that he had done so many times before. It was only Durgaprasad’s inexperience in yoga that had prevented him seeing his guru as well.

Just as inspiring as this and many other incidents Durgaprasad recounted to me was the sight of an ideal Hindu family living according to the highest spiritual principles. When I told one of Yogananda’s most advanced monastic disciples about my stay with the Sahai’s, he remarked: “The home of such dharmic persons is more sacred and pure than many ashrams.”

The heart of the Sahai household was the worship room where daily every member of the family—including three-year-old Priti—engaged in meditation and worship. Like all Hindu marriages, this one had been arranged without the bride and groom having ever met. The basis for the arrangement had been astrological. The families had exchanged the horoscopes of the prospective couple and each had in turn submitted the astral charts to the scrutiny of their family astrologers. Having found at least thirty six points of harmony in the charts of the two, the astrologers recommended the marriage and it took place, proving the practical value of the tradition of arranged marriages according to astrological principles.

The love and respect each member of the family held for the others was a revelation to me. Especially noteworthy was the respect paid by the parents to the children. Believing in rebirth, they knew that their children were fully developed persons, not at all new to the world, so they both respected them and listened to what they had to say, never disregarding them or their words as unimportant. Further, they knew that the children were not “theirs,” but evolving souls who had possessed many fathers and mothers throughout their peregrinations from body to body.

Love and respect molded the relationship of the children to their parents, as well. They did not know a shadow of fear or mistrust in relation to their parents. They would bow down at their parent’s feet when leaving for school, and ask their blessing. They were normal children who liked fun and the enjoyments of childhood, but they also fulfilled the Vedic injunction: “Let your parents be to you as gods.”

Within the week after my arrival in Shyamnagar, Omkar and I went by train to Agarpara, a small town halfway to Calcutta, where there was a large Anandamayi Ashram. This was to be the site of the 1963 birthday celebrations for Ma. Luckily I did not know what Calcutta crowds were like or I might not have come! Each day after Mataji’s arrival, thousands upon thousands thronged the ashram grounds for a glimpse of her whom they confidently believed was the living Goddess Kali. (It was not uncommon for people to look at Ma and see, instead of her usual appearance, the form of God which they loved the most. I know one man who came to see Ma in a railway station. She was sitting on a cement bench, but he saw her seated on a live tiger in the manner of the Goddess Durga.)

A day or so before the end of the celebrations, I managed to get an appointment to

speak with Ma. This was going to be the big one—I was going to ask about taking up monastic life. Though I did not see how I could lead any other life, still I felt I should have her approval to do so. (I was right.)

That day the crowds were horrendous. A division of policemen was barely enough to keep order. Somehow in all this mess I managed to push my way up a flight of steps to a wire mesh door which was padlocked to keep out intruders such as myself. Brahmacharini Chitra, who always travelled with Ma, saw me and came down from the rooftop. Accompanying me was one of Ma's Bengali devotees who had agreed to translate for me. When Chitra reached us, to my vexation my supposed ally turned traitor, saying to her: "He is supposed to see Ma, but since there is such a crowd it would be better for him to try another time." Such generosity with my time and life! Shaking her head, Chitra told him: "No. He must speak with Ma today, because she told me this morning that no matter how many people came and how busy she was, he must be brought to her without fail." So open came the padlock and door, and in went a grateful, relieved, and righteously disgruntled Gopaldas. And to my malicious glee the traitor got turned away. I was so pleased I forgot to wonder what I was going to do about translation. Up the stairs I went and into the life-giving presence of Ma.

To my immense satisfaction I was told that it would be more than an hour before I could speak with Ma, as so many other things were going on. This meant that I would have more than an hour near Ma and could see her all that time. I even got to witness an initiation by Didima.

My interview went in stages. First I gave Ma some presents, among which was a beautiful lace mantilla such as American women often wore in Catholic churches. As soon as it was handed to Ma She put it on and went out onto a balcony to show the crowd Her new headdress! As I stood looking at Her, suddenly a golden crown appeared over Her head which I recognized as the distinctive crown associated with the appearances of the Virgin Mary in Knock, Ireland. Before coming to India a Roman Catholic friend of mine often came to meditate with me. He would always bring his statue of Our Lady of Knock and put it on my altar. After every meditation period the image would radiate an intense and heavenly rose fragrance for about half an hour.

When Ma came back from the balcony the interview resumed. My translator was really poor in English, but it did not matter—I understood every word Mataji said, just as in Delhi. When She wished, Ma could speak any language. She once gave an interview in Italian to a man from Italy who knew no English. She had also conversed with devotees in various languages, though usually She pretended to know only Bengali and Hindi.)

After my stock of questions was depleted the Moment had arrived. Throughout the interview Mataji had been vigorously walking up and down on the rooftop, answering my questions as She went—and as we scurried along at Her side. For some reason the translator had stopped walking, and Mataji was moving on away from us. But as soon as I spoke the first syllable of my question regarding monastic life to him, She stopped and turned toward me. Standing absolutely still with Her head slightly to one side, She began to smile at me, radiating joy and love in tangible waves. After the question was

conveyed in Bengali She continued for a long while to stand and inundate me with Her loving grace. In an old hymnbook I had come across a hymn that began: "Sun of my soul." Now I beheld that Sun.

Slowly turning Her eyes from me, Ma asked the translator who would give me sannyas—that is, make me a Swami. She asked this because a monk must be able to trace his line of monastic initiation back to Shankaracharya, the founder-reformer of the Swami Order. Although great saints have spontaneously put on the orange garb of the sannyasi, needing no such formalities, it is usual for a man to be "made" a Swami by one who himself had been made a Swami by one who possessed that unbroken lineage from Shankaracharya.

Some months before I had been assured by Swami Vidyananda Giri, a disciple of Yogananda and a monastic disciple of the head of the Swami Order itself that if Ma approved my taking sannyas he would gladly perform the initiation. Upon my relaying this to Mataji, She forcefully said: "Yes. Do it!" Then She went into Her room and came out carrying a heavy silk cloth and two cotton cloths. Handing them to me, She said that I should have them dyed gerua and use them at my monastic initiation.

And so it was done. I was initiated into sannyasa in July of 1963 and given the name Nirmalananda Giri. "Nirmala" means "without defect," and "ananda" means bliss. So usually the name would mean "flawless bliss." But when Swami Vidyananda gave me my monastic name he said to me: "Because Anandamayi Ma was named Nirmala, I have given you this name. You are to consider that for you it means 'The Bliss of Anandamayi Ma.'"

A genuine spiritual initiation is not just a symbolic rite (though symbolism is usually involved), but effects a very real change in the initiate. An interesting demonstration of this occurred right after my initiation into sannyas. Traditionally, Hindu monks beg food for their sustenance, and it is considered a great honor to be the one to give a new monk his first bhiksha (alms-food). The person who does so is considered a kind of godparent to him.

The zamindar (a combination landlord and mayor) of the little rural village where I was, had asked to give me my first bhiksha, so I went directly from the temple to his house, clothed for the first time in the flame-colored garb of the renunciate. After eating a meal that was surely too sumptuous for a simple monastic, I bade my alms-father goodbye and returned to the ashram.

On the way I crossed over a small bridge where I met a herd of about forty cows who were also passing over in single file. When I had gone quite some distance beyond the bridge I felt impelled to turn around. What a sight met my eyes! The entire line of cows was standing motionless as though turned to stone with their heads and necks turned completely round, their eyes fixed on me. Intrigued, I stood there waiting to see how long they would hold that pose. Some minutes passed and the tableaux remained unchanged. Turning, I went on my way, deliberately passing out of their sight behind some trees. I stopped and waited a bit, then stepped out to see the result. Sure enough, the cows were proceeding on their way. But the moment I emerged, several of them stopped and looked around, obviously sensing my presence. Once more I went out of

sight and on my way so they could do the same.

When I returned to the United States it was my karma to meet several self-created “spiritual leaders” in the American yoga world who were instantly hostile to me because I was a monk—as they, too, had been before abandoning their ideals and entering upon a succession of marriages. Listening silently to their harangues about how it was wearing the gerua inwardly rather than outwardly that really mattered, hinting that my wearing of the ochre was an indication of my lack of development, I often thought of my cow friends back in India.

Perhaps it was their good wishes that sent me consolation in the form of Daddy (David) Bray, a great Kahuna saint from Hawaii. Upon our meeting he took both my hands and beamed up at me, saying: “So you wear the robes.” A burned child fears the fire, so I “crawfished,” saying: “Well, I hope I wear them inwardly too.” His smile became even more radiant. “Oh, you wear them inwardly,” he assured me, “otherwise you wouldn’t be wearing them outwardly.” Then he embraced and kissed me, entering into my heart where he lives today even though his body has vanished from human view through the gate of life we call “death.”

My visa time was running out. The climate and travel had told on my health. Though over six-feet-two in height, my weight was under one hundred pounds! Therefore more than one saint urged me to return to America and regain my health. Obeying them, though with a grieving heart, I flew from Calcutta at the beginning of August.

But before that I made the long journey up to the Himalayan foothills to bid farewell to Swami Sivananda in Rishikesh. Seeing me clothed in the gerua of monasticism, his joy was great. Throughout the morning satsang he kept turning to me and saying: “‘Swami Nirmalananda Giri!’ I am so happy! I am so happy!” Not knowing it would be the last time on this earth, I bowed at those sacred feet and left for Calcutta.

Two weeks later on the plane flying out of Calcutta the bursar came to my seat. I recognized her as having been one of the visitors to Sivanandashram while I was staying there. “Did you know that Swami Sivananda left his body a day or so ago?” she asked. The earth was bereft of one of its greatest treasures. A little over sixty years have passed, years in which I have so often yearned to see and hear and touch once again that Fount of Life that was Swami Sivananda Saraswati. May we meet again, is my hope and prayer.

As I came through immigration in Hawaii, shaven-headed and wearing my monastic clothes, the officer looked at me in disgust and barked contemptuously: “What happened? Did you ‘go native?’”

Yes.

I had gone an alien and come back a native.

My vow of more than twenty years’ duration had been fulfilled.

I had found my own.

And they had found me.

# Chapter Twenty

## *What Next? A Lot.*

A friend met me at the Los Angeles airport and I asked him to take me to the Hollywood SRF church which held such happy and blessed memories for me. Since it was evening no one was in the church so I had it to myself. I sat and just felt. And felt nothing. This shocked me. What was wrong with me? Always before, just entering there was a marvelous experience. Now nothing. I pondered this and understood. For nine months I had been living in intense spiritual reality. India was alive, and so were those I met—and the places I met them in. The place I was sitting was dead in comparison—a kind of spiritual museum. My Indian experience had changed things for me, including myself. So I decided to go back to Illinois to my parents and see where things would go from there.

It was good to see family and friends, but I no longer belonged there. I got a job and moved to my own place, meditated and waited to see what developed. For one thing is sure: change is the nature of the world.

For about one year I filled my time by getting secular employment and making new friends and reestablishing ties with old friends. It was not a wide circle, but all were interested in esoteric philosophy and believed in rebirth and karma. They were also members of good standing in both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. (I even chanced upon an Anglican priest and his wife who were lifelong researchers into esoteric matters.) In time we began meeting informally for discussion of spiritual topics. Usually I moderated our exchanges and eventually taught yogic meditation to nearly all of them. As a result I was asked to teach formal classes in yoga and did so—some on the campus of the University of Illinois. I was offered the directorship of an established yoga center in California, but the ties I had formed in Illinois held me there.

Eventually three of us formed an ashram (the Sanskrit word for monastery). Soon we were joined by a fourth, and I became increasingly anxious to return to India and Anandamayi Ma. But more had to happen before then.

Since I was increasingly being asked to give instructions in yogic meditation, the question of diet naturally arose. Whatever system of yoga is employed, all have the common basis of refining and attuning the gross and subtle levels of the yogi's being. This is a matter of energies, and since all the energies that comprise the various bodies, physical, astral, and causal, are drawn almost exclusively from the food we eat, diet is obviously of prime importance. Although I was a convinced vegetarian, I disliked the idea of placing any more burdens on my aspiring yoga students than was necessary. Was it so important not to eat meat? Did it really hinder progress in meditation? To find out I ate some meat—once. I certainly found out! My meditations were not simply hindered, they were virtually empty for about a week. My mind could not enter the

subtle yogic states meditation is meant to produce, and in which the yogi should eventually be permanently established. The alteration in consciousness—in the form of the deadening and dulling of my interior awareness in all facets—that resulted was traumatic and unforgettable. No wonder the “fall” of man had been attributed to eating forbidden food! (See Genesis 2:16-17, 3:17.) The mind is a field of energy that is formed of the subtle energies of the food we eat. So if we eat an animal’s body the mental energies of that animal are mingled with our mind—like grafting an animal brain into a human brain. Not good.

From then on I never hesitated to urge my students to abstain absolutely from meat, fish, and eggs in any form and to any degree, including any kind of food that contained or was derived from meat, fish, or eggs.

I say I had “students,” not disciples. God alone is the guru. Those who claim to be or consider themselves gurus are either ignorant though sincere, or deceivers, or deluded. God is sufficient for us in all things. No intermediary is needed or possible. We all came from God, so there is no question of our ability to return to God if we know the way—which is yoga sadhana. That can be taught to us by a qualified teacher who certainly is a spiritual friend, but nothing more, or even by reading printed instructions in meditation.

Spiritual independence is absolutely necessary in spiritual life. “And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you” (Matthew 25:8-9). The aspirant must in time realize that he has only enough inner “fuel” to lift his own spiritual rocket. If he attempts to share his energies, however noble and pure his motives, he will find that he has dissipated his resources and has not given to others enough for their ultimate, lasting benefit. So all remain bound.

There was only one thing constantly in my mind: returning to Anandamayi Ma. How this could be accomplished I did not know, for I was always on the edge of flat broke. Ma said many times that no one could even see her if she did not will it. So the question was: Would she call me? In later years I realized that the desire to see Ma was itself her call, but at this time I did not know that, so I was increasingly anxious about it.

One afternoon I was speaking with one of my yoga students who expressed an interest in traveling to India to meet Ma. I was telling him of my last darshan of her on the roof of the Raja of Solan’s house in Hardwar. “When I bowed down before her in farewell,” I told him, “Ma laughed and said: ‘Be sure and do not forget what you have learned here.’ But she did not....” Before I could complete the sentence with “tell me to return,” I remembered in a lightning flash that she had completed Her sentence: “And come back in the winter.” I sat, thunderstruck. How had I forgotten that for all these years? She had said to return! Right now it was late summer. Would I manage to return that winter?

A miracle was needed, and a miracle was supplied. One of my students received a telephone call from several states away, saying that a company whose debt to him he had long ago given up as uncollectable was trying to restructure itself, and to do so

needed to settle with him. Having nothing else to do, he drove to meet with the company's directors face-to-face. On the way he made a promise to God that he would give any money he might receive to me so I could return to India soon. He assumed that he would only receive a thousand or so dollars, but upon his arrival he was handed a check for many times that amount. Oh, no! Why had he made that promise? Of course, if he reneged no one but God would know. Somewhere along the drive back to Bloomington, he decided to keep the vow and give me the money.

Upon receiving far more than I needed for a ticket to India, I realized that there had to be a purpose for it. Comprehension was not far behind. The purpose was clear: I should not go to Ma alone, but should bring with me those three students who had remained faithful in their practice. There was not enough money for all four of us to fly to India, but "coincidentally" we had learned of a way in which we could fly to Hanover Germany, purchase a Volkswagen bus, and drive overland to India. Upon our return to Germany the vehicle would be bought back for a large percentage of the original cost, and we could fly back to the United States on that money. We decided on this plan and carried it out, rushing through Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to India, then over to Dehradun where a spiritual conference (Samyam Sapta) was to be held with Ma Anandamayi. The time was short, so we often drove day and night. We made it in a total of nine days' driving.

As we drove through the border gate and into India, I felt as though a million gods were welcoming us. In a short time we found a complex of temples. As we got out of the car, we were welcomed by the Brahmin priest in charge who seemed to be waiting for me. Taking me by the hand, he brought me into the main temple where the items for the worship of Shiva and Parvati were spread out, and he assisted me in their worship. At the close of the elaborate rites I knew we had been received by the gods. When I asked to give some monetary donation, the priest refused smilingly. He had only done his duty, he assured me. So bidding him farewell, we sped on our way to Ma.

The next day, in late afternoon, we were making the ascent through the Himalayan foothills to Dehradun. Awe seized my entire being. This was no dream or idle fancy: Ma was real, and soon I would be in her presence. We arrived just before the sun set, and were joyfully greeted by the devotees I had met during my first trip. Standing outside the small house where Ma was staying, I could hear her voice through the open windows. My gratitude at knowing that sweetest of sounds was boundless. Moving hardly three yards away, I saw through another window both Giriji and Didi in close conversation. Shamelessly I eavesdropped, since I could not understand their language, and luxuriated in the sound of their voices as well.

Then I was summoned by Brahmacharini Chitra to enter Ma's room, and in moments was bowing before my only life. When I stood up I was struck at how frail Ma looked, and how she had aged in five years. While on the road I had begun to worry. On my first trip I had seen absolutely that Ma was God. Would I see the same this time? I need not have worried. As I stood gazing at Mataji, beholding with open eyes her absolute divinity, I asked myself in wonder: "How did I miss so much the first time I was here? Ma is much more obviously divine than I perceived then."

It was always so. Every time I returned to Ma her divinity was increasingly evident. She had once prophesied: "In later times you will all be amazed at how ordinary This Body will seem to be." I had prayed desperately that she would never draw the veil for me, but would always be God in my sight. That prayer she fulfilled. Never for a moment did she ever appear to be anything less than God. Instead, as I have said, my "seeing" of Her increased.

Over the years many people—some of them devotees for decades—would say to me: "How I wish I could see in Ma what you see." But they were mistaken. It was not my seeing, but her revealing. And if they had asked her, they, too, would have received. Once a close devotee of Ma read me part of a letter written to her by one of those who always travelled with Ma. "Nirmalananda was here for some days with Mataji, and as usual he got the best of her." "You always receive more from Mataji in your visits than we who are with her so much of the time," various devotees would tell me, not without touches of envy. Such is the blindness of humanity that they would not realize that there was no difference in Mataji's giving. She gave alike to all. The difference was in the receiving, and that was completely in the control of each devotee.

Ma loved all alike, but not all loved Ma in return. They crowded close to receive, but hardly ever to give. Ma was the comfort of our hearts, but who would be Ma's comfort? She was our refuge, but could she take refuge in us? Once in Kurukshetra (the place of the battlefield where Krishna spoke the Bhagavad Gita) I sat at Ma's feet in a large open courtyard. While the mounting sun blazed down on us, she gestured animatedly and said over and over to me: "I am filled with joy [anandamayi] at seeing you here." And the last words I heard from her lips before she removed Her body from earthly sight through "death" were: "You have brought great joy [*bhot anand*] by coming here." Knowing that Mataji ever spoke the truth, I can console myself with the thought that perhaps I was able to give her something in return, that as she made my heart glad, so in some measure she could be glad in seeing me.

In a letter to a devotee, Ma Anandamayi once dictated: "Have you not seen what life in this world is? The One to be loved is God. In Him is everything—Him you must try to find."

Ma!

# Chapter Twenty One

## *Death and Rebirth*

We had reached India in mid-November of 1968. As the week of the Samyam Sapta was drawing to a close I began making plans to drive with one of our group to New Delhi to meet two other students that were coming to India by air.

The atmosphere of these annual conferences with Mataji was unique. One interesting aspect was the observed phenomenon that those who interrupted the week by leaving before the end were often involved in some type of accident. Not wanting this to happen to me, I asked Brahmacharini Atmananda to ask Mataji if it would be all right for the two of us to leave. I noticed that Mataji responded very brusquely to Atmananda when she spoke to Her. This unsettled me, so I asked Atmananda what she had said to Ma. "I told her you and Wishwanath were leaving for Delhi this evening," she answered. "But," I protested, "didn't you ask her permission to do so?" "Well, you are going, aren't you? Where is the need for permission?" was Atmananda's unsatisfactory rejoinder.

Instead of insisting that Mataji be asked as I felt should be done, I made a grave error by doing nothing. This was especially foolish since two days before, as I had been walking from the conference grounds back to where we were staying, an inner voice had come: "Do you realize that in two days you will be dead?" I was stunned. Really? I had hoped that I would be remaining in India for the rest of my life, but did not expect it to be so short. Well, so be it. As long as all was in Ma's hands what difference could it make?

Late that evening, Wishwanath and I got in the VW bus and headed for New Delhi, not realizing the supreme folly of driving at night—and especially on that particular road which was noted for traffic mishaps.

Long after dark, as we continued on to our destination, the inner voice came again: "Put on your seat belt, because you are going to have an accident." I did so, and a few minutes later we crashed at full speed into the back of a large flat-bed wagon that was being pulled by a water buffalo. Having no lights on it, the wagon had been completely invisible until seconds before impact. The front of the bus was caved in, knocking us both unconscious. When I came to, Wishwanath was also just reviving. The glove compartment was now jammed into my lap, and I was hopelessly pinned in. What about my legs? I had heard that if you can wiggle your toes then your legs are not broken. I wiggled them merrily and congratulated myself on not being injured. Then I ran my hand down my right leg and felt the bloody stump of the bone protruding from the flesh. That was one theory exploded!

Within a quarter of an hour a group of men had assembled and were attempting to free me from the bus. Someone had telephoned a hospital at Panipat a few miles away, so hopefully assistance was on the way. When it arrived, instead of an ambulance it

was a jeep that had been fitted out as a fire truck!

The crew could do no more than pull the crushed front of the bus a few inches away from me, so I was going to have to be pulled out. I have an extensive vocabulary, but no words I know can convey the excruciating pain of being dragged sideways out of the bus as my shattered legs flopped where they would. I had no words for it then, either, so as I was hauled out of the wreck I cried out: “Ram! Ram! Ram!” (the Name of the avatar Rama). We had brought a small portable ironing board with us to India, and that was the only support that could be found for my legs. In some way I was carried over to the jeep and gotten in, though my legs—on the ironing board—were left to stick out into the air. I thanked my helpers, and away we bounced down the road, my legs about to fly off the board at every second.

My beloved saint-friend, Raihana Tyabji, had told me at our first meeting: “My son, India is one vast lunatic asylum. If you don’t demand sanity from us, we won’t demand it from you, and we will all be happy together.” Now I proved my worthiness as an adopted son of India, for my reaction to all of this chaos was one of unalloyed joy. What did I care what happened to my body? I was in the land I loved, the home of my soul, hopefully never to leave again. So great was my joy that I began to sing the Names of God aloud. And since it was India, the home of God, the three men with me in the little jeep joined in, and the night rang with our enthusiastic praises of the One Reality, as we sped on, the passing busses and trucks missing striking my extended legs only by scant inches.

Arriving at the hospital, I was told that the x-ray machine was broken, so the doctor did not want to put my legs in casts. Instead he got the bones back in place and put a set of wooden braces on my legs to held them reasonably steady. While this was going on, two of Ma’s devotees arrived, having heard somehow of the accident. One of them was a High Court judge who threatened the doctor that if I was not well taken care of there would be repercussions. At the time I thought this unduly harsh, especially since the doctor was really a fine and dedicated man, but afterward I found out that it was this threatening alone that prevailed to have the hospital authorities send me in an ambulance to New Delhi instead of strapping me into the wrecked bus and having it and me dragged down to Delhi behind a supply truck—a project that would have taken three days!

Between midnight and dawn I was taken and placed in a common ward. Miraculously I slept a little. Not long after dawn a stream of visitors began arriving. Most of them spoke little English, but their loving faces conveyed the message. Some of the older women would caress and hug me as though I were a beloved infant. Many brought fruit and flowers, the traditional gift for sannyasis. Every so often the nurses would come in and chase my guests out, but in a few minutes some more would take their place.

A little past noon the doctor came in and said I was to be taken to New Delhi by ambulance. He had wanted to send me to the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, but the night before he had also been ordered by the judge to send me to Irwin Hospital. Whether this was the best choice or not, I have no idea, but it was no

consolation to learn a few days later that the citizens of New Delhi referred to Irwin Hospital as “The Butcher Shop.” Maybe they have worse names for the others!

However that may be, I was maneuvered onto an ambulance stretcher and carried out of the hospital into the front drive.

The scene was absolutely incredible. Nearly three hundred people were gathered there, and at sight of me broke into shouts of acclamation. My bewilderment was dispelled by one of my bearers turning to me and saying: “All these people have come here to see you, because they were told that a man has come from America who says the Name of God.” Where else but in my India!

After I was in the ambulance, another man came to say: “These people will not let us go until they have given you their respects. What shall we do?” “Let them come on!” I told him. So, one-by-one they began stepping up onto the back of the ambulance and saluting me with folded hands. Then someone got the idea of being more efficient, so three to four people would step up at a time. How long it took for all to manage their greetings, I don’t know, but at the end I had a great pile of fruit and flowers. Calling for one of the hospital orderlies, I asked him to distribute them to the crowd, which he did with great enthusiasm. Tentatively the ambulance began to inch forward, then to roll with increasing velocity. Someone began to sing a devotional song. Soon the entire crowd took it up, and amid unrestrained jubilation we started on the way to New Delhi.

The next few days were absolutely horrendous and absolutely marvelous.

My traveling companions, including the two that I had been going to meet when I encountered the buffalo wagon instead, found places to stay at night, and came to spend the days with me in the hospital. They were appalled at everything they saw—rightly so—but I was the proverbial bug-in-a-rug, right at home—at home. However, I wanted them to know there was more to India than The Butcher Shop, so I gave them general directions as to how they might find Raihana Tyabji and tell her of my plight and ask her blessings. They did so, and she sent word by them that she was praying for me.

When I had met her in 1963, Raihanaji had not left her room for several years. She would not even step out into the hall, but lived in the one room as though it were her Himalayan cave. Numberless were those who sought out her humble abode to receive her spiritual assistance. Her door was always open to everyone, whatever their purpose in coming to her. I learned from those who had visited her that she now would go from the house in which she stayed to the building next door for satsangs once a week. But this building was on the same property, and her rule was never to go beyond its bounds. Regretfully she told them that she would not be able to come see me. Just knowing her thoughts were with me was enough for me, and more.

Never can I forget a single aspect of the next evening when tangible peace descended upon my little room where I had just been moved from the noisy common ward. Gently the door opened, and from beyond it I heard the vibrant voice of Raihanaji: “May I come in?” Entering, she rushed over to the bed and embraced and kissed me. Stepping back, her eyes shining with love and joy, she announced: “My son,

you have died and been reborn!” Several other saints made the same declaration in the ensuing months. That it was true, I knew, for vast reaches of my inner mind had opened that I never suspected were even there.

Not only did my personality and entire psychological “set” change from the moment of my coming to on the Kurukshetra road, so also had my physical body altered. When the first two of my fellow-travelers found me in the hospital, they did not recognize me, and had started to leave to inquire of my whereabouts, assuming that the nurse had mistakenly directed them to my bed since I was an American. Only when I called their names did they realize it was me.

One important change was in my health. From the age of six I had been in very poor physical condition, and my near death from rheumatic fever when I was almost twelve had done nothing to help it. I had no physical stamina, but ran on will power and nerve energy alone. Every few years I would start to die, and would have to rouse myself through a fixation of will to continue living. Now that was all changed. My health was good, however bad off my legs might be. My life force was strong, and my metabolism was perfect. Even the life line on my palm which had been short from birth had now lengthened out. “You will live long,” was another pronouncement I heard from more than one saint.

