

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below took place while he was working in a Kerala branch of the TV Sundaram company.

I soon came to be known to the Sundaram Industries management as a bright young star. I'd begun as a junior assistant, handling service records in the personnel department, but soon leaped into the ambitious role of 'office hero' by tackling tasks that others were not able to handle quickly or skillfully. Within a few months of my arrival, my vanity was gratified by a promotion to the post of senior assistant to the chief payroll accountant.

I had also discovered that because of my being the nephew of the Directing Manager, I could ignore the office dress code, which called for white shirt tucked into trousers. My attire was kurta and lungi. The kurta (the traditional collarless North Indian cotton shirt) would be worn long, down to my knees. The lungi (a white sarong worn by South Indian men) I would wrap up to my knees when I walked and let down below my feet when I sat at my desk. To top off my odd appearance, I sported long hair and a handlebar mustache.

One day a spare man with slicked-back hair and a peculiar gleam in his eye strode into the office and went from desk to desk collecting donations. He wore a lungi and a simple cotton cloth draped over his torso. His forehead was marked with a sindhur dot that indicated he was a shakta (a devotee of Devi, the female principle). I recognized him as a member of the Kerala brahmin caste known as Nambudri, who are sometimes feared for their reputed powers. There was a theatrical, effeminate air about him that I found silly. Still, everyone was giving him a few rupees.

When he saw me in my unusual attire he assumed I'd be a soft touch. Wordlessly smiling with lowered eyelashes, he put out his hand.

"For what?" I demanded irritably.

"I am collecting for the Bhagavati temple here at which I am the priest. I want to hold a great festival of the goddess. "

"I'm not giving you any money. " I turned back to work.

"But I heard you are very religious. "

Though my interest in religious experience was newly awakened, I hadn't lost my dislike for indolent and grasping brahmin priests. I saw no good reason why he deserved my money. "I said I am not giving you anything. "

"Be careful of your attitude," he snapped haughtily.

This only roused my bile. "What are you going to do if I'm not?"

He turned to the other office workers and demanded, "Tell him about me. " They looked at me disapprovingly. "You should give him something," one said with a hint of warning in his voice. "He's a tantric fellow. "

My eyes widened in mock surprise. "Oh," I marvelled in my best stage voice, "a tantric? Well, then . . . of course I won't give you anything. "

He raised a forefinger into the air and glared at me. "I dare you come to my temple on Friday and face my power. "

Sounding as unimpressed as I could, I parried, "Friday, you say? Well, you just might regret your invitation. I've seen power before, and I've also seen powerful silliness. Don't think you can fool me so easily. "

With a dramatic flourish, he stalked out of the office.

"You simply could have given him two rupees and avoided a scene," one of the staff reproved me. "Why this challenging attitude?"

"I just wanted to know what sort of good cause it is that you're all so eager to waste your money on today. "

"Look, youngster, that was a tantric! Be careful!" I made a rude sound and got back to work.

But that Friday I did go to the temple, bringing Ahmad with me. We came expecting at best a magic show, at worst a farce. In either case, we'd be entertained.

Bhagavati, also called Devi, Mahamaya, Durga, Parvati and many other names, is the divine Shakti (potency) known universally as Mother Nature (mulaprakriti). In India she is worshipped by people who seek to enjoy her attributes like rati (the erotic), bhuti (riches and prosperity), tushti (pleasure), pushti (pro- gress) and so on.

Tree temples dedicated to Bhagavati are a common sight in Indian villages, and the temple in Kalamassery was one of these, near the edge of a pond. It consisted of a small brick room built around the tree's base. Inside the room, in a hole in the side of the trunk, was the altar to the goddess.

When Ahmad and I got there, we found a group of local people standing in two lines before either side of the door of the tree temple, praying in unison: "Amme-Narayana, Devi-Narayana, Lakshmi-Narayana, Bhadre-Narayana. . . " These are names of Bhagavati that describe her as the energy of Lord Narayana (Vishnu).

The shakta pujari arrived on a bicycle from his job at a chemical company. Parking his bike next to the pond, he jumped into the water, clothes and all. He climbed out dripping wet, entered the small temple room and closed the door behind him. From within, sounds of a ringing bell and the chanting of mantras could be heard.

The crowd got wilder, singing and clapping to the rhythm of a hand drum. The men were all black-skinned, many with bushy- heads and beards, the younger ones wearing colorfully printed shirts open at the neck. Exchanging fierce looks of some shared inner awakening, their eyes and teeth flashed a fearsome white as their limbs jerked about in an increasingly aggressive display of energy. The women flocked behind the men, swaying in unison, eyes closed, brows furrowed, some with hands clasped or uplifted.

Suddenly the door opened to loud cries from the assembly. The shakta priest did arati, a ceremony in which incense and a brass- handled ceremonial lamp are waved before the murti.