However remarkable the changes, only one really occupied my mind. From what I have written so far about Ma it is surely evident that she gave me her grace unstintingly from the beginning of my coming to her. Yet there was a flaw in my relationship with her from the first, as well. Over and over again in writing about Ma, people would speak of her remoteness. No matter what was going on, they could sense that Ma was not really “with” them, but in another dimension altogether. Many complained—even to Ma—and implied that it was because she did not really care for them, much less love them.

I, too, was aware of this remoteness, but by her grace understood that it was I who was the alien, not Ma. Ma was not distant from me, I was distant from her. Whenever I would be with her, however near physically, I was always aware of a tremendous abyss between us. Inwardly I viewed her across a chasm whose existence tormented my heart. Frantically I would pray to her: “Ma, please remove this distance. I don’t want to be separated from you.” Yet the breach had remained.

Now it was gone. I had passed over the gulf to Ma’s side and could at last experience and receive her love. Because Ma’s love alone was the true love, and not the egoic attachment and infatuation we deluded mortals think is love, most people never knew how great, how real, her love was for them. Some devotees asked me: “How can I know Ma loves me?” I had no answer for them, except to get cracked up on the road to Kurukshetra, die, and come back to life!

So severe were my injuries, I spent the next nine months in plaster casts. The bus got minimally repaired, and we went to live in Hardwar where “coincidentally” we were given the same kutir that I had lived in during my first stay in 1963. Whenever Ma came to Delhi we would drive down to be with her.

Ma sometimes objected to being called “mother,” and would reply that the Self

alone was mother and father. But at my last interview of that trip with Her, sitting on my stretcher, I could not help but say: "I want to wear out your ears calling: 'Ma, Ma, Ma!'" Ma laughed and, pointing to her right ear, said to me: "You cannot 'wear out' these ears by calling 'Ma,' because that is what they are for."

# Chapter Twenty Two

## *American Ashram*

During this time after my accident I had decided firmly that upon my return to America I would begin in a quiet and traditional way giving instructions in yogic meditation and Hindu philosophy—Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Religion.

In August of 1969 we returned to New York and trekked our way across the vast plains to Oklahoma City, the home of one of our little company. My right leg was still in a cast since the break was at a point that received very little blood supply. After nearly nine months a kind of cartilage had formed, but the bone had not become solid. Consultation with a specialist in Oklahoma elicited the recommendation that I have a bone graft. This idea hardly appealed to me, and I said so. This disgruntled him, and he directed that I should not have another cast put on. So home I went with my leg wobbling—but what could I do?

God had always proven to be the best source of help in the past, so I decided to put my case to Him. While in New Delhi we had obtained a set of beautiful small images of Rama, Sita, and Lakshman, incarnations of God born in India several thousand years ago, which we had brought with us from India. Using a tiny room in our underground apartment as a shrine, I installed the images. Searching through the books I had obtained in India I found the rituals for formal worship. The first day at the end of the worship I showed my leg to the Holy Three. “See this?” I inquired, “What are you going to do about it?” The second day I did the same. On the third day I found my leg completely solid. I went back to the specialist walking. He hastily congratulated me and got rid of me as fast as he could—guilty at his dirty ploy to force me into an operation and unable to cope with my miraculous healing. Such is the way of the world.

In time we moved into a large house, where after a few months we re-established our ashram. Although it was my wish to name it Sri Rama Ashram or Ayodhya Ashram (the home of Rama), the others (by now we were six) wanted to name it the Sri Ma Anandamayi Ashram, and so we did. There I gave classes and lectures on yoga and Indian philosophy.

On the second floor we had a meditation room, and on the altar we had the images of Rama, Sita and Lakshman. Sacred imagery is respected by all Hindus (Sanatana Dharmis), and treated accordingly, but an image is only worshipped when it has become alive through the ritual known as “prana pratishtha”—installation/infusion of life. From then on there is a subtle, spiritual connection between the image and the one depicted by the images. The image is treated as the living presence of the deity, which it is.

Those who cannot free themselves from the negative conditioning of the religions that denounce “idolatry” accommodate that ignorance by insisting that the image is not worshipped, but the one represented by the image. This is not so. Just as your and

my body are not really our true Selves, but the dwelling-place of “us,” so the image is the dwelling-place, the incarnate presence and indwelling of the deity or avatar (divine incarnation). Since our consciousness and the deity’s consciousness pervades our body and the image, it is for all practical purposes both us and the deity. After all, if someone slaps your body you say, “You slapped me!” not “You slapped my body!” though that would be more exact. So, after the prana pratishtha, the image is—just as with us—a conscious, living entity. This is demonstrated occasionally by indications of life and awareness manifested by the images.

This happened to us at the daily arati—the waving of lights in homage—when the deities usually manifested life and awareness. It is the tradition in India for deities to be depicted with their eyes looking straight ahead, never up or down or to one side. But during arati the deities would turn their gaze toward one of the worshippers throughout the rite. And at the end we would each say which one we saw being looked at, and it was always the same for us all.

Living images may change their appearance either temporarily and permanently. Our images were not very expensive because we did not have much money, so the gold leaf on the bottom borders of the deities’ clothing did not go completely around the images, but ended just a bit beyond their right side. But a few weeks after the daily worship was established, the pujari (the monk who usually did the worship) told us that the gold leaf now extended completely around the borders in the back. And so it was. These manifestations are common experiences for Hindus throughout the world.

The ashram itself was formally inaugurated on a very special day. We had a life-size photograph of Anandamayi Ma and a smaller but large photograph of Sri Ramakrishna. The photographs were consecrated with elaborate traditional rituals spanning three days. At their end we had a traditionally prepared and consecrated room on the ground floor of the ashram as our temple. There were three altar-shrines: one for Anandamayi Ma, one for Sri Ramakrishna and one for Rama-Sita-Lakshman.

In India rain is considered very auspicious and a sign of blessing. On the day of the inauguration and for every day afterward for one month there was a period of rain. Oftentimes when we left the ashram in our van we saw that the rain was only over the ashram property. Sometimes there was rain when there were no clouds. When I later told this to Anandamayi Ma’s devotees in India they were very pleased but not surprised.

We decided to have public satsangs on Friday evenings and put a small notice about it in the classified section of the local newspaper. Every week I gave a talk on the Bhagavad Gita. Only a few people came at a time, but eventually some people got the idea and we gained a few spiritual friend-attendees, including some Indians. However, every time I would put up a newly framed picture of a deity or holy person, I would say to myself, “Now it will be harder for people to come into this building.” And so it was. Here are two interesting examples.

In the midst of one week I put a picture of Ganesha over our front door as a guardian. Behind that picture I had also taped the mantras of the Sudarshana Chakra, a weapon that banishes evil and evil persons. I prayed, “Ganapati, please do not let

anyone through this door that you do not like.”

The very next Friday people began coming for the satsang and one of the monks was in our entrance room to direct people who were coming for the first time. Four people came up the walk, and three entered while one stood outside just on the step. They turned and saw him standing there, and one of them said, “What are you doing? Come on in!” For a fraction of a minute the man stood there, looking like he was pushing against an invisible barrier, then turned and ran back to his car, jumped in and roared off down the street. Later we learned that he was engaging in very negative occult practice.

A next-door neighbor told one of our monks, “You know, we often see people come up your walk and stand outside your door for some minutes and then turn around and walk away.”

Ganesha heard my prayer.

Newspapers are always on the lookout for stories, and the main newspaper called and asked if they could do a story on our ashram. We agreed, and a story with photos was printed. This produced two interesting results.

The first was an attack on our ashram by several young people. They threw a huge brick through one window and stood outside, beating on the wall, crying and “talking in tongues” for quite some time.

The second was a visit from the FBI. When I came into the entrance room where two agents were sitting they jumped up, apparently ready for a violent confrontation. I invited them sit back down, and sat down myself. First they asked me for identification, so I got my passport and some ID cards and brought them to examine. Then they asked me to roll up my right sleeve and carefully studied my forearm. All along they had been tense and on guard, but now they relaxed and told me that after the article appeared on our ashram, someone called the local FBI office and told them they recognized my picture as being one of the “most wanted” men in the country, from the photos shown at the end of a local television station’s broadcast day, as was common then. This man was a terrorist who had bombed a school in Colorado. He had a huge tattoo on his right forearm, so they had asked to see my right arm if I had one or had one removed. They told me not to worry, that they continually got calls from local viewers claiming to recognize a criminal from the nightly “most wanted” photos shown on television. Of course I realized that some bigot who was outraged by the photos of our ashram’s worship room had made the call to harass us or even get us in some kind of trouble. This is the way of evil.

Having told you this, I will tell you about The Swami Divorce Case, of which I am very proud, since Saint Paul (II Timothy 3:12) said all who would live godly will undergo persecution. And also because it is an example of what real yoga can do in someone’s life, including one of my meditation students.

I have observed in myself and other yogis that when real sadhana is done both the intellect and the will are developed and empowered. This was the case of a woman whose family used her as a drudge while continually disrespecting her. Several times her younger daughter said to her husband in her presence, “Why don’t you get rid of

Mom? She's a defective!" (Some years before, her eyes had been damaged by a faulty tetanus injection, and for a while she had been completely blind. Then she became able to see somewhat, but had to use jewelers' magnification lenses to read.) She was quiet and gentle by nature, and silently endured this.

But things changed when she took a meditation class at our ashram. She meditated faithfully and the bonds began to drop away. First, she firmly told her children that "defective Mom" was not taking any more insults and suchlike from them or their father. After a while she moved out of the house and sensibly filed for a divorce which was granted along with alimony and a property settlement. Since money was involved an appeal was filed by Daddy naming me as the culprit behind Mom's getting a divorce.

Naturally I was subpoenaed and went to court. Right away I saw that the judge was both very intelligent and honorable. So I knew everything was going to be all right.

Being a deadbeat, Daddy had not engaged an experienced lawyer, but a young beginner who was not even being paid by him. So I was confronted with a great number of questions, asked with an air of We've Got You Now, as to the meaning of my Sanskrit name, my life history, my religious beliefs, and if it was true that I had recently gone to another state to look at property for the relocation of our ashram.

I answered the dimwitted questions thoroughly and carefully spelled out for the court stenographer the Sanskrit terms in my answers.

About an hour into this farce, the judge banged his gavel and said very forcefully, "I deny this appeal and this waste of the court's time."

And that was the end of the Swami Divorce Case, which I enjoyed immensely.

# Chapter Twenty Three

## *Sthir, Dhir and Vir*

At this time America—or a segment of its population—was in the midst of the Yoga Boom that had exploded in the 'sixties. Indian gurus were abounding—all of them successful in varying degrees. At first this seemed a very positive development, a logical consequence of the decades of single-handed spiritual labor expended by the great yogi, Paramhansa Yogananda.

In time I, too, was drawn into “the Yoga Circuit,” but after extensive traveling and lecturing in yoga retreats, ashrams, yoga centers, and such like I was forced to face certain unsavory facts about the entire situation that disturbed me greatly—so much so that in the first draft of this book I refused to write about it and skipped over the experience of several years.

The most glaring trait of the Yoga World was its lack of authenticity. Not only was there total disregard of essential traditions regarding the transmission of yogic knowledge, what was being imparted to the public was a ludicrous hobbledy-gobble of hopelessly truncated yoga methods and mindless platitudes. Unmitigated and shameless irresponsibility was the norm. Check the box on the form and get yourself a mantra and a guru (at varying prices)! The reason was not hard to figure out. The whole miserable mess was nothing more—and woefully nothing less—than a con game being conducted with classical carnival atmosphere.

During a visit to India I had a very lengthy conversation with Ma Anandamayi. Because I was not fitting in with the American Yoga Jungle, I needed advice on procedure. Should I simply say nothing and go my way? But how could I if I continued to participate in the activities sponsored by these vagarious yogis and their organizations? “Ma, there is not a single authentic teacher or guru in America,” I lamented. “Yes, I know,” was her simple reply. Her advice was equally simple. I should continue to go wherever I was asked, and I was to speak the truth as plainly as I could, without regard to the inevitable objections. She told me, “You must speak the truth fully and be firm, courageous, and strong!” (The words she used were *Sthir*, *Dhir* and *Vir*.) “Do not care about people’s reactions. Let them not invite you back if they object to what you say. But you must speak the truth.”

Knowing that she was always with me, I returned to the United States ready to try it out.

One of Ma’s “out of the blue” private discourses to me had been on the necessity for a spiritual aspirant to “find his place” and work from there. She had said more than once: “You must find your sthan”—literally, “place of stand.” So following her advice I spoke straightforwardly on classical Hindu and yogic subjects and made a lot of enemies and very few friends.

Cruel exploitation of their disciples by the false gurus was the basis of the entire

Yoga Boom. At that time there was a period of awakening in America that was unparalleled in its history. Thousands of people, most of them young, flocked to the various gurus and followed them in all sincerity and dedication. But in time all the gurus were discovered to be frauds, and worse. Sadly, nearly all those they sought to deceive abandoned spiritual life altogether, some becoming rabid denouncers of both Hinduism and Yoga.

As Ma Anandamayi had directed me, during all this time I spoke the truth about both Sanatana Dharma and Yoga. Occasionally Americans who were involved in the administration of the various gurus' organizations came to me and expressed their bewilderment at what they were seeing in their guru and the organization around them. I told them that they were seeing correctly, and they withdrew from these groups. Therefore I was eventually banned from them all. One super-guru sent letters to all his centers saying that if I ever came to their door they should refuse to let me enter. For me that was a great relief, because I did not want to collaborate with those frauds by speaking at their retreats and seeming to be in support of their spiritual crimes. By following Ma's directive to be Sthir, Dhir and Vir I was free.

Fortunately, the Yoga Boom which lasted only ten years or so is long over, so I need not say any more.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## *Revelation!*

Though I have mentioned a small bit, after my return from my second Indian pilgrimage so much happened that I need to summarize it.

At first our ashram was in Oklahoma City, but when we had first come to Oklahoma City from India, I was not very pleased, though at the time it was the reasonable thing to do. So one morning in meditation I set before my mind the question of where would be a better place for us. Immediately it was like I was miles above the earth, and I saw an area shining with light. I did not forget this and after some years I decided to go there and look around for a place to move the ashram. I did, and found an ideal situation for our immediate circumstances, especially in practical matters.

But in a few years I realized that we no longer needed to live there, either, but could relocate to California. Someone had told me that at the end of his life Yogananda had told his first American disciple, Dr. Minot Lewis, about a place in the low desert beyond San Diego named Borrego Springs, which was ideal for meditation and quiet life—and that he should live there. So both Dr. Lewis and Yogananda's great disciple Rajasi Janakananda (James J. Lynn) bought property there. I looked it up, and three of us went there and found it was as Yogananda said. We bought a few acres that had a house and outbuildings and moved there. The atmosphere of the entire valley was ideal for meditation, as Yogananda had said. We lived there happily and totally content for some years, but there was a looming problem unknown to us previously. The entire water supply was "fossil water" in a reservoir created millions of years before, but agribusiness had come into the valley and was draining it away. Wells began to go dry, and we realized that once again we had to find another place for our ashram. After a lot of searching we found an ideal property in the mountains east of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and moved there. And here we are today.

That was a big change, but a much larger and important thing was coming.

Over a span of more than fifty years I faithfully practiced techniques of various systems of yoga. I found that the methods, although they did give various interesting psychic experiences, eventually they proved to just be psychic gimmicks, each one leading over the same ground to nothing substantial or lasting. They never gave experience of the divine Self, for they were not true yoga. I was just a spiritual hamster running in its wheel over and over and over. But I never gave up hoping to find the true way eventually.

At one time I was diligently practicing anapanasati—breath awareness—as taught by traditional Buddhist meditation teachers. It was very calming and certainly an exercise in awareness. But as I was aware of my breath moving in and out, I also was aware that my inhalations and exhalations were producing subtle sounds, but they were so subtle

and soft that I could not perceive what they were. Naturally this was frustrating, and I fervently prayed that I could discover what they were, but my prayers were not answered so I muddled on, determined to not give up.

One day I was doing some kind of search on the internet—I do not remember for what, exactly. At one point a site came up that intrigued me. At the top it had a photograph of two identical buildings in typical North Indian temple style facing one another. Right under that was an area in which four photos of a man kept appearing one after the other in perpetual change. Photographic copies of various brief texts in an unknown Indian language (Marathi) followed. Finally there was a link to download a text with an English title. I clicked the link and the text of an entire book came up. I looked at a bit of it and then got off the internet, foolishly not having noted the web address. I could not remember how I had gotten there, but after a few days of trying I somehow got back to it. So I noted the web address and came back a few times, reading at random what little was in English (not the book). And then one day I typed in the web address and got a Chinese online gambling site instead! The original site had been kidnapped. That seemed to be the end of that.

But I told about my experience to a website expert who found out how to retrieve the original site. Believe me, I copied that English book, which was good, because when that site came back under a slightly different url, the book was no longer offered. And after a few weeks the site itself disappeared again permanently.

Eventually I printed out the book and read it through. It gave a great deal of detailed information about the Nath Yogi Sampradaya and included the life and teachings of Sri Gajanana Maharaj, a virtually unknown twentieth-century master yogi of the Nath tradition. (He was not the very famous Gajanana Maharaj of the same name who died in 1910.)

There is an old expression, “honor among thieves,” that means thieves respecting each other’s territory and not trespassing on them. This applies to many “gurus” operating in India and abroad. They do not “blow the whistle” on each other, but say all gurus are to be respected and are really all the same spiritually. Sometimes they even visit each other and prostrate to each other to show their universal outlook and reverence. They also insist that all paths lead to the one goal, so no one path is better than another. This is all insincere, but seems very positive, open and spiritual to the uninformed and the unwary.

So I was utterly astounded to read that Gajanana Maharaj openly and often spoke of “false gurus” and “false yogas.” He often delineated the characteristics by which they could be detected as frauds. Having lived through the American yoga boom that began in 1967 and lasted about ten or a dozen years before evaporating almost totally, I was very aware of such gurus and yogas. And my respect for Maharaj was increased. He did not lie to get followers.

But his teachings held something vastly more important. He also explained the nature of a genuine sadguru as one who simply teaches the way to Self-realization to others as their friend—not a “master” or a necessary link to God. And even more important, he taught the authentic yoga that would lead to Self-realization: Soham

Yoga sadhana. I tried it and within five minutes realized that at last I had Found It. I continue to realize it every day at every meditation.

You can read about Gajanana Maharaj's life in my book, *Light of Soham*, and his published teachings in my book, *The Inspired Wisdom of Sri Gajanana Maharaj*.

My book, *Soham Yoga: The Yoga of the Self*, gives the teachings of Gajanana Maharaj and many masters and scriptures about Soham Yoga.

As an angel's voice said to Saint Augustine when he found a book in an abandoned house that changed his life forever: Take And Read.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## *The Capstone*

As I write this I am nearing my eighty-fifth birthday. When I was a child it was the norm for people to die after reaching their sixties. Therefore sixty-five was the age at which people retired and enrolled in Social Security. (In my hometown it was called “the old-age pension.”) But things have greatly changed since then and it is not at all unusual for people to live into their eighties and nineties. It has also been known for centuries that monastics live longer than the norm. When I was in my mid-sixties I was examined by a heart specialist in his thirties. He said to me, “Your body is thirty years younger than mine. How is that?” I told him, “Doctor, I am a vegetarian and a yogi. And I am not married.” His reply was simple: “I understand.”

There is a lot of talk about “self-image” or “self-identity” that I do not take very seriously, but if questioned I would say I have three fundamental, essential identities: I am a Sanatana Dharmi—a Hindu. I am a yogi—a practitioner of Soham Yoga. I am a sannyasi—a Hindu monk of the ancient monastic order of Shankaracharya, the great non-dualist philosopher of India who was born in 509 B.C. (There is some argument about that date, which I do not take very seriously, either.)

I say first of all that I am a Sanatana Dharmi because I believe the teachings of Sanatana Dharma wholeheartedly, and it is only in the context of Sanatana Dharma that yoga is meaningful and is understood philosophically. Further, Yoga is one of the six orthodox philosophies of Sanatana Dharma, so it is organically inseparable from Sanatana Dharma.

I am a sannyasi, a monk, because that is the mode of life in conformity with my karma and samskara which manifest as my swabhava—my basic psychology or temperament. It is the living out of my inmost nature and destiny. Once an Indian sannyasi of my acquaintance was on a ferry in Canada. Seeing his sannyasi attire, a little girl came up to him and asked, “What are you supposed to be?” He smiled and told her, “Oh, just what I am supposed to be.” That is it.

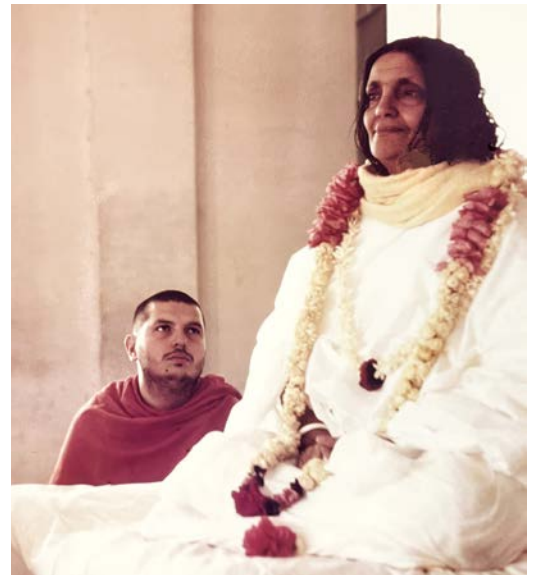
The dharma, the purpose, of every human being is to seek and attain the knowledge/realization of the eternal, immortal, divine Self, the Atman, which is a part of the Paramatman/Parambrahman, that is the Supreme Self: God. Yoga is the way to fulfill that dharma, and sannyasa is a great assistance for the yogi seeking the enlightenment (moksha: freedom and liberation) that is the fulfillment of dharma.

Soham Yoga sadhana is the foundation, the structure and the capstone of everything. That is why I wrote *Soham Yoga: The Yoga of the Self*.

And now our journey together through my life-story is done. But I hope you will consider beginning and living the highest, ultimate life along with me through yourself becoming a Soham Yogi and knowing for yourself: Soham Asmi. I Am Soham.



Anandamayi Ma and her mother, called Didima or Giriji by her devotees. Born Mokshada Sundari Devi Bhattacharya. Didima's sannyas name was Swami Muktananda Giri.



Anandamayi Ma and Swami Nirmalananda in the early 1970s



Swami Vidyananda at 105 years old



Mohanananda Brahmachari



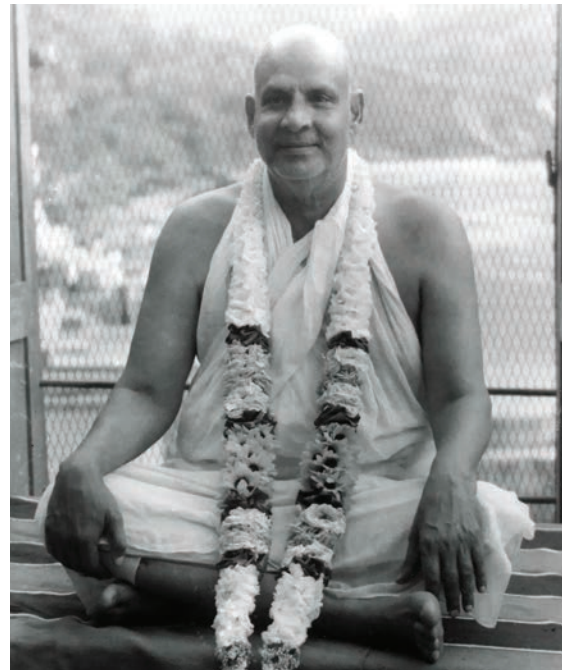
Swami Sivananda-Hridayananda



Swami Rama of Hardwar



Raihana Tyabji



Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh

# Appendix One

## *Blessed Memories*

In my childhood I heard a song, part of which was:

Precious mem'ries, unseen angels,  
Sent from heaven to my soul;  
How they linger, ever near me,  
And the sacred past unfold.

As I travel on life's pathway,  
Know not what the years may hold;  
As I ponder, hope grows fonder,  
Precious mem'ries flood my soul.

I would like to share with you some of the ever-present, ever-living memories I accumulated during several pilgrimages to India.

In India one of the elements considered necessary for a complete spiritual life is Satsanga: Company With The Real/Truth. In my life I was fortunate to meet with people who were embodiments of the truth, both as spiritual examples to be followed and as themselves being united with the True, with Satchidananda Itself, in their lives. Being with them was the highest satsanga except for the ultimate satsanga which is union with the Absolute Reality (Sat). I cannot convey their wonder and glory in words, but as best as I can I want to give you glimpse of my experience of them.

There is an obscure Protestant hymn that says: "When I look on the past I behold how His great hand of mercy led me." That is basically the story of my life, beginning with my miraculous grandmothers and culminating in Anandamayi Ma. There have been many divine hands that have led me on the path of spiritual life.

By far my life's most blessed memories are those of India. Every pilgrimage to India began in the same way: at my first sight of home, I shed tears of joy and gratitude, thanking God over and over that it had not been a dream: India was there. And was my life. India is the presence of God in the world. That is no exaggeration. Bharat Mata is a divine manifestation, and whether they know it or not, she is the spiritual mother of all whose heart's compass turns toward God.

Many places and incidents in my pilgrimages to India became beloved memories, but it was the holy people I met there that are the most beloved, for they were manifestations of the glory that is India—and therefore God. They are not memories to me, but living presences within me.

Every moment I was in India was a moment in the presence of God. I was continually amazed and overjoyed at the spiritual glory that is India revealed in the people and places I met and saw. Although it was essentially spiritual, that glory was

also physical and objective, visible to me in everything and everyone. India is truly Bharat Mata: Mother India, the spiritual Mother of the world. God, India and Sanatana Dharma are organically one. And they are mine, though I live in exile, so far away.

My memories that follow are not according to any chronology, but just as they came to my mind as I wrote.

### **Professor Lahiri (Abhay Charan Lahiri)**

One morning during our ashram's morning meditation I became keenly aware that "someone" was present invisibly. I knew it was a man, an Indian and a powerful yogi. "Who are you?" I asked, and he told me that he was a great-grandson of Yogiraj Shyama Charan Lahiri and lived in the Lahiri ancestral home in Varanasi. I asked if I could meet him when I next went to India, and he said Yes.

When I went to Varanasi during my next pilgrimage I stayed at the Anandamayi Ashram, where I met Sri K. Basu, an official of the Anandamayi Sangha, known to his family and Ma's devotees as Patal-da ("Brother Potato," an affectionate name given to him by his family at his birth since he was fat and rotund like a potato), and asked him if he would take me to the Lahiri home the next day so I could meet the Yogiraj's great-grandson. He told me that the great-grandson was a professor of mathematics at the renowned Benares Hindu University, and he would take me there to meet him since the Yogiraj's house was in the Bengalitola district of Varanasi where non-residents could get hopelessly lost.

The next morning we went in a car toward the university. But before we got there we came to a huge traffic circle where everything was moving very slowly, and sometimes not at all. Suddenly Patal-da exclaimed, pointing, "There is Professor Lahiri in that rickshaw!" I saw two men sitting in a rickshaw right at the circle median opposite us. I got out of the car, which was obviously going to be stranded for some time, to go there on foot. At the same time one of the men got down from the rickshaw and wove his way over to me. With no preamble he took my hand and said, "I am very busy all day today, but I can come to see you at the ashram this evening." That was it—he knew who I was and that I was staying at the Anandamayi Ashram. I agreed and he quickly returned to the rickshaw as the traffic began to move. It was all so fast that it took a bit for me to realize that he knew me by sight, knew my purpose and knew I was staying at the Anandamayi Ashram! So we really had met in our ashram meditation room on the other side of the world.

That evening I was sitting in my room when Professor Lahiri walked in and sat beside me and began speaking openly and familiarly with me about his spiritual lineage and the traditions of his ancestors, because the whole line of gurus had been fathers and sons. For generations a master of that family would have just one child, a male, and that child would be instructed early in yoga, and on the death of his father would become the next guru in the line. They never had many disciples because their requirements could be met by very few. His wisdom and matter-of-fact manner deeply impressed me. He was in reality a perfected grihastha ("householder") yogi, one of the precious treasures of India.

At one part in our conversation he laughed and said: “Look at us! Here you are, from the West, wearing gerua and being called by a Sanskrit name. Here am I, sitting here in a Western suit and tie and called ‘Mister’ and ‘Professor’ by most people who consider me non-religious and a disgrace to my grandfather’s memory.” It was a very humbling thing to have such a great, yes, colossal master sitting there speaking with me as though we were longtime friends. He told me many valuable things and helped me have a much clearer and vital perspective on many aspects of yoga and the requirements of both teacher and students.

I never met him again physically, but we corresponded some and I did send a very dear friend to see him and ask to learn from him. (I had gotten his permission first.) He lived in a huge mansion that was more like a fortress, and when she approached the door it opened and he was standing there. Some others were with her, so as they went in he quietly said: “I can’t talk with them here. Please come back in the evening.” So she did; but I am sorry to say that though she could easily have met the traditional requirements of his lineage, she refused to do so and never saw him again. Confident that he knew exactly how the meeting would turn out, I felt sure that his agreeing to meet her was a gesture of kindness toward me. Actually, it is not impossible that I was the only one he ever revealed himself to that was not a disciple.

The master has now left this world and his son is living in the ancestral home silently and secretly guiding others to the Infinite. May the blessing of all that line of masters be upon us.

### **A Brindaban Bhakta**

From my very first pilgrimage whenever I went for a walk I would intensely scrutinize every face I saw, just to satisfy my inner thirst for the very sight of Indian faces, and because I often saw people walking down the street whose spiritual condition I envied. I have never looked into the face of a stranger in India.

One day in Brindaban, the birthplace of Sri Krishna, I saw an elderly man dressed all in white walking down the street. I knew that he was extraordinary, a person of remarkable spiritual stature. Later on in the holy Bankey Bihari Temple I met him and experienced his inner greatness, as I will recount shortly. He was one of the incredible treasures who abounded in “poor” India in contrast to the inwardly impoverished West, to whom the words of Jesus certainly apply: “Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17).

The Bankey Bihari Temple itself is a sacred marvel I cannot adequately describe. Bankey Bihari is a title of Krishna. The image of Krishna there is living. To see it is to see Sri Krishna Himself. The experience is utterly indescribable. The first darshan (sight/seeing) of the day is attended by the most fervent devotees very early in the morning. Everyone is standing in silent expectation before the doors of the inner shrine, awaiting the sight of the Lord. Finally the doors open to reveal a curtain before the image. When this curtain is drawn aside the spiritual current that flows out over the devotees is so intense that they exclaim in awe.

The first time I had this experience I was with two American devotees of Anandamayi Ma, Shraddha and Satya Davenport. One of the temple priests was observing our reaction, and invited us to return at noon to eat the prasada (ritually offered food) of the Lord. As we were sitting to the side of the shrine awaiting the prasada, the little man I had seen in the street came up to us and sat down in front of Shraddha and Satya. In Hindi he began telling them to say the holy Name of Sri Krishna. I explained his words to them, and they began repeating the holy Name after him several times. Then he pranam, stood up and started to leave. A priest who was standing there asked him if he wanted some money from my friends. The man was visibly annoyed and offended, and sharply told the priest: "They have given me what I wanted!" And left. But not from our memory.

### **A Truly Sane "Mad" Woman**

Vastly different from this sacred soul was someone I met in a tiny village in the plains of Bengal, just outside the ashram of my sannyasa guru, Swami Vidyananda Giri. I was waiting for a bus, so I sat on a bench outside a tiny three-sided lean-to by the road. Immediately a very strange hoarse voice began speaking behind me. Some of the students from the school run by Vidyanandaji were there and told me, "This crazy old woman is talking to you. She is asking you about the road farther on. We told her you had never been there, but she is crazy." It seems prudent to ignore her, so I did not turn around.

There were two or three other men in the lean-to and they all began teasing her, all the while laughing. She raised her voice and then every one of them began laughing uncontrollably. "She is telling us to leave her alone. 'I am the king's daughter,' she says, 'and you will be sorry you are treating me this way.' Hearing those words I was actually afraid. Somehow I knew that this woman was identified with Parvati, the wife of Shiva, daughter of King Himalaya. This is not uncommon in some forms of devotional sadhana in India. I could feel the woman's power and understood that I was in the presence of a true yogi—even though I had not yet looked at her.

They continued to pester her, so she came out from the lean-to and squatted down in the road where there were many rocks which she grabbed in a threatening manner as she glowered at them, but I could tell she was perfectly calm inwardly.

Her action quieted her mockers.

Then looking at me steadily she began silently questioning me about myself, and I could understand her meaning. So I answered mentally as she looked at me intently. She seemed satisfied, but I realized that I should not let this chance escape me. "May I ask you about sadhana?" I inquired mentally. She nodded. And I began asking her advice about my spiritual practice. She told me many things. When I had no more questions she looked at me quizzically, then stood up and walked on down the road with great dignity. So ended one of the most valuable instruction sessions in yoga and its practice that I had ever received.

Just then the bus came so I got on and spent the four-hour ride into Purulia (which was only fourteen miles away) thinking of her and wondering whom I had really met.

### **A Laughing Unknown Soul-Friend**

Another mysterious person was a radiant, elderly man that came into the office of the Varanasi Anandamayi Ashram where a pandit was examining my horoscope and explaining it to me. He sat down by the door and looked at me steadily. The pandit had come to the subject of marriage. This was not at my request because when I was four years old it had been revealed to me that I would not marry.

And that insight was still an absolute within me as the pandit told me that I would marry three times! He said that my first wife would die shortly after our marriage. My second wife would not be a good wife, but I should not worry—I could get a divorce. This insulted me, because Hindus do not divorce. (Because of this in British Colonial days a Christian Divorce Law was enacted so “the saved in Christ” could divorce and get another wife as often as they liked.) However my third wife would be very good and I would have a very happy married life.

As I was emphatically saying No to these predictions, the man by the door was looking at me and laughing joyfully. I sensed that he was on my side and knew the pandit was wrong, but he was enjoying my discomfort in a friendly manner, as friends laugh at one another on occasion at embarrassing events.

Anyhow, I stuck to my guns of denial and the pandit held to his marital predictions, and when the fun was evidently over, my friend by the door stood up and left smiling.

### **Yugavati**

The next treasure I want to tell you about lived right in the midst of the bustle of Delhi, but beyond it all.

One morning my friend Shyam Lal Sharma said he wanted me to meet a special person, a woman named Yugavati who was the sister of a famous Vaishnava guru of Brindaban. So off we went. Sharmaji was a man of very modest means, with whose family I always stayed when in Delhi, always sleeping in the living room. So I was surprised when we arrived at a three-story mansion in a new and prosperous neighborhood.

The surprises were not ended.

As we went up the two flights of stairs to the third floor, Sharmaji explained to me that Yugavati had been a very wealthy woman, but several years before had given everything she had to her daughter with the understanding that a house was to be built with a temple of Radha-Krishna on the top floor and that full temple worship should be offered there daily by a priest. All she asked for was a place to live in the temple room itself so she could see Sri Radha and Krishna all the rest of her life.

The temple room was opulent, and in very good taste. We saluted the deities who were being attended by the priest, and then turned to the left side of the room where Yugavati was sitting on a folding canvas cot of the type that soldiers and campers had been using for a century or more. A few things were under the cot—all that Yugavati possessed. Her name, Yugavati, means a person of profound intuition who lives completely, inwardly and outwardly, according to their atmic vision and nature. This

was very obviously true of her, since her entire aura was completely supernatural. She never left that upper floor, and passed her days in meditation and observing the worship of Lord Krishna.

I wish I could have photographs of all the saints I tell about in this book, but my attempts at description will have to suffice. So let me try to tell you about the appearance of Yugavati.

She did not look at all like her famous brother (I had seen his photo), but did look very much like Sri Ramakrishna's great disciple Swami Shivananda also known as Mahapurusha who was the third head of the Ramakrishna Mission. Her face was strikingly noble, and her skin was golden in color and literally glowed with subtle light. (I had only seen this twice before.)

We sat and she began speaking to us about the supremacy of spiritual practice and aspiration. Reaching into a small bag she brought out a japa mala. It was her brother's mala. He had given it to her just before he left the body and told her to use two malas for her sadhana, that she should hold onto one bead and with the other use a second mala to count off one hundred thousand repetitions of her mantra before moving on to the next bead in his mala. When she completed his mala she had done *ten million eight hundred thousand* repetitions of her mantra. Well, it had worked. She was living proof. As she spoke to us she was moving the beads through her fingers, able to continue the repetition of her mantra even while speaking—a mark of a supremely adept yogi.

Sitting there was a visit to God dwelling in an illumined heart. I went away breathing blessing.

In just a few weeks she left her body, frequently speaking about me and wishing we could meet once more. Surely God will grant her wish in a much higher world than this.

### Maitri Devi

Late one morning Rani Bhan said to me: "I am taking you to meet a saint today," and we set off. O my India! It was a long walk, but worth it. Our destination was an especially beautiful ashram on Ring Road in north Delhi. "This is the ashram of Sri Maitri Devi," Rani told me. Then she led me inside into a large satsang hall and over to some closed double doors that proved to be locked. "It must be after noon," she exclaimed. (Rani had no watch. She lived in natural simplicity.) "Then we no doubt can't see Maitri Devi. Let's go home."

But as we recrossed the satsang hall, a brahmacharini came from a hallway carrying a gigantic bunch of keys on a huge ring. "Ma wants me to open the temple so he can have darshan," she told Rani. Rani objected, saying that it could not be so, since Maitri Devi was very strict and everywhere in India temples were closed at noon so the deity could take a siesta, as did the humans. Waving the keys, the nun countered: "If she did not tell me to open the temple, how to I have her keys?" Her logic stilled Rani somewhat, but she was still wondering under her breath as the doors were unlocked and we entered a small but exquisite temple.

The doors of the inner shrine were closed. "There, you see?" announced Rani, but

the nun just went up to them, knocked and called out “Jai Ho!” to warn the deity of our intended intrusion and opened them. There on the altar was the most beautiful image I ever saw in India. It was an image of Vishnu less than two feet tall, but exquisite. Later I learned that it had been made by a very famous image-maker of Calcutta. It was so beautiful—more beautiful than any image he had previously made—that his family begged him not to send it to Maitri Devi but keep it and make another for her. “No. This is my last image. I will never make another,” he told them. Although he seemed in good health, within a month he left this world.

Rani and I went home without meeting Maitri Devi, but I certainly wanted to see her, so the next morning I went by myself to her ashram. Meeting her was no disappointment. Her purity and exalted spiritual state radiated around her. We spoke together through a translator; she was very interested in how I came to visit India and questioned me about the reaction of my family to my interest in yoga and Indian philosophy.

Anyway, Maitri Devi was apparently satisfied with our conversation, for at noon time she took me into the ashram kitchen and had me sit next to her and eat with all the nuns—something completely against tradition. It was though she considered me one of the all-female community even though I was a man.

(I did not know it, but Sri Maitri Devi had very strict rules about men coming into the ashram. Only the satsang hall and the temple-room were open to them. They were not permitted anywhere else. That day Rani was not with me to be shocked and amazed, and I was too ignorant to know anything was unusual, when I was told that Maitri Devi and the nuns were in the kitchen for lunch and Matri Devi had said I should come there and eat with them. So I did, sitting right next to her.)

From then on whenever I was in Delhi I would go to Matri Devi’s ashram for the evening arati, kirtan and spiritual discourse by Matri Devi. The singing there was among the most beautiful I have ever heard.

Once when Raniji went with me to the ashram, she asked Maitri Devi to tell me something of her spiritual history. She readily agreed and told me the following.

Mataji had been born in the wealthiest and most influential family in the area. Her grandfather was the guru of an entire spiritual community in Agra (home of the Taj Mahal). Since it is advised that gurus not initiate their relatives, when she was only nine years of age he took her to very famous guru in the Punjab and asked that he give his granddaughter initiation, which he did.

A few years later, her father who was a military surgeon came home at the end of one day and told his wife and children that he faced a worrying dilemma. That day a wandering sannyasini (nun) had come to his clinic and asked him to examine her. He found that she desperately needed a very serious operation immediately, and offered to perform the surgery the very next morning. The nun agreed, but only if he would do the surgery without giving her an anesthetic! “You need only tell me how long it will take, and I will go into samadhi and you can operate. But be sure you tell me the right amount of time, because if I come to while you are still operating, the shock will kill me.” Dr. Dayal was afraid that without anesthetic the woman would die; but she would

refuse the operation otherwise and would definitely die. The next morning as he left for the clinic he had not found a solution. His wife and children awaited his return at midday. He came in smiling and told them that he had done as the sannyasini wanted and that not only had everything gone well, she did not need any time to recuperate, but got off the operating table and went her way, promising to return over the new few days so he could feel assured. Of course the whole family wanted to meet such an unusual person and Swami Purnananda came to the Dayal home.

Questioning the yogini, they learned that she had never wanted to be married, but her parents had forced her to marry the man of their choice. (This is the Indian way and usually works very well.) When the two were finally alone together, Purnanandaji began to speak of the ideals of total renunciation and the search for God alone. She spoke all night long, and around dawn the two of them crept away and never returned home again. For a woman to travel alone in India was unheard of and dangerous, so they began the wandering life together. So obvious was their purity and resolve that they were given sannyas and accepted as ideal sadhus wherever they went. Papa Ramdas of Anandashram knew them well and sometimes spent time traveling with them.

Purnananda was a brilliant lecturer on Vedanta, as was her husband. As a consequence when she went to Varanasi she eclipsed the professional pandits who were not just jealous but murderous. They poisoned her, but by her yoga power she neutralized the poison. That frightened them and from then on they left her alone.

She frequently visited the Dayal family and especially spoke to Maitri Devi who from their first meeting had decided to become a nun. Purnananda told her that she should indeed become a nun and build a beautiful ashram in Delhi. "Many women will desire to live there, but you must only accept girls from the best and most devout families. If their families are not dharmic, refuse their request to live with you." Purnananda emphasized this again and again. "I will not live to see your ashram, but when you dedicate it I will give it my shakti [spiritual power]." When the ashram was built a large satsang hall was the central area. High up near the ceiling there was a special shrine in which a large photograph of Purnananda was placed. While the temple consecration was going on, someone came and urged Maitri Devi to go into the satsang hall which was next to the temple. When she did so, she saw that lightning was running all through the ceiling and gathering around Purnananda's photo. Everyone saw it and was in awe, but Maitri Devi knew that this was the fulfillment of her guru's promise.

Maitri Devi spoke only Hindi, but she freely answered through a translator any questions I put to her. Once, as we sat with her monastic disciples on the marble veranda fronting the ashram building, I asked her if she had anything she wanted to say to me on her own. Yes, she did. For the next minutes she explained that there were two aspects of spiritual life: the philosophy and the practice. However exalted and complex the philosophy might be, without the requisite practice there could be no genuine realization—the third element which came from practice alone, never from theory or dogma. Even if the philosophy was incomplete or not perfectly grasped, she said, yet if

the practice was correct and complete the realization would come in time and the seeker's philosophy would spontaneously be rectified by his illumination. If, however, the practice was missing, then no realization was possible. She asked if I understood. I did.

Because of her great warmth and kindness to me, I did not know that she was not so disposed to others. One day I met two newly-arrived men—one from Holland and one from France—and since they asked about spiritual centers they could visit, I took them that evening to the arati at the Satyanarayan Kutir. After the arati there was always truly exquisite kirtan (singing of devotional music) sung by the nuns, and Maitri Devi would give a talk in Hindi, the language of north-central India.

The two men had questions they wanted to ask her, but she said very firmly that she did not know English and that they should go to an ashram where English was known. My sympathy with them might have been displaced, but I quietly asked them what question they would like to ask. They told me, and I relayed it to Maitri Devi through one of the nuns and she gave a very complete answer which was translated to me in English. In this way I relayed all their questions. But I got the idea and never brought anyone to the ashram again.

Whenever I went to India I would always go to the Satyanarayan Kutir the first day. There is a festival of Krishna in which a kind of mountain of food is made and his image put on the top and worshipped. One year Mother Anandamayi was in Delhi, so I went to see her first and then to Maitri Devi who was sitting in the satsang hall by the food mountain. Only the resident nuns and I were there sitting in silence near her. She was in an ecstatic state with barely opened eyes, and every so often she would intone the name of Ram, sounding as though it was forcing itself upward and out from her very being. The Bhagavad Gita speaks of the perfected yogi living in peaceful joy and clear peace. That was exactly how the atmosphere around her felt. I spent many immortal moments with her, but this was the most memorable.

The last time I visited her one of the nuns told me that Maitri Devi had not been well and had been unable to sleep the entire night. When I told her I would return the next day she said, "Let me tell Ma you are here." In a few moments she came back and told me: "Ma wants to see you. She is getting up and after taking a bath will be with you." And so it was. There is no doubt she knew we would not meet again in this world. I pray that I will meet her in her world one day.

### **Swami Rama of Hardwar (Ram Kunj)**

Late one afternoon when I was staying for a while with Srimati Rani Bhan and her family in Delhi she told me that we (Rani, her son and I) would be going to see a Kashmiri saint in a nearby neighborhood. The length of the walk belied the description of "nearby" but I trusted Raniji's respect for the saint who was simply named Swami Rama. He was not a Shankara swami but one who had taken what Ma Anandamayi in a conversation with me called "shukla sannyas," white sannyas. In such a sannyas there are no formal rites of any kind. Rather, from deep within the impulse to declare oneself a sannyasi arises and the person does so spontaneously, adopting a name and

henceforth leading the sadhu life. Some, such as Swami Paramananda the chief sannyasi of the Anandamayi Ashram, wore gerua clothing and others dressed in white. It all depended on their intuition. Rani had not told me which Swami Rama was.

The swami was staying in a fairly large house, but it was filled with people. Because of the universal respect Rani had in Delhi both for her personal spiritual character and the fact that Prime Minister Nehru was her cousin, we were taken to the front row of the room where the swami would be when he appeared. It was a good bit of a wait, so I meditated until Rani touched my shoulder and said, "He is coming."

I stood up and turned around and knew that the radiant man in simple white with no trappings of religion whatsoever coming toward us was The One. He brought with him an atmosphere of inner spiritual fire. His face was radiant and his complexion golden. He smoldered. Looking at him I thought: "The Pope has to be dressed in great finery and carried into Saint Peter's on a throne to let people know who he is, but this man needs none of that." I was impressed and meant no disrespect to the Pope. But I was glad I was there instead of in Saint Peter's.

When he sat down, so did we—right in front of him. He spoke for a short time in Hindi (which I did not know) and answered questions. As we were walking back to the Bhans' home I told Rani that I would really like to speak with him, and she said she would arrange it.

Since I was interested in the swami, Rani told me that he was born in a small village in Kashmir. When he was nine years old he was idly playing in the main street. A wandering yogi came down the street and told him, "Come with me." So he went with the yogi through the village and a goodly distance beyond. When they were not in sight of anyone, the yogi stopped and instructed him in a mantra, telling him to always repeat the mantra mentally both in and outside of meditation. Then the yogi walked on, and the future Swami Rama never saw him again. Many years later in the Himalayas Swamiji was in great danger. The yogi suddenly appeared, saved his life and disappeared. These two times were his only contact with him. But I can tell you that the sadhana given him by the yogi certainly worked. Swami Rama was one of the greatest yogis I have met. When he quietly intoned Om everyone's hair would stand on end. No one could be more unassuming in outer behavior and demeanor, yet he was impressive beyond description and his wisdom was profound.

A day or so later I went to see him. He told me that he had a small ashram by the Ganges in the holy city of Hardwar, and I would always be welcome to come there to meet with him. He came to Rani's home one afternoon for a satsang with several people. We meditated a while, and when he softly intoned Om, the subtle shakti (energy) that pervaded the room was unforgettable.

During my second pilgrimage to India I was traveling with Anandamayi Ma, and when she went to Hardwar, I found where Swami Rama's ashram was and went there to visit him. We had a long talk. His wisdom was great, and so was his knowledge of yoga sadhana. His explanations of various aspects of yoga practice were profound and of great practical value. His ashram consisted of a thatched mud hut and a fairly large two-story building. He lived in the hut and his visitors stayed in the building.

People came from long distances to learn from him, but he refused to give initiation to anyone, saying that if he did, they would not do what he told them and they would tell people that he did not teach what he really did teach, and that he taught what he did not really teach. Good sense and insight into the nature of human beings are the necessary qualities of a yogi, and he certainly had them.

Some pandits from Maharashtra were staying with him in Hardwar for several weeks. Yet he adamantly refused to play the guru game. He gladly taught yoga of various sorts to aspirants, but would not pretend to empower them with some kind of initiation. Instead he assured them that by drawing on their own inner resources they could gain realization.

There must have been an intuitive element to Swami Rama's conversations. Because of his very thick Kashmiri accent I was always about three sentences behind when he spoke to me, but I never lost a word.

My last visit with him took place in Hardwar at his very simple and tranquil ashram by the Ganges. I had been with Anandamayi Ma at Bhagat House most of the morning, and when she went to her room for a few hours I walked over to Swamiji's ashram, having just learned earlier that day that he was in Hardwar.

With me was a young Austrian man who had arrived just that morning to meet with Mataji. He figured that his parents would never agree to his coming to India, so when they left for a vacation in Spain he looted his bank account and sped to India. Arriving in Delhi, he went to the Swiss embassy (there was no Austrian embassy there) and asked them: "Where can I meet someone who is like those written about in the ancient books of Indian spirituality?" Rather a tall order, but it so happened that the entire embassy staff was devoted to Ma Anandamayi, and they told him she was now in Hardwar. So there he was, too. So also was the telegram from his parents telling him to return immediately. (Wisely, he did not. And later visited India again and kept in touch with Brahmacharini Atmananda, also an Austrian. I always asked for news about him when I saw her, and it was always good, I am glad to say.)

Walking into Swami Rama's ashram was a beautiful revelation. Most of the buildings were thatch huts and those that were not were simple and plain. Not the lair of a glitter guru, but the abode of a genuine yogi. And there sat the yogi on the ground in his usual white attire, reading. It was a happy meeting indeed. Swamiji was a jewel, perfected by the Master Jeweler, and just to sit near him was refreshing and joy. He and I caught up on what each had been doing since our last visit.

Swami Rama was very pleased to meet with Thomas, who right away asked about Kundalini. He was fortunate (as was I), since Swamiji understood the subject as few did. His main teacher had been his own yoga practice, but he had spent some years with the great Kashmiri yogi Swami Lakshmanjoo, who I am sure perfected his understanding of Kundalini.

"First," said Swami Rama, "kundalini is *not* shakti. Nor is it prakriti or even mulaprakriti. It is beyond power; it is *consciousness*—primal consciousness: mulachaitanya. This has to be understood. Anything other than this is not kundalini, but an illusion. You cannot 'awaken' kundalini; it awakens you! The 'rise of kundalini'

is the rise of consciousness from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to the Light, from death to Immortality. Kundalini bestows of Self-realization, which has nothing to do with energy but everything to do with consciousness, the consciousness of Brahman that is our inmost Self. Kundalini is Self-realization.” As usual, Swamiji had said volumes in a few sentences. (I learned early on in my time in India that simplicity is a hallmark of the wise, the Brahmajnanis. Complexity is a trait of samsara.)

Next was my turn and I asked about Om. “Om is not a mantra,” announced Swami Rama. “It is Brahman. Realizing that is moksha. It is slightly a vibration, but almost totally is Divine Consciousness: Brahmachaitanya. We can even say that it is moksha, the embodiment of moksha. We must become Om. Then we will be God.” Now I knew.

Like good friends we talked about a lot of things, some trivial, some sublime, but always in contentment with one another’s company. With Swami Rama you never felt any distance or difference because he was one with everything, and that included you.

In this world good things always come to an end, and so did this, my last meeting with Swamiji. Thomas and I walked back into Hardwar very silent and very satisfied.

I never met Swami Rama again, but I never left him, either.

### **Raihana Tyabji**

Rani Bhan knew many spiritual figures personally, and told me about them. One especially interested me: Raihana Tyabji. Raihana was from a very powerful and wealthy Moslem family in western India. But early on in her life three things drastically changed Raihana’s life.

1) When she approached the age to become engaged to marry, she fervently prayed that something would happen to her to ensure that no one would ever want to marry her. The answer to her prayer came in the form of vitiligo: a skin condition where there is loss of color or pigmentation in patches, resulting in blotches. (Some thought it was leprosy!) So marriage was eliminated as a prospect in her life. Once she was freed from the threat of marriage, her entire skin turned white and she appeared quite normal except for two brown splotches underneath her eyes (perhaps as a guarantee that no one would want to marry her in the future).

2) She became a fervent devotee of Krishna and a renowned singer of Hindu spiritual songs (bhajans). So powerful was her voice that she gave concerts to thousands without needing any sound amplification whatsoever.

3) She became an active associate of Gandhi in the movement for Indian independence. (Some of Gandhi’s letters to her can be found in publications of his complete writings.)

Because of these three factors, she became independent from her family and happily pursued her life without interference.

Hearing all this from Rani I asked her to introduce me to this world-renouncing devotee. She told me that Raihana lived in a small room at the back of the house of Gandhi’s (former) senior secretary, Sri Kakasahib Kallelkar, just a block from Raj Ghat, the site of Gandhi’s cremation, and she never left the property, so Rani would phone on my behalf.

As a result I went with her one day to Raihana's little room. The closer to God someone is, the more distinct is his personality and mode of life. Raihana embodied this principle. Her strength of intellect and character was instantly evident to me.

So also was her greatness of heart. For Raihana no one was a stranger. As a result people of vastly differing backgrounds and mentalities came to her for wisdom and inspiration. Over the years a large number of Indians and non-Indians became part of her spiritual family. Yet she herself was one hundred percent Indian in all personal traits and once even said to me: "I would rather be a cockroach in India than a saint in the West," referring to the advantageous spiritual atmosphere of India.

Next to her bed was a large bookcase filled with paperback books. Naturally I was curious and asked to look at them. She agreed, and I saw that they were the complete mystery novels of Agatha Christie! When I expressed my surprise, Raihana simply replied, "I learn a great deal from her." (Later in America I read most of Agatha Christie's novels and found they contained amazing psychological insight. Raihana was right.)