After setting the lamp down he came out of the room and started hopping around on stiff legs with his feet held together, somewhat like a bird. I heard someone shout, "Now he is in trance!" To a non-Indian, all this might seem bizarre, even devilish. But to my friend and I, it was so rustic as to be incredibly funny.

The mad priest hopped through the crowd handing out strands of colored thread to be worn against disease. When he came before me he announced dramatically, "I will show you the spiritual world. Don't doubt what you see. " He bounced over to a row of stones laid out on the ground, and while standing over them, his body bent ninety degrees at the hips and his head swiveled left, right, up and down. He then announced, "I am going to build a great temple on this spot. These stones will transform themselves into worshipable murtis!" He suddenly straightened and demanded money from me for wada-malas (garlands of wadas, or South Indian dumplings) to be offered to these stones when they changed their shapes.

Vainly struggling contain my mirth, I snickered, "I'm sorry, but I won't give you anything. "

He looked me black up and down, trembling with exaggerated scorn. The crowd, now gathered around us, had become ominously quiet. His voice raised to a woman's shriek, the shakta challenged, "Oh, you don't believe me?"

I said no and stood my ground. He asked someone to bring a coconut. Seizing it in both hands, he broke it over his own head.

"This doesn't mean anything to us except that you've got a very hard head," I deadpanned, shrugging. Ahmad laughed out loud. His laughter was shared by the crowd, and that broke the tension, but it did not deter the priest.

"You will yet acknowledge the potency! Wait here. " He went back into the temple room and finished his worship. In the meantime the crowd drifted away, sensing that the show was over. Ahmad also left, his interest spent. I loitered, waiting for the man to finish, curious about his crazed determination to prove something to me. When he came out he brought me into his modest house just a few steps away.

Scattered around the place were all sorts of weird paraphernalia --strange weapons, masks, staring painted eyes, artificial teeth. In one corner was a massive two-foot tall brass floor lamp with five wicks burning in its plate-shaped oil reservoir. Directly

over it, about four feet above, another oil lamp hung suspended by a chain from the ceiling. A ceremonial sword lay on a small wooden table before the two lamps.

Picking up the sword, the shakta eyed me through fierce slits. "You still don't believe me?"

More curious than apprehensive about what he would do next, I said, "No, I don't. "

He held the sword upright in the space between the two lamps. After a moment, he let go of it. It remained in mid-air.

"Let me see how you did that," I said, moving in closer. Instead of trying to stop me as I expected he would, he stood by and grinned vengefully. I gripped the sword and tugged with all my might. It didn't budge an inch. I waved a hand above and below the sword. No wires.

He cackled at my growing confusion. "You're having trouble uncovering the method of my magic?"

"Well," I replied as calmly as I could, "swords don't just stand in mid-air. So what's the trick?"

"This is the potency of tantra. It's not a trick. " I didn't say anything, not knowing what to say. Turning to leave the room, he said, "I'll be back in a moment--you're free to study this mystery however you like. "

I checked the lamps and examined the sword from all angles. There were no signs of fakery at all.

He returned. His voice ringing in defiance of all the faithlessness I represented, he declared, "I will put on a festival two weeks time, and if people don't care enough to help, I will have to use tantric power to arrange everything,"

"Let me help you," I heard myself say as I marveled at the sword glinting in the flickering lamplight. "I'll organize this entire festival for you. " Whatever the explanation was, I found this man's sword-magic the most unearthly thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Now that I'd finally accepted his power, the shakta's bluster evaporated. Now truly sorry for my former indiscretions, I made friends with him. He smiled warmly, looking me full in the face. "Let us not only be friends, let us be fellow tantrics. You're a smart young man. You'll learn quickly if you just behave yourself. "

The next day I returned so he could introduce me to his congregation. They held me in great regard, considering me an educated and religious young brahmin come from far-off Tamil Nadu to assist their own local priest. I broke the barrier of caste by mixing with them, visiting their homes, helping them in whatever way I could. Thus I won their support as well as their respect.

A week before the festival I called the young people of the village together and engaged them in decorating the town, cleaning the streets, hiring elephants, buying

fireworks, and sending invitations to the local political leaders. The organizational talents I'd learned in the DK came in quite handy.

I printed flyers featuring a photo of the Bhagavati murti. These I had distributed from house to house as part of a fund-raising drive; we collected more money than the shakta pujari had ever seen in his life. The festival lasted four days. Each day, I led a procession around town with two elephants at the front. In a small community like Kalamassery, this was an event that would be talked about for years. After the festival ended, I got the Hindus to donate regularly to the pujari so that he'd not be in need.

Later the Muslims of the village asked me to organize a festival for them at their mosque; this I did likewise with great success. I suppose I could have become a leading political figure among the locals.

Around this time one Mr. Murlidharan Karta came from Calcutta and joined our TVS branch. We became friendly. His hereditary house was in Ernakulam, and once he drove me there to meet his family. Later that evening he took me to Chottanikara Bhagavati Pitha, an important place of Devi worship in the countryside. We arrived for the midnight puja.