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Every conversation with Raihana was a revelation of spiritual and practical wisdom. Two things she said stand out among the many hours of our conversations.

As I have told earlier, for a while I stayed at an "ashram" run by westerners. Their contempt and abusive behavior toward my Indian friends appalled me. I told this to Raihana, saying, "They treat the Indians like slaves." To my amazement she immediately answered, "I don't feel sorry for those Indians. If they did not have the minds of slaves they could not be treated like slaves." She was right. The words of Jesus are true: "According to your faith so be it unto you" (Matthew 9:29), and according to a person's mentality so shall his life be. Everyone orders his own life according to his state of mind. Our mind is being reflected in the mirror of our life. We must have deep inner strength and integrity within ourselves to have it outside us as well.

Once in the midst of a conversation Raihana stopped and stunned me by saying very forcefully, "Do you know something? You are a fraud!" Gulp. Then she continued, "Here you are sitting before me claiming to be an American, when in truth you are an old Bharati [Indian] sadhu [monk] who has wandered throughout this land in many lives." When I got over the shock I realized she was right, and I should order and live my whole life accordingly. By truly being myself I could become my Self.

One time Raihanaji said to me: "You know, foreigners are often born in India for some reason, and they don't like it at all. They are dissatisfied that Delhi is not like Paris or New York. They are a real nuisance to us, and the moment they get the chance they are off to the West, and we are so glad to get rid of them. Then there are people like you, old Bharatis (Indians) who somehow ended up in the West. Many years later Swami Ishtananda of the San Diego Vedanta Society told me. "I have given a lot of thought to your situation and have decided that just as in baseball if something is not right in the batting, the ball goes sideways in a completely wrong direction, so when you were to be born you were tossed toward India, but something went awry and you

ended up here.” It might be so, and I have begged many saints in India to bless me that there will be no more mistakes and no more births outside India. They all agreed to do so.

Of course I prefer even more the prophecy made by a priest of the Gauri-Shankar Temple in Delhi. I was with my good friend Shyam Lal Sharma before the Durga shrine. I fervently prayed: “Ma! Please do not refuse to receive me into your durbar [pala court]. We bowed down and as we started away, the priest reached out and caught Sharmaji by the shoulder (something completely against the rules, as a priest never reaches out from the shrine and touches anyone while “on duty”). Pointing to me, he said: “This is his last birth. When he leaves this world he will go to God.”

However, I certainly share in the sentiments of Paramhansa Yogananda when he wrote his poem, My India:

Not where the musk of happiness blows,  
Not where darkness and fears never tread;  
Not in the homes of perpetual smiles,  
Nor in the heaven of a land of prosperity  
Would I be born  
If I must put on mortal garb once more.

Dread famine may prowl and tear my flesh,  
Yet would I love to be again  
In my Hindustan.  
A million thieves of disease  
May try to steal the body’s fleeting health;  
And clouds of fate  
May shower scalding drops of searing sorrow—  
Yet would I there, in India,  
Love to reappear!

Is this love of mine blind sentiment  
That sees not the pathways of reason?  
Ah, no! I love India,  
For there I learned first to love God and all things beautiful.  
Some teach to seize the fickle dewdrop, life,  
Sliding down the lotus leaf of time;  
Stubborn hopes are built  
Around the gilded, brittle body-bubble.  
But India taught me to love

The soul of deathless beauty in the dewdrop  
and the bubble—  
Not their fragile frames.

Her sages taught me to find my Self,  
Buried beneath the ash heaps  
Of incarnations of ignorance.  
Though many a land of power, plenty, and science  
My soul, garbed sometimes as an Oriental,  
Sometimes as an Occidental,  
Travelled far and wide,  
Seeking Itself;  
At last, in India, to find Itself.

Though mortal fires raze all her homes and golden paddy fields,  
Yet to sleep on her ashes and dream immortality,  
O India, I will be there!  
The guns of science and matter  
Have boomed on her shores  
Yet she is unconquered.  
Her soul is free evermore!  
Her soldier saints are away,  
To rout with realization's ray  
The bandits of hate, prejudice, and patriotic selfishness;  
And to burn the walls of separation dark  
Between children of the One, One Father.  
The Western brothers by matter's might have conquered my land;

Blow, blow aloud, her conch shells all!  
India now invades with love,  
To conquer their souls.

Better than Heaven or Arcadia  
I love Thee, O my India!  
And thy love I shall give  
To every brother nation that lives.  
God made the earth;  
Man made confining countries  
And their fancy-frozen boundaries.  
But with newfound boundless love  
I behold the borderland of my India  
Expanding into the world.  
Hail, mother of religions, lotus, scenic beauty,  
And sages!  
Thy wide doors are open,  
Welcoming God's true sons through all ages.  
Where Ganges, woods, Himalayan caves, and men dream God—

I am hallowed; my body touched that sod.

Raihana concurred with the preceding lines, and rightly so. During my first visit with her she told the following which illustrates the unique character of India and her people.

Outside Delhi, but exactly where all travelers by either plane, train or auto would pass by it, was a huge, horrific slum that was a hotbed of violence, crime and even racketeering. The people living there were extremely poor and most of them made their living dishonestly. Murder was common. Many criminals were hiding there from the law. And to top it all off it was called The Paradise of Krishna.

Many times the army and the police came out and demanded the place be vacated, but they were only mocked. Even Prime Minister Nehru went there and speaking by loudspeaker commanded them to decamp. Only defiance came in response. Finally in a very desirable area the government built a small town that could accommodate every one of them and offered it to them for the mere moving into it. But they refused. As a last resort the government came to Raihana and asked her to persuade them to move. Raihana almost never left the property where she was staying, so she asked that the leaders of the Paradise be brought to her. They readily came, filling her room, because of her reputation for holiness and devotion. One of Raihana's positive traits was her truthfulness and straightforwardness, as they found out.

"You have cursed the earth on which you live," was her opening statement, "you have brought dishonor to this city, crime, disease and even death to many. And you have the outrageous arrogance to defy all authority when you are told to disband, and refuse the offer of a place fit for you and your children to create new, decent lives for yourselves. If you do not do something about it, the karmic law itself will bring disaster on you. Now leave that place of shame!"

To the astonishment of the government representatives they all said: "We will."

"Good. But you have to cleanse the earth you have defiled. So first you must clear all your buildings and other debris from the land. No pandit or priest will function for you, so you must choose several of your own people to function as purohits (priests) and you must perform havan [a fire sacrifice] with everyone, including the children that can understand what they are doing, making the offerings with the mantra *Om Namoh Bhagavate Vasudevaya* [the mantra of Krishna] one hundred and eight times each. As soon as that is done, get up and leave immediately. And reform your lives."

The leaders agreed, thanked her and followed her instructions exactly. In a few days they were gone without a trace of the slum that had disgraced the area for so many years.

Only in India. Only in India.

Although Raihana was from a prominent Moslem family and every Friday had a mullah come to her room and recite a chapter from the Koran, which she then kissed in reverence, she was a fervent devotee of Krishna, whose picture she kept on an altar where she could always see it. She had also written a remarkable book in 1924, *The Heart of a Gopi*, about the early life of Krishna based on her recall of a past life. Sri

Aurobindo read the book and told the members of his ashram: “The author of this book was there in Brindaban with Krishna.” One afternoon at the Delhi ashram when people were sleeping after the noon meal, Anandamayi Ma came walking through the main hall where some of the women who travelled with her were sleeping. One of them had a copy of *The Heart of a Gopi* by her head. Ma stopped and asked: “What is that book?” When she was told the title, Ma said: “I can see tiny figures dancing the Maharasa on the cover.” (The Maharasa was the time when each gopi found herself dancing with Krishna—a Krishna for each one.)

In her younger days she had been a renowned classical singer, giving concerts of devotional songs—especially to Krishna—for up to twenty thousand people without needing a microphone. A woman who had attended many of them assured me that every person there could hear and understand every word and note.

One time some religious leaders from Mecca came to visit Raihana and noticed her altar with Krishna’s picture. Naturally they asked about it. “‘O Lord, help me!’ I prayed,” Raihana told me, laughing at the memory. “Somehow I convinced them that there was no conflict between Islam and the teachings of Krishna. I don’t think I could do it again!” She also considered Jesus a saint of India, believing that he lived in India both before and after his mission in Israel.

Raihana accepted readily the spiritual interest of Western people in the religion of India, and gladly explained things to them and gave them spiritual advice, yet she lamented to me that the absolute necessity for purification on all levels seemed to elude nearly all of the seekers from the West. She told me of various Westerners, including many living in India, who had suffered mentally and physically from engaging in practices that in themselves were invaluable, but which when applied by unpurified aspirants could rebound to their detriment. Fortunately for some of them she had been able to show them the need for discipline and purity on all levels of their life. She was also concerned about how best to make it clear that no one could follow the path of the great master yogis without following their way of life scrupulously, including their single-hearted dedication to the quest for enlightenment above all.

The manner in which Raihana helped seekers advance on the holy way spontaneously was especially inspired. The first step in her instruction was the need to constantly engage in the japa of the mantra of a god or avatar. But what mantra? She knew that they would be nervous about whether they could pick the right mantra for themselves, and that many were afraid that to choose one ishta devata (“beloved deity”) over another might offend those not chosen. Her solution was to ask each one to buy a holy picture for her. When they asked whose picture it should be, she told them: “Please take your time, even days, until you find what you consider the most beautiful picture available.” Of course they would find most beautiful the subject which they liked the best. When they would bring the picture to her she would say: “Oh, see how little space there is on my walls. Why don’t you take it home with you and keep it for me? And why not try doing japa and meditation with the mantra of this deity for some days and then come and tell me how it seems.” Always they would report liking the japa of that deity’s sacred name.

Well, then, what about purification? There is no evading the bedrock fact that complete abstinence from meat and alcohol is essential for success in authentic spiritual life and yoga practice. But Raihana would say nothing about it to those she knew ate meat and drank alcohol. She would only urge them to increase their meditation and japa to fill their days. After a while they would say to her: "You know, lately I don't feel so well when I eat meat. I wonder what is wrong." "Perhaps you have an allergy to meat," she would suggest, knowing that would be an acceptable reason to their families and business associates for becoming a vegetarian. So they did as she suggested and became vegetarians with no trouble. Then after some time they would themselves tell her: "You know, I think I am getting an allergy to alcohol." "Then you had better quit drinking it," she would comment. "Yes. I will." And that was how they rid themselves of hindrances in their spiritual life without a bit of trouble. Blessed students of a blessedly wise teacher.

Raihana also detected wisdom and virtue whenever it entered the orbit of her life. One day she told me about the woman who "did" for her. Supposedly an untouchable, an outcast, who lived in a kind of tent city on the banks of the Jumna River (sacred to Krishna), Raihana saw her as a truly worthy person who was very "touchable" indeed. Once when there was flooding of the Jumna, for over a week she did not come to Raihana's, who began to fear that she had drowned. Then one morning the servant came into her room, smiling and perfectly well. When Raihana asked where she had been, the woman began telling her with great relish about her adventures. "Oh, Madam, right away the water came into our tents, right up to the level of our cots. For nearly the whole week we just sat there without food—but plenty of water! So we had great fun, telling stories and singing songs. How we laughed. When the water went down we were sorry to see it go. Such a good time!" "Now just think," Raihana said to me, "of the way all of us, including those who consider themselves so spiritual and non-material, would react to being without food and water and in danger of higher flooding and death for days. And those supposed outcasts whom no 'pure' person is supposed to touch, were enjoying themselves and not complaining or asking God to change things. And you notice that no good, charitable people or relief agencies bothered to rescue or help them. They just left them there, perhaps to die. But do they resent it? No; they think of it as a lark and laugh. Who are the wise in this world, and who the foolish, I wonder."

In India people frequently asked me in a very diplomatic way about my family, usually what they thought about my choosing the path of the yogi-sadhu. So the subject of family came up in conversation and Raihana told me about the carryings-on of her family when she refused to marry, announced herself as a devotee of Krishna and left home to join Gandhi in his struggle for independence. "But when they find you don't want anything from them and will ask for nothing in the future, they leave you alone and eventually forget about you, even if they remember you occasionally and grumble or lament. And you are at peace, living in fulfillment." She was not being cynical, she was just cognizant of human nature. "I love my family," she concluded, "but I can live happily without them." As I have mentioned, she lived on the goodness

of one of Gandhiji's secretaries in whose ashram right next to Gandhi's in Wardha she had lived for many years.

My last visit to Raihana I found it very hard to get to the house because the streets were crowded with buses bringing thousands of people from all over India. I had heard rumor of a fire sacrifice (yajna) being conducted somewhere. When I at last was in her room, she asked me if I knew what was going on. "Some people decided to hold a great havan at Raj Ghat by Gandhiji's memorial for world peace. It took a long while to get permission, but finally they did and created a huge kund [fire pit] with wood arranged in a tremendous, high pile. It was announced that they would not kindle the fire in the usual way, but would recite mantras to invoke fire from heaven to kindle it. For over a week pandits went in shifts reciting the mantras nonstop all day and all night. A few observers came, but not many. Of course the Westernized newspapers sent reporters so they could print stories about how the 'superstition' did not work. But it did. Many saw a kind of lightning bolt come from the sun and ignite the wood. The yajna began in earnest—all day and all night—and people began streaming in from all over India. Although it was scheduled to end some weeks ago, they decided to keep on until everyone who wanted had come and taken part. And so it is going on right now."

I never had a doubt about the event being supernatural. Though it is barely known, some spiritual groups during World War II decided to hold a great havan to end the war, the oblations being made with the Gayatri mantra. In a matter of days the war was over. Later I would meet in Western India a venerable pandit who could kindle the sacred fire by mantra recitation. I did not see it myself, but my friend the Raja of Chandod, a very hard-headed, no-nonsense man, had seen him do it more than once.

About ten years later I was in Delhi and by chance the taxi took me down the street to where Raihana had lived. (Both she and Kaka Sahib Kallelkar had left the body). Eagerly I looked for the house and compound. It came in sight, seemingly all closed up, but there toward the back I saw the little window of her bathroom open as usual. Floods of memories came back to me and my heart yearned to see my dear friend once more, to hear her sweet melodious voice and see her joyful smile. A cousin who dearly loved my mother, who had died when I was five years old, often said to me: "As long as you are alive, your mother will never die." And as long as I live my Raihana will never die, either.

### **Swami Vidyananda Giri**

I learned about Swami Vidyananda Giri in a conversation with Sri Kalachandji, the senior member of the Ranchi Anandamayi Ashram. Just how the subject came up, I do not recall, but he began telling me about the former head of the Yogoda Sat-Sanga Ashram where I had been staying before coming to stay at the Anandamayi Ashram. His first words certainly got my attention: "He is a perfect sadhu. I cannot say that about anyone else, but he is a perfect sadhu." He told me that Swamiji lived in a small village named Lakhanpur in the Purulia District. So I wrote to Swamiji and asked if I might come and visit him. He wrote back, telling me how to reach Lakhanpur from Purulia.

The very next morning I went just after dawn to the lane where the bus to Purulia would leave. There I had an experience I had not expected. I had learned already by my excursions into the bazaar that there are those who try to overcharge on everything in a quite shameless manner. So as I gave what I thought was the right price to the rickshaw man and he held it out to me and protested, I just motioned for him to go on. He stood there a bit, then turned and left. I was a seasoned traveller! Or so I thought. I was soon to be humbled. Several minutes later the rickshaw man returned and got on the bus. I braced for another onslaught. But to my astonishment he held out his hand with some coins in it. I had overpaid him and he had gone and found the right amount in coins to return to me. How ashamed I felt. And right there I realized that beneath the surface veneer that travelers to India may encounter, there is a basic truthfulness and honesty in the people.

(A few weeks later I was riding in a rickshaw one evening and my wallet fell out of my pocket without my realizing it. Imagine my feeling when a few young men came running after the rickshaw and gave me my wallet. Some months further on I went to a shop and pointed to something that looked good to eat. "That isn't good," the owner said to me, and gave me something he considered better for a lower price. From the first moment I stepped through the door at Dum Dum airport I knew I was home and everyone I saw was my beloved family. So it was heartening to know that my dear ones were also honest.

I had come to Ranchi on a night train, sleeping most of the way, so this would be my first chance to see the countryside. Everything I saw was beautiful to me—every moment of that journey was a joy. India is alive, and just beneath the outer life is the Divine Inner Life that is India, eternal Bharat. Since I love India I have enjoyed every moment riding through the countryside. Everything I see enters my heart. As a consequence the ride to Purulia was literally wonderful—truly full of wonder.

In Purulia I got on a rickety bus that was truly headed for the Last Roundup. And soon. But four hours later it dropped me in front of the ashram gate where two boys of the huge school run by Swami Vidyananda were waiting for me. Swamiji administered several schools. In Lakhanpur he had a school for five hundred boys and a school for three hundred girls, and planned within a year to start a college for women.

My newly-met friends took me in through the gate. Far ahead I saw light from a modest building which was the guru mandir-satsang hall. As I came up the steps I was met by a man with the most radiant eyes I have ever seen. When he took hold of my hands I felt as though I was being touched by spirit, not flesh. He greeted me lovingly and quietly. And from then on I, too, knew a perfect sadhu.

Swami Vidyanandaji lived in a small room off the temple which was furnished with one wood platform bed, a small wood table/desk and two simple wood chairs. He had two changes of clothes and a chaddar (shawl). That was all. (One time in early summer two men representing the Government of India unexpectedly came to visit Vidyananda. They told him that they were making a report on all religious-sponsored schools. Because of the border conflict with the Chinese at that time the government had ended nearly all aid to schools and wanted to make sure they helped only the most worthy.

Seeing the simple manner of life led by Swamiji and observing the excellent education being given to nearly eight hundred students—mostly free of charge—they were profoundly impressed. “How much money does your organization allot for the running of these schools?” they asked. When Swamiji replied: “Ten rupees a month,” they were thunderstruck. (At that time ten rupees equalled one dollar.) “How do you manage to keep operating?” they wondered. “God wills it, so help comes from different sources,” he told them. They left and wrote about Swamiji’s work to the central government which immediately granted him five hundred thousand rupees.)

Vidyanandaji actually lived between three rooms: his personal room, the guru mandir dedicated to Paramhansa Yogananda and a small Shiva temple. About ten o’clock at night Swamiji would come out of his room and go to the Shiva temple, shut the door and remain there in meditation until after dawn.

Swami Vidyananda had been given sannyas by Jagadguru Bharati Krishna Tirtha, Shankaracharya of the Govardhan Math in Puri, one of the four great monasteries founded by Shankara himself. It is the rule that a Shankaracharya gives sannyas only in his math, but the Shankaracharya had such regard and affection for Vidyananda that he came to the Puri ashram of Swami Sriyuketshwar Giri (Paramhansa Yogananda’s guru) and in the samadhi temple conferred sannyas on Swamiji. He also broke another rule for Swamiji. A Shiva linga cannot be consecrated until it has been permanently affixed on a foundation. But the Shankaracharya consecrated a Shiva linga of sparkling white stone and gave it to Swamiji to permanently install back in the Lakhanpur ashram. From then on he spent every night meditating before that linga.

Since I have mentioned meditation, I should tell you about his background as a yogi. He became a very gifted and beloved teacher in the Yogoda Satsanga school in Ranchi while Yoganandaji was in America. He met Yogananda when he returned to India in 1935. Early one morning the Master sent for him. When he came to the main building Yoganandaji asked him to sit down. It is the custom to always stand when the guru is standing, but he insisted that Swamiji (whose name at that time was Girin Dey) sit down though he stood. After being silent awhile, Yogananda told him: “Come this evening and I will initiate you.”

That evening when Swamiji came to Yogananda’s room the master told him that there was a mela (fair/bazaar) in nearby town and he wanted to go there. So they did, and Yoganandaji spent the whole time enjoying himself, soaking up the atmosphere of India from which he had been separated for so many years. Finally everything was closing down and people were going home. So Swamiji asked if he should return to Ranchi. “O!” exclaimed the Master, “I am going to initiate you, aren’t I?” He looked around and saw nearby a ruined hut with much of the roof fallen in. “Let’s go over there,” Yoganandaji said. Such ruined buildings are almost guaranteed to have cobras and other unpleasant creatures living in them. But in they went and in the pitch dark Yogananda initiated him. Then they returned to Ranchi. There the story ended when Vidyanandaji told it to me, but two men who knew him well told me the rest. There was a corrugated iron shed at the far end of the ashram property. Swamiji went directly there and did not come out for thirty days, neither eating nor drinking but remaining

immersed in meditation-samadhi.

“Don’t let Swamiji fool you,” some of his friends once said to me when Vidyanandaji was not around. “He has all the yoga powers. But he lives quietly and simply with us ordinary people and keeps it all inside.” Their words did not surprise me because I had already figured the truth about him.

Every afternoon as evening was approaching I would sit with Swami Vidyananda on the veranda of the guru mandir. Everything would be quiet. With the faintest of sighs Swamiji would breathe out and remain in breathless samadhi. I would meditate (after the first two times when I watched the whole time to see that he did not breathe) until after an hour or so Swamiji would breathe in softly and be as usual.

More than once I was sitting in the guru mandir as Swami Vidyananda was writing letters. I was going through the Gita very slowly and pondering each verse. Sometimes I would think over a particularly difficult one and come to a conclusion regarding its meaning. All this was going on in my head; I did not speak a word. But Swamiji would put down his pen and very quietly say: “No, not exactly.” And then he would explain the verse to me. “Do you understand?” he would ask, and I would answer: “Now I do.” This happened so matter-of-factly, just as though it was commonplace.

I was staying in a small house about forty feet from the mandir. One time I needed to wash out a shirt (kurta) but had run out of soap. So I went toward Swamiji’s room. When I came near the door he stepped out and handed me a big sliver of soap. “That’s all I have,” he said, “but it will be enough for that one thing.” All was known to him.

Early one morning a student at the school came by to speak to me about something. He told me he was going right to the road to get a bus to Purulia as there were some things Swamiji wanted, and would not be back till the next day. The next morning while sitting thinking of something good to eat (not an uncommon event for an American in rural India), I thought: “How I wish I had some rasagollas! If I had only thought of it yesterday!” In late afternoon I saw the student going to Swamiji’s room. Since there was nothing else to do, I headed there, too. Swamiji met me at the door and saying, “Here are your rasagollas,” handed me a big earthenware pot with about two dozen rasagollas in it. There is a sequel to this story. In a day or so huge black ants invaded my house and went straight for the rasagollas. They cut them up and carried them all away. I got too near one of them and he bit one of my toes which bled. And hurt. It left a scar that remained for at least three years. Every time I saw it I was reminded of my Swamiji who not only knew my present thoughts, but knew what I was going to think.

One evening Swamiji told me that he had received a letter from a village quite some distance away asking him to take over the administration of their local school which otherwise would have to close. He asked me if I would like to accompany him and I certainly said Yes. But the headmaster of the Lakhanpur school needed to go also. He had gone to see relatives in Calcutta and was to have returned that afternoon. “We can’t do anything without him,” Vidyananda said and then became utterly still like a statue. His eyes did not blink and he did not breathe. He sat quite some time in that state and I began to be anxious. Then he stirred, heaved a sigh and said: “In Calcutta

he met a friend that wanted him to attend his daughter's wedding, and he agreed. He is there now and will not be back until Friday morning." Sure enough, on Friday morning I met the headmaster coming from the bus. Together we went into the guru mandir that doubled as Swamiji's "office" and there he told us that he had met an old friend who begged him to visit his village for his daughter's wedding, so that was why he had only now just come. "Yes, I know," Swamiji told him, and the headmaster was not the least surprised. Nor was I, finally.

One morning someone from the village gave me a large papaya. I asked Swamiji about offering it in the Gopala temple that was just on the village side of the wall enclosing the ashram. He thought it was a good idea, so that was done. When I came back to the ashram to distribute the offered papaya to Swamiji and some of his guests, he said: "From now on you are Brahmachari Gopalananda!" That was pleasing to me, but when the headmaster called me "Gopalananda Maharaj," I protested, saying: "I am not a raj [king], I am a das [servant]." Vidyanandaji was delighted and said: "Yes. You are not Gopalananda but Gopaldas, the servant of Gopal [Krishna]." And so it was.

It was my heartfelt aspiration to become a monk of the Shankara order, and when several months later I asked Anandamayi Ma about it and told her that Vidyanandaji had promised to give me sannyas if she approved, she agreed immediately and gave me the cloth to have dyed gerua and used in the conferral. I had picked out two or three possible sannyas names and told them to Swamiji, who just said: "I have something else in mind." At the end of the ceremony he told me: "Your name is Nirmalananda. It usually means Flawless Bliss, but in your case it means The Bliss of Anandamayi Ma." (Nirmala was Ma's birth name.)

In my second trip to India I intended to visit Swamiji in Lakhanpur, but an auto accident prevented that. Though I wrote to him, we were never to meet face-to-face again, though one of our monks did meet him in Ranchi when Ma Anandamayi was there at the same time. Two other friends also met him during their pilgrimage to India. On February 26, 2008, Swamiji left this world to be with the great Master Yogananda. He was one hundred and five years old. His sacred body rests near the Shiva temple where he had spent countless hours in communion with God.

### **An Atheist Army Pilot-Devotee Professor**

In America I had heard of a great yogi named Sita-Ramdas Omkarnath, and when I was staying at Sapta Rishi Ashram I learned that he had come to an ashram in Hardwar on his way to Dehradun. I told a university professor who was also saying at the ashram that I planned to go and meet Sita-Ramdasji, and he said he would go along with me. So as we were walking along he told me his spiritual history.

Although his family were very devout Hindus, he was an atheist from birth. So he never went with them to temples, and although he would travel with them to pilgrim cities such as Varanasi, he would stay at their hotel or dharmashala when they went to the temples or holy sites. Never did his family try to persuade him to believe or act as they did.

When he became an adult he joined the Indian Air Force. One day he was on a

routine mission, flying alone, when both his engines stopped functioning. Immediately he bailed out, and his parachute did not open!

So he went plummeting toward the ground. But all the way down he saw standing in front of him the radiant form of the god Shiva, and he felt no fear. When he landed, the impact was so gentle that his knees did not even bend.

And from then on he was a believer.

### **Mohananda Brahmachari**

When I first came to Ranchi I stayed at the Yogoda Satsanga (YSS) ashram for about two weeks, but after that went to stay at the Ranchi Anandamayi Ashram. Friends from the YSS ashram that visited the Anandamayi Ashram told me that in a few days a famous yogi, Sri Mohananda Brachmachari, would be passing through and staying for a day or so at the YSS ashram. I did not feel any interest, and decided not to go for his darshan. But in the evening of the day he arrived in Ranchi, I felt an intense “pull” to go meet with him the next morning. And odd as it seemed, I felt that he himself was calling me. So I decided I would go.

The next day three friends from the YSS ashram came and we walked together back there for his darshan. When we entered the ashram gates I felt a tremendous force like a nuclear reactor emanating from a building on our right. “He is there, isn’t he?” I asked as I pointed to that building. “Yes. He stayed the night there,” was the reply. So on we went to the guru mandir where he would be coming to speak.

Eventually the mandir was filled with people waiting for the great yogi. Suddenly I knew he was coming, and I said so to my companions. The feeling of approaching power was intense, so I stood up and faced the door, through which Mohanandaji entered less than a minute later. His appearance was awesomely dignified and noble, and his face showed remarkable intelligence. This was a master yogi.

He sat to one side near the front, and began to speak in Bengali so I did not understand a word. But I was awed. It was as though Infinity was speaking through his mouth. When he got up and left I felt desolate at losing his presence. My remembrance of him is as vivid and present with me as it was sixty-two years ago.

### **Yogeshwar Brahmachari**

I first saw Sri Yogeshwar Brahmachari at the birthday celebration of Anandamayi Ma in 1971. He was sitting on the speakers’ platform along with Ma and many spiritual figures of Northern India. While the others looked around and often made some overt response to what was being said over the microphone, Yogeshwarji sat totally unmoving for hours with closed eyes and holding his yoga danda upright without the slightest movement. Quiet and unassuming, he yet stood out in all situations. One very marked trait was his eyes. Sri Ramakrishna said: “The mind of the yogi is always fixed on God, always absorbed in the Self. You can recognize such a man by merely looking at him. His eyes are wide open, with an indrawn look, like the eyes of the mother bird hatching her eggs. Her entire mind is fixed on the eggs, and there is a in-turned look in her eyes.” That is exactly the look I always saw in the Brahmachari’s eyes. He spoke

very familiarly and cordial with all who approached him, yet with great dignity, wisdom and intelligence; and all the time centered within. Yogeshwar means Lord of the Yogis and is a title of Shiva. But it fits Yogeshwar Brahmachari perfectly.

He was in the spiritual line of Sri Ramakrishna, being a disciple of Sri Kuladananda Brahmachari, a disciple of Vijay Krishna Goswami, who was a disciple of Ramakrishna. You may be surprised and perhaps horrified to learn that Yogeshwar Brahmachari had twenty-three gurus! But it certainly sat well on him and I saw no reason for objection.

One of his gurus was Tincouri Lahiri, a son of Yogiraj Shyama Charan Lahiri Mahasaya. However he told me that when he went with Tincouri Lahiri to his ashram in Jagganath Puri he met the head of the ashram just across the lane: Swami Sriyukteswar Giri, the guru of Paramhansa Yogananda. "I spent every moment of every day with him," he told me. "I was completely mad for him." Whether Sri Yukteswar was one of his gurus he never told me.

After the Russian Revolution the Communists did their utmost to seem legitimate and worthy of acceptance in the world community. One of their attempts was the calling of a World Students' Congress in the new Soviet Union. Yogeshwar Brahmachari decided to attend so he could see what a militantly atheistic state could produce. He saw it. And he went directly to Lenin (an aristocrat who had studied to be an Eastern Orthodox priest—as had Stalin) and challenged him on his atheistic ideas and the lack of freedom and morality they entailed. He met with Lenin privately several times. Lenin's secretary told him: "After you leave, he sits for hours staring at the wall of his office. I have no idea what you say to him, but it certainly affects him!" Lenin did tell Yogeshwarji that he considered Indian religion to be the most true of the world religions. Many years later Sri Kaka Sahib Kallekar went on a world speaking tour which included Moscow. Naturally spiritual philosophy was his topic. Afterward many heads of government agencies came to him and shook his hand, saying: "We like your religion. You do not send us to hell." (The Russian Orthodox Church in 1918 had anathematized—cursed and cast out—all who belonged to the Communist Party: "By the power given to Us by God, we forbid you to approach the Mysteries of Christ, we anathematise you, if only you bear Christian names and although by birth you belong to the Orthodox Church. We also adjure all of you, faithful children of the Orthodox Church of Christ, not to enter into any communion with such outcasts of the human race: 'Remove the evil one from among you' [I Corinthians 5.13].")

Everything about Yogeshwar Brahmachari was direct and simple. He followed a very ancient tradition of not becoming a full sannyasi. "Brahmachari" is the title of a junior monk, a student of spiritual life, and many have preferred to remain in that status as a result of humility and avoidance of the pitfalls of continually receiving honor as a sannyasi, an honor that is often exaggerated and imprudent, unwise and certainly unmerited.

When I arrived for a Samyam Sapta at the remote ashram of one of the saints who often visited Anandamayi Ma, I learned that Yogeshwar Brahmachari was there as well. So I asked where he was staying. Even though the ashram was large and able to accommodate many in comfortable quarters, I was taken not even to a ramshackle hut,

but to a cowshed! Way toward the back I found him sitting on a pile of straw on a kind of cement shelf meant for storage. About four feet away a calf was tethered. So Brahmachariji was not just in a cowshed, he was in a calf's toilet. He tried to soften my unspoken chagrin by saying that since he was considered a member of the "family" the Anandamayi Ashram officials had assigned normal places to those not so close to them. (*However, not one of them was consigned to an animal shed.*) I respected his loving and humble attempt to cover up for such an outrage, and did not contradict it. The good side of all this was my witnessing Yogeshwar Brahmachari's love and patient humility so I could tell you about it now.

My last meeting with Yogeshwar Brahmachari was at a Samyam in Brindaban. The last day I was asked to speak at the evening session. I have no memory of what I said, because I was so uncomfortable at sitting on the same level as Ma Anandamayi. (Once when I was speaking with her privately in Dehra Dun and another time in the courtyard of the Varanasi ashram when I was sitting on a step just beneath Ma—with many people present—she told me to sit next to her. I just could not. Devotees will understand.) When I was finished, Yogeshwar Brahmachari was the next speaker. Turning to me, he said in English: "Many people here do not know English, so I am going to translate for them what you said." And he did.

(Later I learned that although Ma had been lying down and covered up from the beginning of that session, when I began to speak she sat up and watched me throughout the entire discourse then lay down and remained covered up for the rest of the time.)

That was my last darshan of Yogeshwar Brahmachari. He was both here and not here, or rather he was about one-fourth here and three-fourths There. He lived in the Infinite. Just standing near him was a profound spiritual experience.

He was unforgettable. And eternal.

### **Swami Krishnananda of Krishnagar**

When I was staying with Swami Vidyānanda at his Lakhanpur ashram I became acquainted with several of the students in his high school. Three of them told me that a great disciple of the Holy Mother, Sri Ma Sarada Devi, the virgin wife of Sri Ramakrishna, had an ashram in the village of Krishnagar a few miles away. He knew English, and they would like to take me to meet him. Indeed!

So the next day they came to take me there. Thinking that it might be too long a journey, they had borrowed a bicycle for me to ride as they walked. It was a worn-out wreck, and I kept nearly falling off every time I tried to pedal it forward, so I trusted to my feet to get me there and back. It was a long walk, but since I found the plains of Bengal beautiful to my soul I had no complaints, just gratitude.

I was bringing along another discomfort of the journey myself. On the way to India I had begun getting pain in the left side of my throat. One of the boys with me had looked into my mouth and saw that an ulcer had formed there! I had a slight fever, and every time I swallowed I wanted to jump and yell.

All the way I was thinking about how I would ask Krishnanandaji to tell me about

his experiences with Holy Mother. But when I got there and bowed before him as he lay on a wooden cot on the veranda of his small house, he told those with me that he would not speak with me, but he wanted me to sit where he could look at me. So for quite some time I sat and looked at him as he looked at me. After a while he directed one of the ashram brahmacharis to show me around the small but tranquil and holy place. Then I came back, bowed down and left.

For some time I could see Swamiji lying there as we began the long walk back to Lakhanpur, and he never stopped looking at me. When we were out of sight and a goodly distance away, I suddenly realized that my throat pain and the mild fever it had caused was completely gone. I swallowed hard a few times, sure that the pain would return. But it did not. I had been healed by his very look.

### **Swami Krishnananda of Bombay**

I really know nothing about Swami Krishnananda of Bombay except from the Samyam Saptas which he attended when I was in India.

Seated on the stage would be many well-known religious leaders from various parts of India. They would speak during each day. Swami Krishnananda always spoke in the evenings. While the others spoke on religious themes, Swamiji only spoke about them! Having known them all for one or two decades, he was able to recount very funny stories about each one of them. While the audience laughed, they sat with stony faces. And that was Krishnanandaji's intention. It was good for them and us. In this way Swamiji made sure that no one of them could feel stuck-up and self-righteous.

Further, he would not give any formal talks himself, but would lead the entire audience in singing kirtan. At one point only the men would sing: "Sita, Sita-Rama bolo [Say Sita-Rama]," and the women would reply: "Radhe, Radhe-Shyama bolo [Say Radha-Shyama/Krishna]." This would go back and forth with each side trying to sing louder than the other. It was sacred fun, had by all.

However, at the end of last day's session of the last Samyam I attended, I pushed my way up to the front where he was standing with the other speakers and took both his hands, put them on my head and held them there for awhile. It was most satisfactory, and Swamiji laughed with me.

Saints are a lot of fun. As Saint Francis de Sales said, "A saint that is sad is a sad saint indeed."

### **Chakrapani Maharaj**

*(not the contemporary politician)*

Anandamayi Ma was born in East Bengal, which now is called Bangaledesh. Eventually she became closely associated with two saints in that state, Hari Baba and Chakrapani Maharaj, both renowned Vaishnava sadhus. I saw Hari Baba two or three times, but had no contact with him.

Chakrapaniji often participated in spiritual events with Ma, and was very beloved by everyone. He was highly intelligent, but not intellectual—only intelligently devotional. More than once in Samyan Saptas after some very intellectually sophisticated talks

given by scholarly spiritual leaders, when the microphone was placed before him he would say something to the effect of “Forget all this empty talk. Join me in words that are real,” and would lead us in vigorous singing of the Divine Names: “Sriman Narayana, Narayana, Narayan.” (Names of Vishnu.)

In the Samyan Saptas each day ended with a Matri Satsang, a period when people could ask Ma questions. At one Samyan Saptas I attended there was a loud and annoying “devotee,” a spiritual show-off, who at the end of every session would bellow out: “Sri Sri Anandamayi Ma, ki jai!” One evening at the question and answer time, after each question put by this man Ma would indicate to Chakrapani Maharaj that he should answer. All of his answers were very funny and implied foolishness on the part of the questioner and the questioner. The last one was this: “Ma, you have come from heaven. What is heaven like?” Ma gestured to Chakrapani Maharaj who said, “Heaven is like walking along in Mussoorie [a famous city in the Himalayan foothills noted for its beauty and ideal climate; a favorite vacation spot] eating sandesh [a popular sweet] and looking at all the pretty girls.” This was considered very inappropriate for a sadhu to say, but I think it was a hint that the questioner liked to do that very thing. So that night we had no “ki jai” from him. It was a welcome change.

The last time I saw Chakrapaniji we were driving out of Brindaban on the way to Delhi. I had the driver stop and got out to prostrate before Maharaj. He raised his hand and forcefully said, “May you have a happy and blessed life with Ma!” He knew what was needed.

### **The Vishnupur Train Platform Vaishnava Sadhu**

Vishnupur is a town in Bengal. Sri Ramakrishna called it “a hidden Brindaban.” That I believe, because there was an indefinable yet tangible atmosphere, almost of mystery, about it.

Vishnupur did not have a train station, just a big cement platform in the midst of the tracks with benches in the center. I was sitting there in the early evening while it was still light. My sannyasa guru, Swami Vidyananda Giri, had been asked to take over the administration of a village school in the Bankura district, and we were going there accompanied by the headmaster of the Lakhanpur school and the future Swami Bhumananda Puri. As we sat there in silence, a sadhu dressed as a Vaishnava swami came walking from the right, stopped in front of me and began speaking. One of our party told him that I did not know Bengali, and he answered, “I know that” in the same language and continued speaking to me, looking directly into my eyes. A steady current of peaceful bliss flowed from him into me as he spoke. A couple of times he was told again that I did not speak Bengali, but he did not even acknowledge it. He spoke very carefully and with quiet intensity for at least twenty minutes and perhaps more. Then the train pulled in and he saluted and walked on to the left.

I never saw him again, but something permanent had been conveyed to me: a kind of spiritual resolve and the peace that comes with it.

### **Prayagraj Train Platform Pilgrim Mother**

Bharat Mata, Mother India, has many ways of opening her treasury to someone. They may not always be pleasant, but that is a small price for gaining her priceless treasures. Here is one such instance.

When in Howrah Station in Calcutta I got on the train for Delhi, a very kind conductor put me in an unoccupied seat which was intended for railway officials. All went well until we reached the holy city of Prayagraj where the three most sacred rivers of India, Ganges, Saraswati and Jumna, merge in what is called the Triveni. This is the most auspicious place to bathe in all of India.

A Christian railway employee came in, and seeing me, an American, dressed as a sannyasi, was enraged and spoke to me in English very insultingly and demanded that I get up and leave the train, claiming that I had no right to the seat! So off I went onto the platform of the Prayagraj train station. It was very late, and a large number of people were lying there, asleep, so I settled myself and joined them.

In the morning, as I sat up I saw a radiant woman pilgrim complete with pilgrim staff, making her way toward me through those that were still asleep. She spoke with me a bit and then realized that I could not speak Hindi, but I got the idea that she wanted to know where I had been in India. So I named both places and holy people I had met. Every time I named one, she smiled and radiated intense joy as she said in Hindi, "I know it/them!" She glowed with intense joy and holiness. Soon the train for Delhi came and we had to say farewell, but she went with me in my heart, and even now, after sixty-two years, I see her joyful face and hear her joyful voice.

Jai Bharat Mata!

### **Hari Dutt and Amrit Vasudeva**

Whenever I went to India and travelled with Anandamayi Ma, at some time Sri Hari Dutt Vasudeva would come to be with Ma and we would speak together and I would hear his personal reminiscences of saints and yogis. Here are his accounts of his first meeting with Ma Anandamayi and the "death" of his wife, Srimati Amrit Vasudeva.

He had a very good friend who became a fervent devotee of Anandamayi Ma. From then on he would tease that man continually and say, "Are you, a Brahmin, so hard up spiritually that you have to have a *woman* for your guru?" And his friend would say, "One day you may meet her, and you will understand." But Hariji doubted that.

After a few years, the devotee friend insisted that he come with him to meet Ma, who had come to Mumbai (Bombay). So he agreed, fully intending to make the meeting a chance to tease and ridicule his friend.

When the two got to where Ma was staying, they were told that Ma was on the roof of the building. So the friend said, "You go on up, and see Ma." So he did. As he came up the last step he saw Ma standing there, and shouted, "O! My mother!" and prostrated before her. And that was the beginning of his real life.

When Hariji took his wife, Amrit, to meet Ma, it was the meeting of mother and beloved child, and Ma became the essence of Amrit's life. After some years, when Ma came to Mumbai she asked to see Hariji. Ma had everyone else leave, and then said to him, "I want to ask you to do a favor for me." "Ma!" he said, "I cannot do anything for

you. You need nothing!” But Ma insisted, “There is something you can do for me. Amrit has cancer. But you must never tell her or let her find out. Promise me you will do this for me.” He promised. And Amrit kept up all her intense spiritual disciplines and observances until the day she left her body.

After her passing, the entire family was sitting in the room with her body. It was afternoon, and when the time came that Amrit usually did her meditation, to their intense shock her body inhaled with a loud sound, and began saying her mantra over and over until the usual number of repetitions was completed. Then there was silence. And that sacred body was taken to enter the sacred fire.

I never met Amrit, but I saw her on a few occasions during my pilgrimages, and her serenity, devotion and holiness were clearly seen by me.

### **Sri Prabhudutt Brahmachari**

One of the most valiant leaders of Sanatana Dharma in the outrageous war waged on India and dharma by the Nehru dictatorship (1946-1964) was Sri Prabhudutt Brahmachari. Knowing that Nehru had no higher nature to appeal to, Prabhuduttji met him on his own territory: politics. He became himself a candidate for Prime Minister and campaigned intensely and successfully. Nehru beat him only by a tiny margin, which was the Brahmachari’s intention, having no real interest in political office.

Immediately after the election, he went to Nehru and told him that unless he stopped his attacks on dharma and the real India, he would oust him in the next election and end his career permanently. In fear, Nehru stopped his more overt persecutions, which even included persecution of homeopathy because it was disapproved of as “unscientific” by the West. (See the Wikipedia article on Homeopathy as “a pseudoscientific system of alternative medicine.”)

While Sri Rama was exiled in Chitrakut, his younger brother, Bharat, was proclaimed king of Ayodhya. But Bharat refused, and went to Chitrakut and brought back the sandals of Rama which he put on the throne and, sitting on the floor by the throne, ruled as his substitute until Rama eventually returned to reign. Therefore, for some years Prabhuduttji led a massive annual pilgrimage from the mountain of Chitrakut to Ayodhya, carrying on his head replicas of Rama’s sandals.

One year I accompanied Sri K. Bose, the General Secretary of the Anandamayi Sangha, to Prayagraj, the confluence of the sacred Saraswati, Yamuna and Ganges rivers, to meet with Sri Prabhuduttji on his way back to Ayodhya from Chitrakut.

When we arrived, Prabhuduttji was engaged in worship, so we waited in the room next to where he was doing the puja. When the door opened and he entered, a tremendous field of tangible spiritual power and light was surrounding him. As soon as he saw us, he pranamed and said, “Please bless us, please bless us,” so the pilgrimage would be completed successfully. On his hands joined in pranam were rings made of sacred kusha grass, implements of ritual purification, and indications of his total dedication to Sanatana Dharma and its total, traditional observance. We just stood there basking in the inner light coming from him, then bowed before him and he left.

In a subsequent pilgrimage I went with Anandamayi Ma to Bhimpura, a small town

in Gujarat, a state in Western India. Arriving there, we learned that Prabhudutt Brahmachari was staying there in the famous Ganganath Temple. One evening he came to meet with Ma, and the moment he entered the ashram grounds he began boisterously calling, “Where is my American brother? Where is my American brother?” It was a happy and blessed reunion. Truly he was one of those sacred beings who are immortal even while in the mortal body.

### **The Ganges Island Swami and His Sandy Mansion**

At the beginning of 1963, Anandamayi Ma instructed me to find a kutir in either Hardwar or Rishikesh where I could do sadhana. Thanks to Brahmacharini Atmananda, who was known to many pilgrims to India as translator, counselor, friend and smoother of the way, I was put in touch with an ideal devotee, Rai Bahadur Narayan Das who was the chief director and patron of the Sapta Rishi Ashram which I have already mentioned. The ashram was not a single large building as is usual, but rather was a kind of small sadhu village consisting of kutirs in which single sadhus would remain for a while and do tapasya. One sadhu I met had lived there for many years.

Sapta Rishi ashram was a perfect place for meditation and study—at first. But then pilgrim season began when hundreds of thousands would traverse the Himalayas to visit the great pilgrimage centers of Gangotri and Badrinath. Then all day long people streamed into the ashram and knocked on the doors of all the kutirs in hope of meeting a mahatma, a great soul. To compound the problem, the doctor who ran a free medical dispensary at the ashram began bringing crowds of people to look at the American yogi, a rarity indeed. I had someone make me a sign in Hindi asking that I not be disturbed, but that just meant that it was discussed for a while and then the banging began on the door beneath the sign. “All I want is darshan” (in Hindi, of course) was the common preamble for the racket.

The only solution was the very unsatisfactory one of spending the whole day on an island in the Ganges where two or three sadhus were living and completely left alone at all times. (I have no idea why.) Anyway I went there every day and starved until it was safe to go back to my kutir and cook something—usually Anandamayi Kitchuri, a recipe formulated by Anandamayi Ma for sadhus living under her supervision and taught to me by Atmanandaji.

This went on much too long, but did have one good result. Each day when I was going back to the ashram, I would meet two sadhus coming to the island for the night. Both were perfect examples of the sadhus I have already described: first class. They would pranam and smile, but never speak.

One day when I came over to the island I saw one of the sadhus sitting on a tiny bit of sand not even ten feet long and five feet wide. The only thing there but the sadhu was a very big rounded rock. As I was passing by, the sadhu motioned for me to halt. Then he indicated to me that this was where he lived. First he pushed the rock out a way into the river and made the motions of washing his clothes on the rock. That was his laundry room. Then he pushed the rock back onto the sand over a bit and made the motions of making a fire. That was his kitchen. Then he moved it to another spot and

sat down on the rock in great dignity. That was his living room. Then he moved it to the far end, laid down and put his head on it. That was his bedroom and his pillow. In this way he showed me that he had a complete house right there and everything he needed. And throughout the entire pantomime he was smiling and radiating the joy of freedom from possessions. He was living in the luxury India provided for him so easily. Then he made signs that I knew were his question: Did I understand? I did. And I never forgot the lesson.

### **My Brother in Black**

More than one saint blessed my life with a single appearance. Such was one of the most memorable sadhus I have met.

One tranquil morning I was sitting with some friends by the Shiva temple just inside the gate of the “old” Anandamayi Ashram in Kankhal. It was pilgrim season and many pilgrims were crossing through the ashram property, either from the main road to reach the ancient, renowned Daksha Temple just across the way, or returning from the temple to reach the main road.

To my surprise, a man with long hair and beard, clothed all in black and walking with a typical pilgrim’s staff, entered from the side of the Daksha Temple. During my first visit to India I once saw a sadhu dressed in black at a distance when I leaving through the back gate of the Sapta Rishi Ashram. Later I asked someone about it and was told that some Sikh and Moslem ascetics dressed in black, a color that is virtually never worn in India.

The sadhu’s clothes were a puzzle, but he himself was not. Here was a real yogi! I immediately stood up and went toward him. He began smiling at me and speaking animatedly. When we met we both hugged each other. What he felt, I don’t know, but I felt like I was embracing a friend from a long-past life. As we stood there he spoke to me very earnestly, but I have no idea what language he was speaking. Then he took me by the hand and we found a place to sit and just be together in silence with God. After a while he stood up and we went out onto the road. There he pranamed and went toward Hardwar.

That was all. But it was enough.

### **The Swami Who Would Not Be a Pet and His Guru Who Laughed**

This swami did not live in the Himalayas, but out on the plains of India south of Kanpur. I was attending a week-long series of discourses in Kanpur on the Srimad Bhagavatam by a very famous swami whose Bhagavatam talks were very popular. Everything was taking place in an immense pandal. At the front was a big platform on which the speaker was seated along with a goodly number of sannyasis. Second only to the speaker in prominence was the extremely rich man who was sponsoring the whole thing. He was sitting in a special place facing the lecturer. Every day for hours several hundred people were in attendance.

I had been given a place to stay at what had once been the fabulous estate of an important English official of the British Raj. Not only was my room large, the bathroom

was almost as big. (I have never figured out this feature which I found many times in India.) Several members of the ashram which was sponsoring the Bhagavat Sapta in a kind of secondary sense had rhapsodized to me about the tour the rich man had given them just before I had arrived. He had bought the estate at the end of the Raj. Apparently two of the main features of the property were a gigantic swimming pool which had a machine that created authentic ocean surf (the only one outside Europe) and an artificial hill with an artificial stream running down it and through the estate.

The staff at the estate were very good and devout Hindus, and they were very kind and attentive to me since I was a sannyasi. Indians are very protective of their saints and rarely introduce them to foreigners, but fortunately they did not consider me an outsider, so one day they took me to the servants' quarters and introduced to me a sadhu-yogi who was staying there as a guest, not of the rich man but of two brothers who worked there as servants. The swami spoke only Hindi, but a school teacher had come at the request of his hosts to translate for us.

It was immediately evident that this sadhu was of the definite first class, extremely learned and intelligent. He explained to me that he had a very simple ashram in a remote part of the state (Uttar Pradesh), and urged me to come spend time with him after the "do" was done.

Then he asked me what I thought of the whole thing. Unable to come up with a suitably diplomatic response, I said nothing. He nodded his head, smiled and said: "I see Swamiji has the same opinion that I have. I was invited some time back and came with the belief that I would hear real spiritual discourses by real spiritual teachers. But instead I find that everyone on that platform had been invited just to be exotic pets of the sponsor. So I have not gone back after the first session. I am no one's pet, least of all of a corrupt business man who joined with the foreigners to maintain their enslavement of India. They made him rich and even gave him the title 'Sir' to indicate he was really one of them. I am going back to my ashram and want you to come with me."

I told him that after the function was over I was scheduled to return to America.

"Is Swamiji not coming to visit me because Swamiji feels that my ashram is poor and the accommodations and food will be also poor?" was the response.

It took three tries before he understood that I really did have to leave. And I understood that he was used to the high and mighty disdaining him and his ashram, but I assured him I was not one of them. He laughed and told me that his friends had told him I was not, but still it had been a few days before he had agreed to see me.

I hope I am not giving you the impression that he was a kind of snob. He was not. But he did value his integrity and would compromise it for no one or no thing.

Then we got down to sadhu talk and had a wonderful time together. When it was over we were family. So he invited me to meet his guru the next morning. "He told me not to come; that it would be useless and foolish. But wanted to see for myself. And I knew he would be passing through Kanpur this evening."

Early the next morning one of the servants took me some distance on the property where the artificial hill was. It was impressive and looked like the real thing, even

though it was not. However the real Real Thing was awaiting me at the hilltop. There I found my new swami-friend and his guru, a tremendously powerful old jungle sadhu blind in one eye and dressed in next-to-rags. He was definitely not himself one of those I had described to you as first class. He was way beyond that, beyond any class. When I bring him to mind I automatically think of the word *trigunatita*: beyond the three gunas. And appropriately he was joyful.

At one point someone went and turned on the fake stream. Right out of the hilltop the water bubbled and went racing down the hill. It, too, looked absolutely real. If I had not seen it turned on I would never have thought it anything other than an actual mountain stream. The old guru began laughing, and gesturing with his hand to the whole property said to me: “Mayapuri!” The City of Maya, indeed. Shaking his head he walked on down the hill, and we followed.

Then the Surf Pool. It was filled with scummy water, the paint and plaster peeling off everywhere and thoroughly neglected. And this had impressed the ashramites! When asked if he would like to see the surf machine in action, the guru looked disgusted and told his disciple to end the silly waste of time. So we walked and talked a bit, though the servant was not the best of translators. At the gate to the property we bade farewell, the guru to escape the city and the sadhu to return to his ashram.

I went on to the Big Tent and the show going on there. Now, I had not been invited to sit on the platform and it had never even occurred to me that I might be. And now I was glad of the non-invitation. I was no pet, either.

### **Yogi Bhai (HRH Durga Singh, the Raja of Solan)**

One of the most remarkable people I became acquainted with in India was Sri Durga Singh, the Raja of Solan, who was known to the devotees of Anandamayi Ma as Yogi Bhai—Brother Yogi. A wise and devoted ruler and associate of Mahatma Gandhi, Yogi Bhai had always lived a simple and spiritual life though in a palace. When he was young he met and became associated with Ma Anandamayi. Some of the earliest photographs of Ma were made in his palace at his request.

I had read of Yogi Bhai before meeting him during my second trip to India in 1968-1969. Devotees of Ma always spoke of him with equal affection and respect, so meeting him at the end of November in 1968 was a real privilege and pleasure.

Yogi Bhai had relinquished his kingdom after independence, having ruled in an exemplary manner for twenty years. He always dressed in normal Indian style in the simplest and most humble manner. As any true and worthy king, he needed no insignia to proclaim his nobility. And as his title, Yogi Bhai, indicated, he was foremost a yogi. In all my subsequent visits I was able to visit with him. He was a friend and advocate of our ashram in America.

Yogi Bhai was teaching his two sons to follow the spiritual path and ideals of Ma Anandamayi and Gandhiji. They were totally unaffected, humble and dignified, dressed like their father in homespun cotton clothing. I well remember walking with the three of them along Rajpur Road in Dehradun to the Anandamayi Ashram. Yogi Bhai was questioning me in detail about myself and my background, just as others had done

during my first Indian pilgrimage. He put some very serious questions to me and I understood that I was being carefully examined. Then to my surprise he asked his sons in Pahari, the local dialect of Himachal Pradesh, what they thought of me, not realizing that I could understand. The elder one, who seemed thirteen or fourteen years old, was not as diplomatic and answered in English: "Very nice!" I could not help but laugh that the raja's cover was blown, and we all laughed together.

There are no particular incidents through the years that stand out in my mind. All our encounters were natural, open and friendly—like Yogi Bhai himself.

The news that Yogi Bhai had left his body saddened me of course because I had come to respect him so, but I knew that for him death was the portal to his real kingdom which no element of earth could affect, much less take from him. And that was the kingdom he had always preferred, anyway. But something happened that I want to tell, even though some might doubt its accuracy.

The year that Yogi Bhai left this world the annual spiritual conference sponsored by the Anandamayi Sangha, the Samyam Sapta, was held in Brindaban, the childhood home of Sri Krishna. Naturally we were all missing and remembering the presence of Yogi Bhai. Just across the street from the Anandamayi Ashram was the ashram of Swami Sharanananda, a well-known saint of Brindaban and a longtime friend of Anandamayi Ma. There was a kind of arched gateway at the entrance to the ashram property, very high and a few feet thick. There was no wall, just the gateway standing there in an open area.

I was standing across the main road, ten or so feet to the left side of the Anandamayi Ashram gate, waiting for some friends, when suddenly Yogi Bhai came walking down the ashram path! He was dressed as always in a blue coat and white dhoti with a brown knit cap on his head, walking with a stout cane that he had been using the last two or three years of his life. There was no mistaking him. Yogi Bhai always walked with the cane in a cross between limping and swaying. I never saw anyone else walk that way.

But I just could not believe it. Reaching the road he turned to his left and walked over to the arched gateway and into it..., and never came out the other side which was completely open to my sight. I had been preparing to run after him, but I realized that there would be no one there.

Why did I see him this way? I really have no explanation, but I am grateful that I did. There is no doubt in my mind that Yogi Bhai demonstrated his immortality to me, and I hope that he was indicating that he would not forget me. I have not forgotten him.

### **Neem Karoli Baba**

It might seem strange that I am writing about Neem Karoli Baba because I have no personal stories about him. But I did see him, and since it was one of the most memorable events of my life, I want to add my voice to those who speak of his greatness. (If you do not know about his life, please read some of the books written about him. They are a great inspiration.)

I was in Brindaban with some of the members of our ashram for the Samyam Sapta with Anandamayi Ma. After a few days quite a number of Americans and Europeans began showing up for Ma's darshan, which was a sign that Neem Karoli Baba must be in town. We knew where his ashram was, so one morning we went to see him. And that was all we did: see.

I have no idea why, but for decades the police in that area had been paranoid about American and European tourists and really made a nuisance of themselves. A few months before my first trip to India one of my close friends went to travel with Ma Anandamayi, and every single day she was in Brindaban officious fools came and pestered her, acting as though she was a spy or mad bomber. Over the years I heard about these antics, though I never experienced any myself.

They apparently had decided after so many years that Anandamayi Ma's devotees were not spies and had shifted their suspicion to the devotees of Neem Karoli Baba. As a consequence when we got to the ashram we found the gate was locked. A man who saw us came and explained that the police had been especially troublesome to all foreigners, so Neem Karoli Baba had asked them to all leave the district and wait until he went to one of his ashrams in a more sensible area.

However, there sitting at some distance was Neem Karoli Baba all alone. So though we were outside the wall we went opposite to where he was sitting and bowed to him, then got out our movie camera with a telephoto lens and took turns looking at him through it. For the one with the camera it was like standing hardly a foot away from him. But the real benefit was how we felt all the time. Every one of us was filled with intense joy. It is no exaggeration that we were drunk with the bliss (ananda) that poured from him. We stood there a long time not wanting to leave the source of such a heavenly condition. Eventually we had to go, but the memory was permanently etched in our minds.

Later it occurred to us that since no one was around he was sitting there just for us to have his darshan, even if from a distance and through a lens.

### **Swami Sivananda-Hridayananda**

The next heart-treasure I want to tell you about is Swami Sivananda-Hridayananda of Sivananda Ashram. Her name means Bliss of Sivananda's Heart, and it was very appropriate. In the ashram she was simply known as Doctor Mother because she was an eye surgeon and presided over the free eye hospital Swami Sivananda had established in the ashram.

Doctor Mother had been born in Madras State (Tamilnadu) as had Swami Sivananda. She told me that when she first learned to speak her grandmother taught her that the moment she awakened in the morning she should say: "O Lord, I am thy dear one; be with me this day." And so she always did. She was born loving temples and worship of God. Being outstandingly intelligent and having a heart embracing others, she became a very successful eye surgeon in a clinic of her own. She was married to an equally dedicated and spiritually devoted man and had two daughters.

Spiritual reading was her favorite pastime and she frequently went to a large

bookstore in Madras (Chennai) where the owner would keep aside any new spiritual books for her to look over. One day he showed her the book *Spiritual Lessons* by Swami Sivananda. She had never heard of Sivananda before, but when she saw his photograph in the book she felt that she knew him very well. Standing there in the midst of the store she began reading and inwardly heard the voice of Sivananda speaking the words as she read them. This was a new experience, so she bought the book and asked that any others by Sivananda should be reserved for her. She took the book home and read it through. By the end she knew that the author was a spiritual giant and she must go to Rishikesh and meet him. Until that time she was in frequent correspondence with Sivanandaji. As soon as she could she went to Rishikesh and spent some time there. This was the pinnacle of her life, but she had to return to her family and business. The second time she visited Sivanandashram, when she came to bid farewell to Sivananda she said to him: "How I wish I did not have to leave." His reply was: "Then don't leave!" And so she did not. After a while she became Swami Sivananda-Hridayananda.

I have already told you about how in the morning satsang with Swami Sivananda I would feel as though we were transported into infinite space far beyond this world. This would always occur when Swami Sivananda would say: "Kirtan by Swami Sivananda-Hridayananda," and she would sing as he would sit there with closed eyes in perfect stillness.

Doctor Mother was remarkable in her appearance. She was always regal, and made me think of the poet-queen Mirabai. She had a dignity beyond any I had previously seen. But most important of all she truly was Sivananda's heart. Being an advanced yogini, her appearance and manner were always inward. Sivananda was her life in actuality, not sentimentality, and she always radiated a quiet joy as she sat or walked next to him. It was a beautiful sight, and unique. Just a glimpse of her was inspiring.

Fortunately I found a book in the ashram office called *Sivananda My God*. It was by Doctor Mother and contained the correspondence between her and Sivananda and the story of her spiritual transformation. It was thrilling and I never forgot it. After some years I miraculously found a copy for our ashram library. It, like Doctor Mother herself, is unique as a spiritual record.

My first trip to India I never spoke with Doctor Mother, but in my second trip we became acquainted and spent wonderful hours remembering Sivananda and extolling his loving greatness. "I alone am the theme of their discourse: thus delighting each other, they live in bliss and contentment" (Bhagavad Gita 10:9). A few years later she came to America and spent some time in our ashram. I found that she was always even-minded and inward, calm, peaceful, wise and joyful. We had many wonderful satsangs with her and she often said to her traveling companion: "What a treat this is to be here!" It certainly was for us. After quite a bit of time spent in America she went to Europe and eventually settled in Belgium until she left the body. The world was blessed by her every word and act. Saints such as her make life in this world worth living.

*I have left the next two revered ones for the last since in my estimation they are the greatest of*

*all, and are inseparable from me. Although my mother died when I was five, my cousin Edith used to say to me whenever we met, "As long as you live, your mother will never die." That is also true of these, because at every moment I am alive in the inner life they gave me.*

### **Swami Muktananda Giri (Didima/Giriji)**

It is difficult to write about Sri Swami Muktananda Giri (Didima), the earthly mother of Anandamayi Ma, because she lived in complete obscurity, hiding her greatness from all but a very few, of which I was privileged to be one.

In January of 1963 I went with my friend Rani Bhan and her adopted son Inder Jit to the town of Modinagar, about an hour's drive northeast of Delhi. That morning of that day the huge Lakshmi-Narayan temple was to be consecrated, and Anandamayi Ma had been invited to participate. It would be my first darshan of Ma. The town was jammed with cars and busses, and it was difficult to find a place to park.

As we spilled out of the car, someone clutched my arm and said, pointing to an auto several yards ahead: "Go quickly, Mother is in that car!" I ran. But when I reached there I saw immediately that Mother was not there at all. Instead, sitting in the front seat was a tiny woman swathed in the orange (gerua) clothing of a monastic. In retrospect I have no idea how I knew the little figure was a woman, for her hair was cut short—almost shaven—and she looked for all the world just like my great uncle Riley Maxey. But that is how I had my first darshan of Srimat Swami Muktananda Giri, the mother of Anandamayi Ma.

Here is her story.

Mokshada Sundari Devi Bhattacharya was born in a village in East Bengal in the nineteenth century. Giriji had been a great yogi even when young, and there are indications that even then she had disciples who did not make it public.

Giriji was unique in that she had totally interiorized her illumination, concealing it completely from external manifestation. Mother Anandamayi said that such an accomplishment—and therefore such a person—occurs only once in many, many centuries, and was a great wonder beyond any miracles that could possibly be worked, that such a one as Giriji rarely appeared upon the earth.

Although after her enlightenment Giriji, who was beforehand virtually illiterate, had written exquisite hymns in Sanskrit delineating spiritual experiences reaching far beyond the bounds of the *yoga shastra*, the classical texts on yoga, she had never "done" anything that could be taken as a miracle. Instead, she passed her days sitting quietly, rosary in hand, reciting the Name of God. When asked by others why she did this, since she had no more need for formal spiritual practice, she would answer: "I am doing it for my disciples who do not repeat their mantra."

(Sri Ma Anandamayi did not take on the role of guru and did not give initiation. Instead, when anyone asked for initiation (diksha), she told them to receive initiation from Giriji. As a consequence Giriji gave initiation to a great many people who did not really care anything about her and who told people that they were Ma's disciples, not even mentioning Giriji. One man bragged to me that when Ma told him to be initiated by Giriji he replied: "I will do what you say, Ma, but you must be present for the diksha

and I will still consider you my guru.” So as I say, Giriji bestowed her tremendous grace and love upon a multitude of people who could not care less and never gave her a thought. But that made no difference to her: she loved and she cared; and she looked after them all.)

In time Mokshada Sundari Devi was married to a great devotee of God, Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya, who was renowned for his inspired devotional singing and holy life. He often was absent for many months, traveling around at the invitation of those who arranged public gatherings to hear his songs. And even at that time it seems that she had disciples, but no one knew about it.

Once when he had been away from his home for many months, he received a letter from his wife saying that inexplicably she felt that she had suddenly become pregnant. This proved to be so, and in time she gave birth to Nirmala Sundari Devi, the future Anandamayi Ma. She felt no labor pain, but suddenly realized the child was about to be born. She went into the room prepared for the birth and lay down. After a short while she somehow felt that the child was no longer inside her, and it was so. The child never cried. When asked about this years later, Ma replied, “Why would this one cry? I was busy looking at the banyan tree outside through a hole in the wall.”

When Nirmala was a few years old, a newborn sister died and Mokshada wept in profound grief. Little Nirmala had never cried at any time, not even at birth—nor did she ever after this event where she came up to her mother crying intensely. Immediately, Mokshada’s grief vanished. So she knew her daughter was of no common order of being.

In time the divine nature of Nirmala Devi was revealed, and she became known as Anandamayi Ma, the Bliss-permeated Mother. After some years Mokshada Devi could not bear to be separated from her daughter, and traveled with her throughout India, eventually becoming universally known as “Didima” (Grandmother) by Ma’s devotees. After quite some time she took sannyas and became Swami Muktananda Giri. From then on she was sometimes referred to as “Giriji” by Ma’s devotees—and her own disciples after she began giving initiation (diksha) into both spiritual life and sannyas. (It was at Ma’s direction that Giriji gave spiritual and sannyas initiation.)

As already mentioned, Ma said that only in many centuries is a great being such as Giriji born on earth. She declared that one of the rare aspects of Giriji was her ability to totally internalize her state of realization, to totally hide from outside observers even a hint of her inner nature.

Giriji’s humility was remarkable. She was always silent and virtually unmoving.

Most people who came to see Anandamayi Ma had no idea who the frail elderly person dressed in gerua and usually sitting next to Ma even was. When Ma would leave, they would surge after her, and more than once I saw people push Giriji aside and nearly knock her down in their haste as they rushed past her after Ma. She would look at them with total calmness without a flicker of annoyance, and just calmly walk on behind them. Her humility and patience were the humility and patience of God.

Without exception, every time I saw Giriji she would instantly pranam to me before I could pranam to her. Over and over this happened. One time when she was at Bhagat

House in Hardwar, as I was walking there from Sapta Rishi Ashram where I was staying I said to myself: "Today I pranam to Giriji before she gets a chance to pranam to me first! The moment I see her I will pranam." I came up to the gate of Bhagat House. There was a large courtyard and beyond it a large satsang hall. I turned right to go in and saw Giriji sitting in the satsang hall, looking at me *and already pranaming*. So I gave up. Happily. Such was her humility and kindness.

I profoundly experienced that one time at the Delhi Anandamayi Ashram. It was very warm and everyone was outside the ashram in the dim light of evening. Ma Anandamayi was reclining on a wooden cot, literally glowing in the dark with soft light as Brahmachari Brahmananda (Vibhu-da) was singing devotional songs. Didima was sitting with the future Swami Dayananda Giri in the back of a kind of covered porch or three-sided room. Being bold, I sat right at the front but on the other side so as not to block her view of the outside.

As I sat there in peace and wonder, looking and listening, a hideous, harsh voice grated out from behind me: "This little creature over here.... Do you think it's a man or a woman? I have been trying to figure it out." Turning, I saw a Western woman standing directly behind her, apparently having entered from the back.

"What do you think?" she demanded. "What is it?"

I was stunned. Such coarseness and such rudeness toward this venerable holy one!

"Why, that is Swami Muktananda Giri, Mother Anandamayi's mother," I told her. And as I spoke I looked toward Giriji and found her looking at me with calmness and love. She looked toward the interloper, also with peace and love, then turned back to me.

The conversation was not over and my interrogator went on and on about how she was part of the staff of the Italian embassy, and how she disliked India and how could someone keep their health in such an awful place and such a terrible climate, etc. etc. etc.

And all time Giriji never looked away from me, and I did not look away from her. Those were some of the most prized minutes of my life. Her gentleness and kindness far outshone the awfulness that had led up to it.

All this happened the first time I went to India. On my second trip I travelled overland from Germany to India and on to Dehra Dun for the annual spiritual gathering known as the Samyam Sapta. I arrived there three days before it started. It was evening and I was standing outside a small house where Ma Anandamayi was staying, right in front of a window with drawn curtains. Suddenly Giriji began speaking from inside, conversing with Sri Gurupriya Devi whom we all knew as "Didi." Hearing Giriji's voice and her occasional gentle laughter, I made a prayer of fervent thanksgiving to God that I knew the sound of her voice.

On the morning of the fourth or fifth day of the Samyam, hundreds of people were in a large pandal (flat-roofed tent) listening to discourses by various spiritual leaders, mostly sannyasis. At one point Giriji came up onto the platform and sat right in front. At one time she had worn glasses, but now did not bother and it was evident that usually she could not see clearly at all. But that day her eyes were filled with light like

stars, and she was looking all around, obviously enjoying the ability to see everything clearly as she radiated intense life, strength and joy. As you may already suppose, for the rest of the morning Giriji was the only object of my sight. What had caused this change in her I do not know, but I took full advantage of it.

My last darshan of Giriji—and some of the (many) most sacred moments of my life—took place in the Delhi ashram satsang hall after my auto accident. Though I was sitting upright with both legs in casts, I was carried on a stretcher into the satsang hall and put down there about halfway toward the front and to the right side. Ma and Giriji came in and sat at the front. After about an hour, one of the women who travelled with Ma—and some years later would become Swami Dayananda Giri—led Giriji back to where I was.

Giriji was holding her hands together in pranam as she came, looking steadily at me and smiling more radiantly than I had ever seen her do. When she was in front of me and I had bowed down at her feet, as I rose up I saw that her hands were holding many small red flowers. She extended her hands and put the flowers into my hands, then stood there smiling, quietly laughing in joy, stroking my head and speaking (in Bengali which I did not know) so sweetly and gently with such great love. I had often seen Giriji smile and show a sense of humor, though even then she was always very reserved, but now she was radiating such joy and love as I had never seen her do. After some time she pranamed to me and went back to sit by Ma. It was too wonderful and amazing, for me to even have a reaction, but I was certainly glad it happened.

When Giriji left her body in Hardwar, one member of our ashram, Prangopal, was there. The afternoon of the day before her mahasamadhi, he was standing at the door of the satsang hall when Giriji came toward the door. He moved aside to clear the way for her, but she moved too—toward him. Coming right up to him, smiling and holding out her hands, she filled his hands with flowers, pranamed and went on into the hall. Before dawn the next morning she left her body.

Let me step back a moment to give some background to my further account. In my visits to India I met a family of great devotees, disciples of Giriji who knew her as their hearts' treasure. The father was the manager-supervisor of the mammoth Howrah railway station in Calcutta. The love of him, his wife and their children for Giriji was total and pure. Even when they were small, his children loved to sit with Giriji and serve her in any small way they could. They even cut her fingernails on occasion. She was the center of their life no matter where they might be.

A samadhi-tomb was dug for Giriji in the garden of the Kankhal ashram. Her sacred body was placed in it and a marker, a kind of brick and cement cube was placed over it and a small cement walkway was made around it for circumambulation. Now here is the interesting thing: nearly the entire samadhi-shrine was made by just the members of the devoted Howrah family and our Prangopal, who took many pictures throughout the day showing the progress. In the final one he was kneeling around the samadhi with the family of devotees. Although she had so many disciples and there had been a large gathering at the time of her passing, Giriji obviously intervened and saw that only they should make her samadhi as their last service (seva) to her.

The flowers she gave Prangopal were brought back to America and given to me and kept in our temple as holy relics. In my next pilgrimage Ma directed that one of Giriji's kurtas should be ceremonially given to me by one of her granddaughters, and that was kept in our temple with the flowers in a special carved box made in India.

Several years later in a private conversation, Mother Anandamayi told me that when Giriji left her body she assumed the form of Shiva and was now in the highest realm of relative existence, Satyaloka.

Every virtue was fully developed in Giriji. Her inner power and glory was immense, but by her yoga power she kept it completely unseen and unknown—unless she chose to show it to someone. She showed it to me, and Ma told me, “You have received a special grace, a special shakti, from Giriji.” She also worked a miracle for me that revealed her yoga powers, and Ma told me that, too, was unique, that Giriji never showed any of her power. But Giriji's life is always in me and mine in hers.

### **Anandamayi Ma**

Entire books have been written about Anandamayi Ma, and I have written about her in earlier chapters, yet I often tell people that the only thing you can say about Anandamayi Ma is that you cannot say anything about her. She is a transcendental Being who cannot be described. There is no possibility of “understanding” or “knowing” her. Yet when we saw her by entering her presence, our consciousness was changed and we lived in another dimension altogether. We may not have understood or known her, but we were certainly with her on all the levels of our very being. Years later, an American devotee of Ma said to me, “We can say about Ma what Saint Bernadette said to doubters about her visions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes: ‘I did see her. I did see her.’” And we were one with her, since she was infinite.

It is possible—and often preferred—to talk about oneself, so I will talk about “Ma and I.” These words in quotation marks were originally spoken by Sri Ramakrishna to a pandit (religious/scriptural scholar) who had spoken at length about complex points of philosophy. When he was done, Sri Ramakrishna quietly said, “These things do not satisfy my mind. All I know is ‘Ma [Mother] and I.’”

My real consolation and confidence is the fact that what she told me to say every day is true: “Ma has been with me in all the past. Ma is always with me now. And Ma will always be with me in the future.” She is inseparable from my life.

I went to India in 1962 because I felt strongly that either Anandamayi Ma or Swami Sivananda would leave the body very soon. I was right: Swami Sivananda left his body only two weeks after my last visit to him.

Anandamayi Ma remained here for nineteen more years, during which I went many times to India and traveled with her. For the last fifteen of those years our ashram was under her direct supervision, and she advised me on every aspect of the ashram very carefully and in detail.

I find it difficult to write about those times with her, and it is impossible to attempt describing or defining her. Some years back on the internet a woman posted a request that someone who knew Ma would tell her what Ma “was like.” Reading that I vividly

remembered when during a visit to our ashram by Swami Kriyananda one of our members asked him: “What was Yogananda like?” And Swamiji replied: “He was not ‘like’ anything. He was unique.” In the same way I knew that no one could tell that inquirer what Ma was like. They might try. But they would fail.

Yet, to think and speak of Ma is a wonderful thing. Ma said that she knew whenever anyone spoke or thought of her. And I am sure she still does. So let’s spend some time with Ma—me in the writing and you in the reading.

Sri Gurupriya Devi (Didi) has written that many time she spoke with devotees about Ma through entire nights. As an octogenarian, Vera Savitsky—a Russian refugee from the Revolution who lived in a nursing home in France but came many times to Ma despite her frail health—said once, “Too much of Ma is not enough.”

Once someone asked Ma, “Ma, when we think of you, do you know it?” Ma replied, “If there was not the kheyala [will and intention of Ma], how would you remember this body?” So be assured that when you think of Ma her divine kheyala is on you. And on me as I write this.

Now I want to tell you a few of my experiences with, and observations of, Ma.

But first, though, I want to tell you about the experiences of Pat (Shraddha) Davenport, a devotee who had become a dear friend of mine the moment we met in California.

Early in our acquaintance she said to me, “If I have a guru in this world it is Anandamayi Ma.” Then she told me that over twenty years before, when she was very young and knew nothing of India or its philosophy, she had a vivid dream: She was standing with a group of people looking at a woman who was sitting in an open touring car, of the type that was common in the nineteen-twenties. The woman’s face was turned away from Pat, but then she turned around and looked directly into Pat’s eyes. And Pat said with all her heart: “O! My God.” And she meant it literally. After some years and a move to California, she read *Autobiography of a Yogi* and recognized Anandamayi Ma as the woman of her dreams.

After a few years, one morning Pat knew that Ma was present invisibly. Three things occurred. First, although she knew no Sanskrit except for a few words such as “karma,” a mantra began surging through her mind. Second, she knew that from then on her name was “Shraddha.” Third, after decades of intense addiction to cigarettes she suddenly knew she would never smoke again. And the urge was completely gone. She immediately wrote to Ma and asked about the mantra and the new name. The reply came that what had spontaneously arisen in her consciousness was indeed a legitimate mantra, the way she had written as to its pronunciation was totally correct, and as much as possible she should repeat it always. Also, Shraddha—which means Faith—should be her name, and her husband, Joe, should be called Satya—Truth. And so a new life began for them.

After a short time she and Satya almost miraculously got the money to travel to India and meet Ma. I was there at their first meeting and we travelled together with Ma. At the end of their time in India, we were with Ma in the city of Kanpur. On the evening of their last day, they were with me in large group of devotees of Ma. Ma called

for them to come and sit right in front of her. After some time Ma smiled, leaned forward and, looking into Shraddha's eyes, said, "You are not new to me. I know you very well."

I was standing about twenty feet away. Ma pointed to me and told those sitting near her, "He is very happy to see them here." I most certainly was.

I am glad to tell you that over and over a kind of miracle was worked through the years, and they went several times to be with Ma and travel with her. Shraddha wrote *In Her Perfect Love*, a book about her experiences with Ma, and she asked me to write the foreword.

Now more of Ma and I.

Ma was indeed beyond all conception or description. To be in her presence was a wonder beyond any words to express. Ma was the embodiment of Reality Itself. Therefore Ma was not easy to "understand," and it took some experience and intense thought and analysis to manage to correctly and completely understand what she said. It took a few years for me to understand that what seemed to be vague (even evasive) answers or statements made by Ma had a precise meaning. For example, if she would say regarding some proposal and plan, "Let us wait and see," or "Let us wait and see what happens," it meant that nothing would come of the idea. If she said about something, "Let us see what Bhagavan [God] does," it would come about and be positive. It was the same if she said, "Let us see what Bhagavan makes you do." The inquirer could be assured that whatever he decided to do would be in accordance with the divine will.

Ma was the embodiment of Reality, of Truth. So in her presence the truth about one's inner nature often became manifest. There was a young man from California who spent much of his time making all kinds of artistic renditions of the words Jai Ma (Glory to Ma) on paper and giving them out as tokens of his (supposed) dedication and devotion to Ma. Then he decided to go to India and meet Ma. I met him at the Delhi Anandamayi Ashram the day after he had arrived in India, and he told me that the closer the plane had come to India the less he wanted to see Ma, until he had almost not left the airport but got the next plane back to America. I knew that this was because the truth which Ma embodied was being revealed to him about himself. He did leave in a short time, and that was that.

Ma's interaction with anyone was a response to their true, inner desire. Ma often said, "This body is a drum. However you 'beat' it is what you get from it." (Ma usually referred to herself as "this body.") So whatever Ma did or did not do in relation to a person was determined by what they really wanted—not just thought or claimed they did.

It is said in India that just as you have to poke a honeycomb to get the honey to flow out, so the seeker after truth must actively "poke" the teachers of wisdom to receive their teachings. One time I had an hour-and-a-half interview with Ma in Varanasi where Ma told me many things—especially about yoga and sadhana. At the end, Sri K. Bose, the general secretary of the Anandamayi Sangha, who had translated for me, said, "Sitting here with you today, I have heard from Mother's lips things I have

never heard her say before.”

Another time I had an interview with Ma, and to some of my questions—and my query as to whether Ma had some instructions for me of her own volition—she responded, “There is no kheyala at this time.” (In Ma’s terminology, “kheyala” meant a spontaneous movement of will or intent. Everything Ma did or said came from her infinite consciousness—was a manifestation of that.) The next morning when I came to the ashram, one of Ma’s devotees said to me, “Ma has been asking about you since early morning, so go find what she wants.” A few minutes later another devotee came up and said, “Ma has been calling for you.” Another said, “Don’t leave without seeing Ma, she is asking for you.” This was repeated a few times. Ma was at a satsang on the grounds of a nearby temple, but I waited there at the ashram. When Ma came she immediately took me over to a place by the ashram wall outside—which quickly became populated by devotees standing at a discreet distance to simply see Ma and be blessed by her sight—to speak with me.

Throughout the very long interview which included many exact details and instructions, Ma said several times, “Because you asked me, I am telling you these things.” I realized that Ma was showing me two things. One: whatever I would ask she would answer. Two: if I did not ask because I did not really want to know, she would not say anything.

Also in that interview Ma gave me some very strict, even severe, instructions regarding certain possible situations. I thought, “How am I ever going to be able to follow these things?” But I resolved that I would do what Ma had directed, however hard it would be. And none of those situations ever came up! But Ma knew I had to be ready and resolved.

Sanskrit terms can have more than one meaning. I have mentioned “kheyala,” the word Ma used for the spontaneous movement within her that resulted in her external words and deeds. Whatever we witnessed in Ma was a direct manifestation of Divine Consciousness. I personally experienced another facet of her kheyala: the fixing of her attention on, and awareness of, someone.

When Ma directed her attention, her kheyala, on me, I felt it deeply. I cannot describe it for it was unique in my experience. It was very subtle, but had a profound effect. Whenever this occurred I would immediately go to wherever Ma was. If it occurred when I was in America I would wait for twenty-four hours, and if it persisted I would tell the ashramites, “Ma is calling,” and would go to India as soon as possible.

Once I was in Kankhal talking with an American who was living in the ashram there. Suddenly Ma’s kheyala’s was on me, so I said, “Ma is calling,” and went to find her. I was told that she was in the upper floor speaking with the mahant (head) of the ancient Daksha Temple, and had given instructions that no one should come up there. I went on up to where Ma was, anyway, and sitting there in silence—not understanding a word Ma and the mahant spoke to each other—I learned a lot.

Ma only responded to what a person really wanted. So she even let people delude themselves if that was what they truly wanted. And she let people lie to her. One time I watched a woman tell Ma about a vision she had supposedly had. She was telling it to

Ma with great drama and exclamations of awe. Ma just sat there calmly looking at her until she finished and left, satisfied that she had proven to Ma that she was a great soul and a spiritual visionary.

Naturally, there were people who thought they could control or influence Ma. I did not intend to be one. But I did find one thing that worked for me. If I asked Ma about something I was considering doing, and her response was that she had nothing to say on the matter, I would say, "If Ma does not tell me to do this, then I will not do it." Ma would then either say whether I should or should not do it.

If you really wanted her to, Ma would be very straightforward. I loved doing ritualistic worship, the longer the better. Once when I asked Ma about some aspect of worship, she stunned me by leaning forward and saying to me very forcefully, "It is your duty to understand that all of this is just playing with dolls." Consternation! On the other hand, when people disparaged ritualistic image worship, Ma would tell them, "It is for you to realize the divine presence in the image." We both needed to learn to truly perceive the nature and purpose of worship in general.

Also, there were very few people that Ma could totally level with and speak to without any "diplomacy" or anything held back. So she was completely straightforward only with them. Her total focus was on their growth and evolution. And Ma knew which was which. A long-time devotee of Ma once told me that he had once remarked to Ma about how spiritually evolved those around her must be. (Ma usually travelled with twenty or more people.) Ma touched her forearm and said, "Baba, even flies sit on this skin."

When people were honest and direct with Ma, she was the same with them. And those who tried to fool Ma would be fooled by her into thinking that they were fooling her. As Swami Brahmananda, the great sadhu-disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, used to say about the ways of the world and the worldlings: "Just see the fun!"

The yoga siddha, Sri Dattabal, once said to me that what we saw as Ma's physical presence was really just an appearance, that she was pure divine consciousness, her seeming body was chinmaya-formed of consciousness. So a glimpse of Ma was divine darshan: seeing the divine. That this was true I know by experience. Sometimes I had the chance to see Ma for hours on end. At the end of those hours my consciousness had been markedly elevated and altered. One time some of our ashram members and myself stood for a few hours where we could only see Ma's left hand through a window. Every moment was sacred and life-giving.

This incident I have just told about occurred at Ma's birthday celebrations in Varanasi. For the entire night Ma had lain in samadhi on a cot at the front of a giant pandal (a kind of flat-roofed tent). When the morning came, she arose and left the pandal. Our ashram contingency hurried around to the side entrance where she would be coming down some steps. At one point she sank down on the steps and re-entered samadhi for a while, then stood up and came completely down. We had brought a white umbrella for Ma, and gave it to one of the women who travelled with Ma so she could hold it over Ma's head as she returned to the ashram. Although Ma's eyes were closed, she reached up and took hold of the umbrella for a few moments then walked

on. The devotee followed her, carrying the umbrella. We followed after Ma and then spent that blessed time looking at her hand. The next day we were told that Ma had handed this umbrella to an ashramite, saying, "Take good care of this, because it was given with love."

The Mother form of God is called Mahamaya, "the Great Delusion/Illusion," because all of relative existence is really an impermanent dream, only God the Paramatman and our divine Self the Jivatman being absolutely real. So She is the Great Magician. Ma demonstrated this aspect in an interesting manner at the consecration of the Ananda Jyoti temple next to the Anandamayi Ashram in Varanasi.

Often in India performers want to perform before a great saint so they will have the saint's blessing in their subsequent profession. So a man who aspired to be a stage magician asked to perform for Ma in the temple one evening. He was really quite good, but all through the performance Ma was sitting with some women devotees at the front over to one side, in the plain view of all, and by gestures she showed the devotees how he did every trick.

This is a minor thing, but interesting—at least to me. Ma glowed in the dark. Many times I have sat outdoors (usually on the roof of the ashram) with Ma in a very dark night where it was hard to see anyone else, but she and her clothes emitted a very gentle light. Everyone else was hard to see, but Ma glowed.

On one of my pilgrimages I went directly from Delhi to Brindaban where Ma was. It was the morning, and full daylight. When I got to the ashram I was taken by some devotees to a room and told to wait for Ma. In a short while Ma came in with her face blazing within a cloud of light. I rubbed my eyes and blinked, but the light stayed and I understood that I was seeing "real," that Ma was the embodiment of the divine light that is Divine Consciousness.

Once when I was newly-arrived in India, my first sight of Ma was when she came walking rapidly through a hallway lined with devotees, all pranaming. I was standing at the door of the satsang hall which was her destination, pranaming like everyone else. Ma looked and smiled at everyone but me. When she came bustling by, I looked at her and mentally said, "I don't care whether you look at me or not. What matters is that *I* am looking at *you*." She stopped, turned and grinned—not just smiled—at me, then turned and went on.

Ma could do very quietly funny things that were a joke just between her and another. I will tell you two.

The first. Every year the Anandamayi Sangha sponsored a week-long program called Samyan Sapta, Week of Restraint/Discipline, usually attended by a large number of devotees. Almost always this was held in an ashram, and each day there was a meditation period in the early morning and the early afternoon. The rest of the day, except for meal times, there were spiritual discourses by pandits and sadhus, ending in the evening with a Matri Satsang—questions asked by devotees and answered by Ma.

One day there was quite a stir. One of the Big Babas of India, a famous guru, was coming and would be speaking! It was true. He was very famous. He was also a vile hypocrite whose favorite sport was telling a young girl that he realized he had made a

mistake by becoming a monk, but he had fallen in love with her and wanted to marry her. But first.... You can guess what that “first” was. My friend Rani Bhan knew of several young girls he had deceived in this way and gotten pregnant. But he wrote books and had a huge ashram that put out a magazine. He was called (not satirically or cynically) “the businessman’s guru.”

Big Guru arrived with a busload of rich disciples—proof of Great Guru’s greatness—so many that they filled the center aisle of the satsang hall from back to front. Before he spoke, a man introduced him with the most incredibly flattering titles I had ever heard. The only thing lacking was calling him God incarnate.

Big Guru’s appearance fit the adulation. His clothes were well-tailored, made of silk of a tasteful shade of gerua. Even though a kurta (shirt) has plain sleeves, BG’s were pierced so they could accommodate two huge gold cufflinks. He also wore a very large gold wristwatch to match the cufflinks.

Anyway, his speech was a delight: so phony and silly and pretentious that I was enjoying every moment. (I have an Irish sense of humor.) I wished that I could be in a soundproof booth where I could roll on the floor and kick my heels and laugh. This man was no monk or worthy teacher, but he sure was a hilarious act.

When he was ended, and someone else was speaking, he began looking around, in bored sophistication swinging his gold-rimmed sunglasses back and forth. I was thinking how that action so perfectly revealed his true character, when suddenly I asked myself, “Why am I looking at this monkey on a stick instead of Ma?”

So I shifted my attention to Ma. She was leaning forward, intently studying his sunglass swinging and slightly nodding her head with a concentrated expression that said, “Aha! Oh yes! This tells the whole story.” Apparently we agreed.

The second. During that same Samyan Sapta, one evening I suddenly had to go to the toilet. I mean GO. In desperation I looked at Ma and mentally said, “Ma, I am so sorry, but I have to leave. I have to go to the toilet.” Ma looked at me and gestured: Go! So I went.

Saint John says in his gospel (John 2:25) that Jesus “knew what was in man.” So did Ma. As I have said, no one could fool her. At the same time she was aware of the truth of each one’s mind and heart. Again: the drum was beaten according to the person’s true desire and nature.

It was her nature and her purpose to continually give powerful blessing to all those who came to her. And to ensure this benefit, Ma absorbed an equal amount of negative force or shakti from those she benefited by her very presence. As long as she was with people, this divine process would continue. That is why she would occasionally go to some isolated place unknown to others and remain there for some time.

Once during a pilgrimage I learned that Ma was about to “disappear” in this way. Though I was disappointed, I knew that it was beneficial for Ma to do this. So I was surprised when Ma suddenly asked me, “If I send word to you, will you come where I will be?” Yes, indeed. “Then wait to hear from me,” she said. So although others made suggestions as to where I could go as long as Ma was “out of sight,” I stayed right there. And in only a few days the word came. The next two weeks I had the blessing of

being with Ma along with only two or three of those that usually travelled with her.

Though I never heard an explanation for it, Ma would not enter the house—or even go onto the porch—of a grihastha (married person). So when married devotees built a house they would ask Ma to come and stay in it for at least a day before being occupied by them. Then the room in which Ma stayed would be their puja (worship) room.

Dr. Ghosh, who was the priest of Gopala in the Ranchi Anandamayi Ashram and a dentist, told me that he had once been engaged to be married. So he built a mansion on the main street of Ranchi, near his office. But when he learned that Ma would not enter the home of a grihastha, he asked himself, “Will I take up a mode of life that will bar Ma from wherever I live?” So he canceled the marriage and gave the mansion to Ma, and it became a Kali temple and ashram.

Ma had no “identity” since she transcended such a state. And yet she did. Doctor Ghosh had some Roman Catholic nuns as patients. When Ma came to Ranchi one time he brought them to meet her. To the surprise of Doctor Ghosh and the nuns, Ma said to him, “Tell them that this body is also a nun.”

In the first book I read about Ma the author of an article wrote that despite her supernatural virtues, one “fly in the ointment” (his expression) was her pronounced preference for monks (sannyasis). It was well known that Ma called all men “father,” but she always referred to sannyasis as “friend.” When an acquaintance of mine went to India I sent a letter to be read to Ma. When Ma replied, dictating her answer to a devotee, she began: “Tell my friend....” So the devotee who read my letter to Ma said, “Ma considers him a sannyasi.”

In my second pilgrimage to India three others were with me. Once we were staying right next to a property where someone had built a small house for Ma to stay in when she came to that place. One evening one of my fellow pilgrims saw Ma through a window in that house. She was speaking with great animation and a tangible intimacy that he had never seen in her before. Curious as to who could evoke this intense communication with Ma, he climbed up on the separating wall. Then he saw that Ma’s room was filled with sannyasis.

Yes. Ma did indeed have a marked preference for those whose preference for God was so marked that they renounced all for the realization of God. Even in the West there was at one time a monastic order simply named The Friends of God.

My sannyasa guru, Swami Vidyananda Giri, had known Ma for many years before taking sannyas. He was known to her as Girin Dey. So when I asked Ma about becoming a sannyasi she asked me who would confer the sannyas. I told her “Girin Dey,” and she asked me who that was! When I said, “Swami Vidyananda” she knew who I meant. Ma had never been told that Girin Dey had become Swami Vidyananda, but she responded only to his sannyas name. There was a lesson in that.

In previous pilgrimages I had sometimes seen a venerable man who ran a school for girls bring a busload of the girls to meet Ma. At the end of my last trip to India and Ma I witnessed a wonderful thing. A bus had brought quite a few young women from that school, and Ma was speaking with them. I stood outside one of the windows and observed. At one point she talked to them about the necessity for japa of one of God’s

Names, and asked each one which Divine Name they liked the best and would promise to always repeat and meditate on. As they would tell Ma a holy Name, she would say to each one: "Very good. Say It always." When all had done this, Ma said to them very forcefully: "Have nothing to do with a man. Never let a man even touch you. But keep your own shakti. And you will accomplish great things." I hope they did.

When we see a thing, we are actually seeing the shape or configuration that has been taken by our subtle mental energy within as a reflection-duplication of that object. What we see as outside is within us to a very real degree. That means that the field of energy that is our mind is vibrating at the same frequency as the object we see.

Ma did not have a body like ours. It was chinmaya-formed of pure consciousness. She said that no one could see her without her willing it. This also implied that a person would have to possess the capacity or ability to see her. I have observed this myself. I have seen people nearly walk right into Ma as though she was invisible to them, only at the last moment veering off to the side before touching her—and still not looking at her.

Therefore, whenever I would be looking at her I would understand that Ma wanted me to be in her presence and seeing her. And I would mentally thank her for such grace.

Someone once asked her, "Ma, when we think of you, do you think of us?" She answered, "If there was not the kheyala," obviously on her part, "how could you think of this body?" Also, she knew whenever anyone was thinking of her or hearing about her. To think of Ma was to be with Ma. And to see Ma was to see God, to be with God. But only those she willed to realize that would be aware of that.

There were people that would be brought to meet Sri Ramakrishna by one of his devotees, but after just a short while they would start shifting around and being restless, and would say to the one who brought them, "I will wait for you outside." This was because the vibration, the consciousness, that Ramakrishna embodied unsettled them and made them uncomfortable because it was in conflict with their low state of development and awareness.

It was the same with Ma.

One way people had of avoiding the experience/effect of Ma's presence was to sit in front of her with closed eyes, supposedly meditating, and thereby avoiding having her "inside" their mind by seeing her. Fake yogis always did this. This especially was standard procedure for Westerners who came to Ma just so they could go back home and brag about meeting her. (They often had Western friends who had met Ma, and they did not want to be outdone by them, so they came, too. And missed her completely.)

As Yogananda said, "People are so skillful in their ignorance."

Once at the time of Durga Puja, the October worship of Goddess Durga, at the Agarpara ashram north of Calcutta, some Australians were brought by someone so they could meet Ma, who had been sitting by the image of the goddess. The entire ashram grounds were searched for her, but Ma could not be found. As soon as they left, there was Ma by the image of the Devi. She told them she had been sitting there all the time.

When she was told about the visitors she simply commented, “Perhaps they were not intended to see this body.”

Once I was foolish enough to take two western “yogis” to the same ashram for Ma’s darshan. Just seeing Ma was as usual a divine experience—for me, anyway. Since the two were staying at a place only twenty minutes’ walk from the ashram, I told them, “Now you know the way you can come back any time, for Ma will be here for some days.” But I got this response: “Oh, no. It’s too far away to walk.” Yes. People are skillful in their ignorance. And obvious, too.

There were those that Ma inwardly called to come to her, and knew they were called. In Varanasi at the Anandamayi Ashram I met a man who had known Ma when she first came to Varanasi and was staying on a houseboat on the Ganges. He told me that sometimes through the years he would intensely want to see Ma, but when he came to the ashram officious fools would try to block him from seeing Ma, supposedly because she was busy or unwell. “(Ma is resting,” was a common lie I was told several times.) When he told Ma about this, she said, “Just tell them, ‘Ma has called me,’ and come wherever I am.” “But Ma,” he protested, “that won’t be true—you won’t have called me.” “If you want to see me so much that you are willing to say that, then I *have* called you,” was her answer.

Everything Ma said and did was perfect, though people often did not realize that. The man I just told about had such an experience when I was in Varanasi during one pilgrimage. We were sitting together outside the Annapurna temple in the ashram, waiting for Ma. He was restless and kept complaining that he had an appointment that he must keep, that Ma was holding him up, and so forth. Only after a very long time did Ma come. When she left, he went to his appointment, grumbling to himself.

The next day when I saw him, he said, “Ma saved my life by delaying me yesterday. Recently, it has become common for someone to receive a letter saying that they will be killed if they do not come to a certain place and pay the money they demand. Yesterday morning I got such a letter, telling me to bring the money to a certain place, or I would die. So I came to the ashram for Ma’s darshan, intending to salute Ma and then go give the money.

“Ma did not come for such a long time, so I was worried, but when I went where I was told to be I found some policemen there who told me that they had just apprehended the man I was to meet, and that he had a huge knife hidden under his clothes, obviously planning to stab me after getting the money. So Ma saved my life.” But how he had complained while having his life saved!

Some years later, in Kankhal, a Western woman who had known Ma for quite some time, came out of the room where she had been speaking with Ma. She was griping to herself, and saying, “Oh, ho! How hard it is to have a guru!...” Then she explained to me that Ma had told her to go immediately to a cancer specialist in Bombay (Mumbai) and be examined. She told Ma that surgery on her thyroid had removed all cancer, so there was no need for an examination. When she told this to Ma, one of the women who traveled with Ma asked her, “Can’t you do this simple thing Ma has told you?” So she agreed and went. I saw her a few weeks later and she told me that examination

revealed the cancer had returned. She got treatment and it was easily eliminated permanently.

Both these incidents remind me of something I read many years ago: The mother washes the baby's face, and the baby howls and tries to turn away. But the mother persists, so the baby gets clean. It is the same in spiritual life. The aspirant complains and tries to evade the needed discipline and purification, but when it is undergone the resulting blessings make him grateful and ready to cooperate in the future.

This reminds me of another incident about Ma's perfect knowledge. An Indian devotee of Ma told me that he had travelled halfway through India to be with Ma for a short time. When he came to bid farewell to Ma, she leaned forward and looked at him intently. "What is wrong with your eye?" she asked. "Nothing," he said, and immediately left for Bombay where he was scheduled to be in a polo match. During the match he was struck in the eye by a polo ball. It hurt, but he was used to polo injuries, and left the field intending to go home. But in the dugout he found a man waiting who said without preamble, "I am an eye specialist, I am taking you to my office to examine your eye." At first he thought that was unnecessary, but he remembered how Ma had been concerned about his eye. So he went, and the doctor found that the retina of the eye was slightly detached and would soon have resulted in blindness of that eye. He performed minor surgery on the eye and all was well.

In the early nineteen-sixties Swami Kriyananda, a disciple of Paramhansa Yogananda, was living in India and often visited Ma. Once he spent quite some time with her, and upon his return to the ashram where he was living he found a telegram saying Ma wanted him to return immediately. He picked up his unpacked suitcase, went back to the train station and returned to Ma, anxious as to why she had summoned him. So when he had saluted Ma, he asked, "Ma, why did you call me?" She said, "I just wanted to see you." He was bewildered and objected, "But Ma, you always see me." "Yes," she replied, "but you don't really *know* that!"

Ma was incomprehensible, but always responsive to the devotee's heart. One time some young students went to meet Sri Ramakrishna's great disciple, Swami Akhandananda. One of them said, "Swamiji, we are studying the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna carefully so we can understand him." Akhandanandaji smiled and replied, "You may do so as much as you like, but we who lived with him never tried to understand him."

This is what is needed: to live with, in and by Ma. She is only a thought away.

Jai Ma.

## Four Transformations

India is the land of spiritual transformation. I would like to tell you about four people in India whom I saw transformed by the spiritual power of India, persistent practice of meditation, and living proof of the liberating power of yoga. I will give the actual name of only one, Swami Jnanananda Saraswati, because his peculiarities were well known to the residents of Sivanandashram for many years, and those who knew

him will not be shocked at my candor. Rather I expect they will laugh in fond memory of him. To the others I will give titles rather than names, for I am going to have to describe their negative traits so you will understand what a great change yoga sadhana made in their life.

### **1) Swami Jnanananda Saraswati of Sivanandashram**

I met Swami Jnanananda at Sivanandashram where he was living. He was a very great Sanskrit scholar, but more than that he was a totally devoted disciple of Swami Sivananda, in praise of whom he had written many Sanskrit verses.

Swami Pranavananda, another disciple of Sivananda, told me that Jnananandaji would tell people: “I am a king in the kingdom of my mind. I studied Sanskrit for more than twenty-five years, and became proficient in it. For even longer than that I studied all the scriptures. Now I am a king reigning in the kingdom of my intellect.” That may sound very boastful, but he was a truly humble person just telling the truth. At the “just plain boiled rice” lunch that I have told about in Chapter Eighteen, he engaged in a contest of spontaneously composing Sanskrit verses with a visiting scholar, and he won effortlessly. Whenever his turn came he would have a gleeful expression on his face and rock from side to side as he pulverized his opponent’s attempts.

Now I cannot deny that his ways were really crazy. He spoke in a very nasal, rather high-pitched voice in an exaggerated manner. And the things he said were even weirder. There is no way I can convey in writing his strange intonation and manner of speech.

One day he walked up to Steven Wyland and I and began loudly: “Oh, my goodness! I completely forgot that this was ekadasi [a day of fasting], so when I found the kitchen door closed and locked I RAN to Madras Hotel and demanded they make something for me right away. Oh, yes. Otherwise I would have starved! I would have starved.” Then he turned around and wandered away.

One satsang revealed something of the inner nature of Jnanananda. It was in the evening, and Sivananda told Swami Jnanananda to stand up and recite some of his Sanskrit verses. So of course the Swami chose to recite what he had written in praise of Sivananda. Standing up right where he had been sitting, and facing Sivananda, he lifted his hands above his head in pranam to Sivananda and began almost shouting: “Vande Sivananda....” Sivananda interrupted him in equal volume by shouting out: “Oh, boodle boodle boodle boo!” (I can’t really convey what he did in writing, but this gives some idea.) Jnanananda stopped, looking really surprised. Sivananda indicated that he should start over, and so he did with Sivananda immediately responding: “Oh, boodle boodle boodle boo!” This happened one or two more times. Then Sivananda let him recite without interruption.

Now here is my point. Swami Jnanananda never got miffed or hurt. Whatever Sivananda did was all right with him because he knew the master’s greatness and wisdom. To him obviously this all had a purpose. And it did: it showed the fundamental sincerity and genuineness of his devotion to Sivananda, to whom he had but one response: love. And the master had the same for him.

Whenever I would visit Sivanandashram on subsequent trips, I would tell whoever was with me, "Now we are going to find Swami Jnanananda and have some fun." As soon as he saw me he would begin exclaiming: "Oh ho! Here you are after so long a time!" Then he would turn to my companion and continue, "Oh, ho! You should have seen him the first time he was here! He was only this wide [using his fingers to show about two inches] and so tall, just like a string. Oh. Oh. Oh." And these last three syllables would roll out accompanied by all kinds of odd head movements and facial distortions. It was always memorable.

Then, though I did not know it, there came the last time I would meet my dear friend. When another monk and I inquired after Jnanananda we were told he was up on the hill outside the print shop. So there we proceeded, anticipating the usual comic display. But it was not to be.

Jnananandaji was sitting under a tree. When we bowed down and then sat up before him, he at there in silence, looking at us, radiant and still. As the opening verse of the Isha Upanishad says, he was seeing God first and us second. He was looking at us through God. You may know the hymn "Lead Kindly Light." That Light came out of Swami Jnanananda's eyes as he looked at us. Then a brief conversation followed, Swamiji speaking in a very soft voice. For a while all three of us closed our eyes and sat in meditation. Then we bowed in silence and left his blessed presence. He will never be forgotten by me. With Sivananda he is immortal in my memory.

## **2) Swami One**

I first met Swami One during my second visit to India. After some months I had met a marvelous devotee of God, Chandni Ram, who loved sadhus. He had built for himself a very large mansion in New Delhi. But he and his family lived in two rooms and a kitchen, all the rest of the house being given over to the sadhus he invited to stay there. None were permanent residents, but came and went. Usually there were twenty or so sadhus of various types staying there. So I became one, and had the good fortune to be given the family's worship room for my stay.

Right away S-1 introduced himself and told me that he was a disciple of a very famous yogi whom I had met during my first India trip.

S-1 was a very intelligent and affable person, but utterly devoid of any spiritual quality that I could see. He was more like a trustworthy business man than a devotee or yogi, much less a sannyasi. But my positive-neutral opinion of him was shattered the very next morning as I was sitting watching the women of the household preparing for the morning worship.

S-1 entered by the door next to the shrine. To my and their astonishment he demanded the sandal paste they had just made to be offered in the worship. They protested that he could only have some sandal paste after it had first been put on the deity's image. Nothing doing. S-1 wanted that special orange-hued sandal paste to make a nice big dot (tilak) on his forehead to complete his morning toilet. (His wet hair indicated that he had just taken his morning bath.)

Despite the women's pleading, he reached over and took the sandal paste and a

mirror lying on the altar. After finishing adorning the deity, it is the custom to hold up a mirror for the deity to see the result. But S-1 had a more immediate purpose: he used the mirror to make sure his orange dot was perfectly round and exactly in the middle of his eyebrows. Obviously he was his own deity. Then he walked out, leaving the women to discard the sandal paste and make a new batch. A cousin of mine, when very little, had announced to his mother regarding a schoolmate: "Mother, I have my opinion about him." Now I had an opinion about S-1.

Some years went by and I never forgot S-1 and his orange dot. Then during one trip I was in Western India. I had been there once before and had discovered a very wonderful Vamanadeva temple whose mahant was a spiritually outstanding person. So one evening I set off in happy anticipation. I was very disappointed to find that the Mahant had gone to Bombay, but the arati was especially powerful and I was glad I had come.

No one who attended the arati could speak English, but they would not let me leave when the arati was over, indicating by signs that I should sit and wait. I did, and two or three of them started toward a side door calling out very loudly: "Guru Maharaj! Guru Maharaj!" In a few moments the atmosphere changed and through the door there walked an incredible sight: a yogi if ever I saw one, with long hair and beard whose entire manner and "feel" told me that this was a Guru Maharaj indeed.

First I stood and then I bowed down to him. With great affection he asked me to sit. After he had inquired about me and my purpose there, he told me what ashram he was from and his guru. They were the same ashram and guru of S-1! As he continued speaking to me, I really scrutinized him and said to myself: "He certainly looks like that dud swami I met at Chandni Ram's in Delhi." Finally I had to ask: "Swamiji, do you know Sri Chandni Ram of Delhi?" "Yes. He is a dear friend of mine." "Were you staying at his house in February of 1969?" "Yes." "Do you remember a very skinny American sadhu who stayed there a few days?" (I had gotten chubby over the years.) "Yes.... was that *you*?" "It was, Swamiji."

"Oh, my brother!" he exclaimed and hugged me, then explained in Gujarati to those watching us about our previous meeting. And all the while I sat there in awe. Never, never could I had dreamed that the Tilak Thief could become this wonderful being. Yogananda often said: "A saint is a sinner who never gave up." I would not accuse S-1 of having been a "sinner," though a lot of Hindu devotees would have if they knew the tilak incident. Certainly he had not given up, but followed the sadhana his guru had given and now here he was, ablaze with realization.

It was with regret that I left, knowing that this, too would be a last meeting with that divine soul. And I certainly never forgot him.

### 3) Swami Two

Now Swami Two was very different from Swami One. He was outright obnoxious, arrogant, rude and a pleasure to not meet again. There is an old popular song, "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?" Well, when you saw S-2 you saw an ego walking.

I first met S-2 in Hardwar my first trip. Ma Anandamayi was staying at Bhagat

House and he had come to bestow himself upon her for only a couple of hours. A few months before a close friend of mine had made her first trip to India and had met him. She spoke very enthusiastically about him and how generous he was with his time talking with her about spiritual subjects. So when I saw him and learned who he was I introduced myself. My impression was not that of my friend, and I was shocked at his ill manners. Then I got the idea. I was not a cute American girl.

But after a dozen years I was in a situation where I had to meet him. Was I ever dreading it. My memory of him was very fresh indeed. Another American friend had become acquainted with S-2, and he took me to S-2's small house in an isolated area. When we got out of the car, the door opened and S-2 came out of the house to meet us. This was an even greater stunner than my second meeting with S-1.

I recognized S-2 immediately and saw not just a transformation, but a transmutation. He had become so purified and refined that he was barely there physically. This may sound odd, but I tell you that I could see into him and clearly perceived his awakened chakras and the inner luminosity that was his consciousness. When we were seated inside, I just sat and reveled in the sight of him and the subtle radiance that surrounded him. It was heaven on earth.

I was able to be with Swamiji that day and the next. The lesson I learned from my second encounter with him was a valued one, and the memory of Swamiji has remained with me ever since as a treasure beyond expressing or evaluating. Over the intervening years Swamiji has been a beacon light to many souls. I bow to him in appreciation.

#### **4) Ashram Official**

I had visited a few monasteries in America, and it was apparent that visitors were interlopers, tolerated but not desired. In India it was totally different. Ashrams were places meant to be visited by everyone, sources of spiritual wisdom and upliftment. Devout people felt that an ashram was a kind of second home, and many (even entire families) would sometimes stay in an ashram for a week or more. This was especially true of Sivanandashram. But there are always exceptions to the rule, and I encountered some myself during my India trips.

During my second trip I spent some time near an ashram that was renowned for its lack of common hospitality. In fact a frequent visitor to that ashram was very embarrassed that the ashram would not even provide food for visitors, something virtually all ashrams do as a matter of course. Even before I got there I had received an abrupt letter from the ashram announcing that I would have to find my own place to stay and my own food to eat. But there was someone staying there that I wanted to be with for a few days so I went and trusted to luck. (It wasn't very good; accommodations in that town were quite poor.)

One evening as I was leaving the ashram to return to the room I was renting at an exorbitant rate (and whose owners shamelessly tried to make me pay for their entire electric bill for the month), I was accosted by the ashram secretary. (He was a layman, not a monastic, who lived nearby.) Stopping me right in the middle of the main road,

he began complaining to me about the financial troubles of the ashram (which I knew was extremely rich) and ended up asking me for money, when the ashram had given me nothing but a cold shoulder. (They were not discriminating against me; they treated everyone that way unless they were very rich.) If you suppose that I did not give him (or them) a penny (a pice), you suppose right. Was I ever disgusted.

Again, some years went by and I was in Kankhal at the Anandamayi Ashram, sitting at the side of the Shiva temple on the “old” ashram property. People were streaming in and out to have the darshan of Anandamayi Ma, who was on the roof of a building which was reached by a stairway behind the temple. Anyhow, there I sat, happy as a duck in water—as always when I was in India.

As I sat there silently doing japa, the entire atmosphere became electric, and I could feel Someone coming down the stairs behind the temple. It was not Ma, I knew, because her aura was completely different. Who it could be I had no idea, but I stood up in anticipation despite the inquiring looks of those around me. And then it happened.

Around the corner of the temple there appeared a man dressed in traditional Indian clothing (dhoti and kurta). At first I thought his hair was brilliantly white and shining, but then I realized that I was seeing him through a cloud of blazing light. Everything about him was shining. To my surprise he immediately saw me and called out, “O my brother!” then came up and hugged me and took my hands, saying: “I am so happy we are meeting again after so long. You are looking so well.” Then I realized: this was the man who had hit me up for undeserved money those years ago! I could not help myself. I hugged him back and did not want to let go. Talk about friends in high places: he was himself a “high place.” What a blessing.

We sat down and had a marvelous talk together. I cannot remember a word of it, but I remember the inner message. This, too, was a last meeting, but it lives in my heart.

# Appendix Two

## The Practice of Soham Yoga Meditation

1) Sit upright, comfortable and relaxed, with your hands on your knees or thighs or resting, one on the other, in your lap.

2) Turn your eyes slightly downward and close them gently. This removes visual distractions and reduces your brain-wave activity by about seventy-five percent, thus helping to calm the mind. During meditation your eyes may move upward and downward naturally of their own accord. This is as it should be when it happens spontaneously. But start out with them turned slightly downward without any strain.

3) Be aware of your breath naturally (automatically) flowing in and out. Your mouth should be closed so that all breathing is done through the nose. This also aids in quieting the mind. Though your mouth is closed, the jaw muscles should be relaxed so the upper and lower teeth are not clenched or touching one another, but parted. Breathe naturally, spontaneously. Your breathing should always be easeful and natural, not deliberate or artificial.

4) Then in a very quiet and gentle manner begin mentally intoning Soham in time with your breathing. (Remember: Soham is pronounced like our English words So and Hum.)

Intone Soooooo, prolonging a single intonation throughout each inhalation, and Huuummm, prolonging a single intonation throughout each exhalation, “singing” the syllables on a single note.

There is no need to pull or push the mind. Let your relaxed attention sink into and get absorbed in the mental sound of your inner intonings of Soham.

Fit the intonations to the breath—not the breath to the intonations. If the breath is short, then the intonation should be short. If the breath is long, then the intonation should be long. It does not matter if the inhalations and exhalations are not of equal length. Whatever is natural and spontaneous is what is right.

Your intonation of Soooooo should begin when your inhalation begins, and Huuummm should begin when your exhalation begins. In this way your intonations should be virtually continuous, that is:

SooooooHuuummmSooooooHuuummmSooooooHuuummm.

Do not torture yourself about this—basically continuous is good enough.

5) For the rest of your meditation time keep on intoning Soham in time with your breath, calmly listening to the mental sound.

6) In Soham meditation we do not deliberately concentrate on any particular point of the body such as the third eye, as we want the subtle energies of Soham to be free to manifest themselves as is best at the moment. However, as you meditate, you may become aware of one or more areas of your brain or body at different times. This is all right when such sensations come and go spontaneously, but keep centered on your

intonations of Soham in time with your breath.

7) In time your inner mental intonations of Soham may change to a more mellow or softer form, even to an inner whispering that is almost silent, but the syllables are always fully present and effective. Your intonations may even become silent, like a soundless mouthing of Soham or just the thought or movement of Soham, yet you will still be intoning Soham in your intention. And of this be sure: Soham never ceases. Never. You may find that your intonations of Soham move back and forth from more objective to more subtle and back to more objective. Just intone in the manner that is natural at the moment.

8) In the same way you will find that your breath will also become more subtle and refined, and slow down. Sometimes the breath may not be perceived as movement of the lungs, but just as the subtle pranic energy movement which causes the physical breath. Your breath can even become so light that it seems as though you are not breathing at all, just thinking the breath (or almost so).

9) Thoughts, impressions, memories, inner sensations, and suchlike may also arise during meditation. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner, but keep your attention centered in your intonations of Soham in time with your breath. Do not let your attention become centered on or caught up in any inner or outer phenomena. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner. They are part of the transforming work of Soham, and are perfectly all right, but keep your attention centered in your intonations of Soham in time with your breath. Even though something feels very right or good when it occurs, it should not be forced or hung on to. The sum and substance of it all is this: It is not the experience we are after, but the effect. Also, since we are all different, no one can say exactly what a person's experiences in meditation are going to be like.

10) If you find yourself getting restless, distracted, fuzzy, anxious or tense in any degree, just take a deep breath and let it out fully, feeling that you are releasing and breathing out all tensions, and continue as before.

11) Remember: Soham Yoga meditation basically consists of four things: a) sitting with the eyes closed; b) being aware of our breath as it moves in and out, and c) mentally intoning Soham in time with the breath and d) listening to those mental intonations: all in a relaxed and easeful manner, without strain.

Breath and sound are the two major spiritual powers possessed by us, so they are combined for Soham Yoga practice. It is very natural to intone Soham in time with the breathing. The way is simple and easy.

12) At the end of your meditation time, keep on intoning Soham in time with your breath as you go about your various activities, listening to the inner mantric sound, just as in meditation.

There is an entire book on the subject of Soham Yoga entitled: *Soham Yoga: The Yoga of the Self*, which I recommend you read.

# Glossary

**Abhaya(m):** “Without fear;” fearlessness; a state of steadfastness in which one is not swayed by fear of any kind.

**Ajnana:** Ignorance; nescience.

**Ajnanatimira:** The glaucoma of ignorance.

**Ananda:** Bliss; happiness; joy. A fundamental attribute of Brahman, which is Satchidananda: Existence, Consciousness, Bliss.

**Annapurna:** “Full of Food.” A title of the Goddess (Shakti) depicted as the Goddess of Food and Abundance. The consort of Shiva.

**Arati:** A ceremony of worship in which lights, incense, camphor, and other offerings representing the five elements and the five senses—the totality of the human being—are waved before an image or symbol of the Divine.

**Ashram(a):** A place for spiritual discipline and study, usually a monastic residence.

**Atman:** The individual spirit or Self that is one with Brahman; the essential being, nature or identity of each sentient being.

**Aurobindo Ghosh, Sri:** One of India’s greatest yogis and spiritual writers, he was at first involved in the Indian freedom movement, but came to see that yoga was the true path to freedom. His ashram in South India became one of the major spiritual centers in modern India, and his voluminous spiritual writings are read and prized throughout the world.

**Avatar(a):** A fully liberated spirit (jiva) who is born into a world below Satya Loka to help others attain liberation. Though commonly referred to as a divine incarnation, an avatar actually is totally one with God, and therefore an incarnation of God-Consciousness.

**Bhagavan:** The Lord; the One endowed with the attributes: infinite dominion, infinite might, infinite glory, infinite splendor, infinite wisdom and infinite renunciation; the Personal God.

**Bhajan:** Devotional singing; a devotional song; remembrance (of God).

**Bhakta:** Devotee; votary; a follower of the path of bhakti, divine love; a worshipper of the Personal God.

**Bhakti:** Devotion; dedication; love of God.

**Bhakti Marga:** The path of devotion leading to union with God.

**Bhakti Sutra:** An aphoristic work on devotional Yoga authored by the sage Narada. Another text by the same title is ascribed to the sage Shandilya.

**Bhakti Yoga:** The yoga of attaining union with God through the prescribed spiritual discipline of the path of devotion.

**Bhakti Yogi:** One who practices Bhakti Yoga.

**Bhiksha:** Almsfood; food obtained by begging or that is offered to a monk.

**Brahmachaitanya:** Divine Consciousness, Brahman-Consciousness.

**Brahmachari(n):** One who observes continence; a celibate student in the first stage

of life (ashrama); a junior monk.

**Brahmacharini:** A female brahmachari.

**Brahmacharya:** Continence; self-restraint on all levels; discipline; dwelling in Brahman.

**Brahmajnana:** Direct, transcendental knowledge of Brahman; Self-realization.

**Brahmajnani:** One who possess Brahmajnana.

**Brahman:** The Absolute Reality; the Truth proclaimed in the Upanishads; the Supreme Reality that is one and indivisible, infinite, and eternal; all-pervading, changeless Existence; Existence-knowledge-bliss Absolute (Satchidananda); Absolute Consciousness; it is not only all-powerful but all-power itself; not only all-knowing and blissful but all-knowledge and all-bliss itself.

**Brindaban:** The place where Krishna was born and where he lived until the age of twelve. Today it is a city of devotees and temples. Many agree with my friend who once said to me in a very matter-of-fact way: “Brindaban is my life.” Its actual name is Vrindavan, but so many Bengali devotees and saints for centuries have called it “Brindaban” in their dialect, it has become common usage throughout India.

**Chinmaya:** Full of consciousness; formed of consciousness.

**Chit:** Consciousness (that is spirit or purusha); “to perceive, observe, think, be aware, know;” pure unitary Consciousness. The principle of universal intelligence or consciousness.

**Darshan:** Literally “sight” or “seeing;” vision, literal and metaphysical; a system of philosophy (see Sad-darshanas). Darshan is the seeing of a holy being as well as the blessing received by seeing such a one.

**Deva:** “A shining one,” a god—greater or lesser in the evolutionary hierarchy; a semi-divine or celestial being with great powers, and therefore a “god.” Sometimes called a demi-god. Devas are the demigods presiding over various powers of material and psychic nature. In many instances “devas” refer to the powers of the senses or the sense organs themselves.

**Devata:** Godhead; god; divinity; celestial being. See Deva.

**Dharma:** The righteous way of living, as enjoined by the sacred scriptures and the spiritually illumined; law; lawfulness; virtue; righteousness; norm.

**Dharmashala:** A place for pilgrims to stay, either free of charge or at a minimal cost.

**Dharmi:** One who follows dharma—specifically, Sanatana Dharma.

**Dharmic:** Having to do with dharma; of the character of dharma.

**Dhir:** Steady, unshaken, firm and resolute.

**Diksha:** Initiation.

**Durga (Durga Devi):** “Incomprehensible One;” “Difficult to reach;” the Universal Mother; she rides a lion (or tiger) and carries a weapon in each of her eight arms symbolizing the powers of the Self against ignorance and evil. She is invoked against all forms of evil—physical and metaphysical. She is considered the consort, the shakti, of Shiva.

**Ganapati:** “Lord of the Ganas” (the spirits that always accompany Shiva). See

Ganesha.

**Ganesha:** The elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati; the remover of obstacles; lord (pati) of the ganas (spirits that always accompany Shiva); god of wisdom; god of beginnings; the granter of success in spiritual and material life; in ritual worship he is worshipped first, and is therefore known as Adi-deva, the First God.

**Gerua:** The brownish-orange mud used to dye the clothing of Hindu monastics; the color produced by dyeing with gerua is also itself called gerua.

**Grihastha:** One who is living in the second stage (ashrama) of Hindu social life; married householder's life.

**Guna:** Quality, attribute, or characteristic arising from nature (Prakriti) itself; a mode of energy behavior. As a rule, when "guna" is used it is in reference to the three qualities of Prakriti, the three modes of energy behavior that are the basic qualities of nature, and which determine the inherent characteristics of all created things. They are: 1) sattwa–purity, light, harmony; 2) rajas–activity, passion; and 3) tamas–dullness, inertia, and ignorance.

**Gunatita:** Beyond the Gunas; one who has transcended the three Gunas.

**Guru:** Teacher; preceptor; spiritual teacher or acharya.

**Ishta:** Object of desire.

**Ishta-devata:** Beloved deity. The deity preferred above all others by an individual. "Chosen ideal" is the usual English translation.

**Ishta mantra:** The mantra of the divine form specially beloved by an individual (ishta devata).

**Japa:** Repetition of a mantra.

**Japa Mala:** A string of beads, usually one hundred and eight, on which repetitions (japa) of a mantra are kept count of, or used just to help the yogi remember to do japa. Though one hundred and eight is the usual number of beads, smaller malas can be used when more convenient, especially since they can be put around the wrist when not in use. The beads can be of any substance, whatever is convenient or preferred.

**Jnana:** Knowledge; knowledge of Reality–of Brahman, the Absolute; also denotes the process of reasoning by which the Ultimate Truth is attained. The word is generally used to denote the knowledge by which one is aware of one's identity with Brahman.

**Karma:** Karma, derived from the Sanskrit root *kri*, which means to act, do, or make, means any kind of action, including thought and feeling. It also means the effects of action. Karma is both action and reaction, the metaphysical equivalent of the principle: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). It is karma operating through the law of cause and effect that binds the jiva or the individual soul to the wheel of birth and death.

Karma is said to be the three kinds: Prarabdham, Santchitam, and Vartamanam, called also Agami. Prarabdha Karma is that which is ripe for reaping and which cannot be avoided; it is only exhausted by being experienced. Sanchita Karma is the accumulated Karma of the past, and is partly seen in the character of the man, in his powers, weaknesses and capacities. Vartamana Karma is that which is now being created.

**Kheyala:** A spontaneous movement of will or intent.

**Krishna:** An avatar born in India about three thousand years ago, Whose teachings to His disciple Arjuna on the eve of the Great India (Mahabharata) War comprise the Bhagavad Gita.

**Kundalini; Kundalini Shakti:** The primordial cosmic conscious energy located in the individual; it is usually thought of as lying coiled up like a serpent at the base of the spine.

**Kusha:** One of the varieties of sacred grass (darbha) used in many religious rites, including the sprinkling of water. Because of its insulating qualities, both physical and metaphysical, it is recommended as a seat (asana) for meditation, and as mats for sleeping (it keeps the sleeper on a cold surface warm).

**Kutir(a):** Hut; cottage; house; building; hermitage.

**Lakshman:** The brother of Rama whom he accompanied into exile.

**Mahamaya:** “Great illusion;” divine Power operating as identified with the Supreme Lord. A title of Shakti, the Goddess.

**Mahant:** The head of an ashram; an abbot.

**Mahashakti:** The Great Power; the divine creative energy.

**Mantra:** Sacred syllable or word or set of words through the repetition and reflection of which one attains perfection or realization of the Self. Literally, “a transforming thought” (manat trayate–“that which carries over”). A mantra, then is a sound formula that transforms the consciousness.

**Mantra Yoga:** The Yoga of the Divine Word; the science of sound; the path to divine union through repetition of a mantra—a sound formula that transforms the consciousness.

**Moksha:** Release; liberation; the term is particularly applied to the liberation from the bondage of karma and the wheel of birth and death; Absolute Experience.

**Mudra:** A position—usually of the hands/fingers—which inherently produces a desired state in the subtle energy levels (prana) according to the Tantric system; a Hatha Yoga posture; a position of the eyes in meditation.

**Mulachaitanya:** Root consciousness; seed of the creation.

**Mulaprakriti:** Avyaktam; the Root [Basic] Energy from which all things are formed. The Divine Prakriti or Energy of God.

**Nath(a):** Master; lord; ruler; protector.

**Nath Pantha (Nathas):** Various associations of yogis who trace their roots back to Matsyendranath and the Nath Yogi Sampradaya.

**Nath Yogi:** A member of the Nath Yogi Sampradaya.

**Nath Yogi Sampradaya:** An ancient order of yogis claiming Matsyendranath, Gorakhnath, Patanjali, Jnaneshwar and Jesus (Isha Nath) among their master teachers.

**Pandal:** A flat-roofed tent whose sides and top are detached from one another, the roof usually being higher than the sides to provide air circulation.

**Pandit(a):** Scholar; pundit; learned individual; a man of wisdom.

**Paramatma(n) (1):** The Supreme Self, God.

**Paramatma(n) (2):** The Universal Soul and Lord of the Divine Mother or Kundalini

Shakti. In this state Shiva feels infinite power, beauty, love, wealth, wisdom, goodness, etc. He now wants to delight in playing with his Shakti using all these infinite attributes to create the phenomenal, cosmic universe. As Paramatama, Shiva is conscious of the Perfect Spiritual Personality which is the Shiva-Shakti combine.

**Parambrahma/Parambrahman:** The Supreme Absolute; the transcendental Reality.

**Parambrahman:** The Supreme Absolute; the transcendental Reality.

**Paramananda:** Supreme (param) bliss (ananda).

**Prajna:** Consciousness; awareness; wisdom; intelligence.

**Prana:** Life; vital energy; life-breath; life-force; inhalation. In the human body the prana is divided into five forms: 1) Prana, the prana that moves upward; 2) Apana: The prana that moves downward, producing the excretory functions in general. 3) Vyana: The prana that holds prana and apana together and produces circulation in the body. 4) Samana: The prana that carries the grosser material of food to the apana and brings the subtler material to each limb; the general force of digestion. 5) Udana: The prana which brings up or carries down what has been drunk or eaten; the general force of assimilation.

**Prana pratishta:** “Installation of life;” a ritual which is done to an image when it is set on the altar of a temple at its consecration. This ritual makes the image alive in a subtle—but no less real—sense.

**Pranam:** “To bow;” to greet with respect. A respectful or reverential gesture made by putting the hands together palm-to-palm in front of the chest. A prostration before a deity or revered person.

**Prasad(am):** Grace; food or any gift that has been first offered in worship to a deity or saint; that which is given by a saint. It also means tranquility, particularly in the Bhagavad Gita.

**Puja:** Worship; ceremonial (ritual) worship; adoration; honor. Usually involving the image of a deity.

**Pujari:** One who performs ritualistic worship (puja).

**Ram:** A title of Brahman the Absolute. Though sometimes used as a contraction of the name of Rama, many yogis insist that it is properly applied to Brahman alone and employ it as a mantra in repetition and meditation to reveal the Absolute. Interestingly, Ram (Rahm) is also a title of God in Hebrew.

**Rama:** An incarnation of God—the king of ancient Ayodhya in north-central India. His life is recorded in the ancient epic Ramayana.

**Rama Nama:** The name of Rama—both of the Absolute Brahman and of the incarnation, Rama of Ayodhya—used in devotional singing, japa and meditation.

**Ramakrishna (Paramhansa), Sri:** Sri Ramakrishna lived in India in the second half of the nineteenth century, and is regarded by all India as a perfectly enlightened person—and by many as an Incarnation of God.

**Rishi:** Sage; seer of the Truth.

**Rudra:** Shiva. Derived from *rud*—he who drives away sin or suffering.

**Rudraksha:** “The Eye of Shiva;” a tree seed considered sacred to Shiva and worn by worshippers of Shiva, Shakti, and Ganesha, and by yogis, usually in a strand of 108

seeds. Also used as a rosary to count the number of mantras repeated in japa.

**Sadhana:** Spiritual practice.

**Sadhu:** Seeker for truth (sat); a person who is practicing spiritual disciplines; a good or virtuous or honest man, a holy man, saint, sage, seer. Usually this term is applied only to monastics.

**Samskara:** Impression in the mind, either conscious or subconscious, produced by action or experience in this or previous lives; propensities of the mental residue of impressions; subliminal activators; prenatal tendency.

**Sanatana:** Eternal; everlasting; ancient; primeval.

**Sanatana Dharma:** “The Eternal Religion,” also known as “Arya Dharma,” “the religion of those who strive upward [Aryas];” Hinduism.

**Sanatana Dharmi:** One who both believes in and follows the principles of Sanatana Dharma.

**Sannyas(a):** Renunciation; monastic life. Sannyasa literally means “total throwing away,” in the sense of absolute rejection of worldly life, ways and attitudes. True sannyas is based on viveka and vairagya. It is not just a mode of external life, but a profound insight and indifference to the things of the world and the world itself—not the world of God’s creation, but the world of human ignorance, illusion, folly and suffering which binds all sentient beings to the wheel of continual birth and death. The sannyasi’s one goal is liberation through total purification and enlightenment. His creed is Shankara’s renowned Vedanta in Half a Verse: “Brahman is real. The world is illusion. The jiva is none other than Brahman.”

**Sannyasa Guru:** The one who bestowed sannyasa on an aspirant.

**Sannyasi(n):** A renunciate; a monk.

**Sannyasini:** A female renunciate; a nun.

**Sanskrit:** The language of the ancient sages of India and therefore of the Indian scriptures and yoga treatises.

**Sarada Devi (“Holy Mother”):** The virgin-wife of Sri Ramakrishna, and a great teacher in her own right, considered by many to be an incarnation of the Mother aspect of God.

**Satchidananda:** Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute; Brahman.

**Satsang(a):** Literally: “company with Truth.” Association with godly-minded persons. The company of saints and devotees.

**Shakti:** Power; energy; force; the Divine Power of becoming; the apparent dynamic aspect of Eternal Being; the Absolute Power or Cosmic Energy; the Divine Feminine.

**Shankaracharya:** Shankara; the title of the head of one of the major monasteries (maths) of the Swami Order founded by Shankara. There are four maths in the four quarters of India: Sringeri, Dwaraka, Badrinath and Jagannath Puri.

**Shiva:** A name of God meaning “One Who is all Bliss and the giver of happiness to all.” Although classically applied to the Absolute Brahman, Shiva can also refer to God (Ishwara) in His aspect of Dissolver and Liberator (often mistakenly thought of as “destroyer”).

**Sita:** The consort of Rama, an avatara of the Divine Mother aspect of God.

**Sri:** Holy; sacred; excellent; venerated (venerable); revered; a term of respect similar to “Reverend.” Also: prosperity, glory, and success—and therefore an epithet for Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and abundance, the consort of Vishnu. It is often used as an honorific prefix to the name of deities and holy persons to indicate holiness (Sri Krishna, Sri Swami N., etc.). Also used as the equivalent of the English “Mr.” (Srimati would be the equivalent of “Mrs.”)

**Sthir:** Firm, fixed, immovable and resolved.

**Sudarshana:** Sudarshana Chakra.

**Sudarshana Chakra:** The invincible weapon of Lord Vishnu which is able to cut through anything, and is a symbol of the Lord’s power of cutting through all things which bind the jiva to samsara. Thus it is the divine power of liberation (moksha).

**Sukarma:** Good action; good deed; virtuous; diligent.

**Swabhava:** One’s own inherent disposition, nature, or potentiality; inherent state of mind; state of inner being.

**Swadharma:** One’s own natural (innate) duty (dharma, based on their karma and samskara. One’s own prescribed duty in life according to the eternal law (ritam).

**Swami:** Literally, “I am mine”—in the sense of absolute self-mastership. It could be legitimately translated: “He who is one with his Self [Swa].” It is often used in the sense of “lord” or owner as well as a spiritual guide or authority. God Himself is the ultimate Swami. As a matter of respect it is always used in reference to sannyasis, since they have vowed themselves to pursue the knowledge of the Self, or those considered to be of spiritual advancement.

**Tilak:** A sacred mark made on the forehead or between the eyebrows, often denoting what form of God the person worships.

**Triguna:** The three gunas or qualities: sattwa, rajas, and tamas. (See the entry under Guna).

**Trigunatita:** Beyond the three gunas.

**Tulasi (Tulsi):** The Indian basil plant sacred to Vishnu. Considered a manifestation of the goddess Lakshmi. Its leaves are used in worship of Vishnu and his avatars, and its stems and roots are formed into rosary beads used for counting the repetition of the mantras of Vishnu and his avatars. The leaves of tulasi are also used for purification and even medicinally.

**Vaishnava:** A devotee of Vishnu.

**Vaishnavism:** A religious sect of Hinduism, whose members follow the path of devotion to God as Vishnu or one of Vishnu’s avatars—especially Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, and (in Bengal) Sri Chaitanya.

**Vamana Avatara/Vamanadeva:** An incarnation of Vishnu in the Treta Yuga as a Brahmin dwarf.

**Vimala:** Purity; unblemished; without stain or defect.

**Vir:** Strong and courageous.

**Vishwaprana:** The universal life force (prana).

**Vishnu:** “The all-pervading;” God as the Preserver.

**Yajna/Yajanam:** Sacrifice; offering; sacrificial ceremony; a ritual sacrifice; usually

the fire sacrifice known as agnihotra or havan.

**Yoga Sutras:** The oldest known writing on the subject of yoga, written by the sage Patanjali, a yogi of ancient India, and considered the most authoritative text on yoga. Also known as Yoga Darshana, it is the basis of the Yoga Philosophy which is based on the philosophical system known as Sankhya.

**Yogi:** One who practices Yoga; one who strives earnestly for union with God; an aspirant going through any course of spiritual discipline.

**Yogic:** Having to do with Yoga.

**Yogini:** A female practitioner of yoga.

**Yogiraj:** "King of Yogis," a title often given to an advanced yogi, especially a teacher of yogi.