The shrine was representative of the cleanly evocative style of Kerala temple architecture, being a simple, compact structure beneath a low, pagoda-style tiled roof. The small courtyard within was illuminated by rows of brass oil lamps hung by chains from the ceiling. The walls were decorated by intricately carved motifs of mystical significance.

I went down a narrow dark stone stairway into a cave beneath the shrine, where I saw rites being performed to a stone that reputedly grows in size each year. In the dancing orange glow of fiery oil lamps, I saw ceremonial white chalk mandalas drawn on the cave floor and markings of red sindhur on the walls. The ceiling was bedecked with banana bark and leaf trimmings, and there were strange figurines made of white flour positioned here and there. The effect on the mind of this ancient ethnic cultism was palpable. The atmosphere was heavy with the preternatural.

A huge tree grew from out of the cave floor up through the ceiling and into the courtyard of the shrine, where it spread its branches above. I watched as a group of haunted lunatics were brought into the cave, each to have a tuft of hair wrapped tightly around a nail that was then driven into the tree. In their madness they tore their heads away, leaving the hair--and the ghost--on the nail. Their disturbed symptoms immediately vanished.

The experience did much to change my attitude to life. I came away convinced that I should delve as deeply as possible into the secrets of tantra. I went back to the Kalamassery pujari and learned all I could about Devi-worship from him.

The word tantra means 'thread' or 'woven pattern' in Sanskrit; it refers to the underlying order of the universe. This knowledge may be colored by one or a mixture of three types of desire: *tamas* (base desire), *rajas* (desire for material success), and *sattva* (desire for spiritual enlightenment and peace). Usually the term 'tantric' only applies to someone who practices tamasic tantrism.

A soul conditioned by the tamasic quality is obsessed by lust to the point of madness and illusion. He is compulsively drawn to dark, degraded activities that are ruinous to his spiritual progress. The tantric scriptures, spoken by Shiva to Devi, prescribe a code of religion that is attractive to such unfortunate people addicted to sex, intoxication and meat-eating. They are advised to ceremonially engage in these sinful acts as a way of worshiping Shiva and Devi. The goal is to overcome these obsessions and rise to a higher standard of life. As inducements, Shiva and Devi offer material benedictions to faithful followers of tantra.

There are two paths (margas) in tantra. The shaktas, like my new friend the Kalamassery pujari, follow the dakshinamarga (right-hand path). Shaktas seek communion with Devi through temple worship and trance; from her they get powers of prophecy and healing. The right-hand path of tantra is considered 'clean' because the rituals are confined to symbolism that only suggests the offering of meat, fish, wine and sexual congress. It is rajasic worship.

But the vamamarga (left-hand) tantrics practice a most unclean ritualism. Like the voodoo sorcerors of Haiti (who, interestingly, are known as the bokor, 'the priests who serve with the left hand'), the left-hand tantrics of India seek to attain black magical powers by methods strange and terrible. This is tamasic.

Strange displays of power were the food of my teenage enthusiasm for the occult, so the pujari recommended I take up studies under a master of the left-hand path. He explained that in vamamarga there are two specialties. One is necromancy: the summoning of evil spirits, ghosts, goblins and the like for particular tasks. Ghastly rituals are performed to bring these entities--known by such names as Yaksha, Yakshi, Dakini, Shakini, Mohini, Chatan and Udumban--under control. Their home is the underworld, but at the bidding of an expert tantric they rise to the earthly plane and perform wonders.

The other specialty is a kind of short-cut siddha-yoga, a method of gaining magical powers by meditation upon fearsome expansions of Shiva or Devi. The yogi offers some type of vow, sacrifice or ritual to these threatening, lascivious forms. After satisfying them, he receives siddhis (yogic perfections) in return.

A vamamarga master may perfect one or both of these means to power, and he may perform right-hand rituals as well. There are so many intertwining branches within the general divisions of tantra that it is not always possible to make clear distinctions between them.

On the advice of the pujari, I sought out a vamamarga master at a small village close to Chottanikara Pitha. The center of town had just one real building, a temple, surrounded by huts and shanties. When I arrived, there was a competition going on in the marketplace between two tantrics who'd selected an onlooker from the crowd to be their instrument. They had him standing stiff as a board, in trance. One tantric pointed a stick at him and said, "Lie down. " He fell flat. The other pointed and said, "Get up. " He rose up straight without bending a limb.

One of the tantrics placed a figurine made from rice flour and eggs on the ground. It was about six inches long, with two bones stuck in the bottom like legs and a knot of hair stuck on the top. The tantric recited a charm and the doll stood up and started moving towards him, rocking back and forth on the bone- legs.

The crowd grew restless. People edged away from the tantrics, muttering fearfully among themselves. I soon found out why. In their zeal to outdo one another, the tantrics called more people out of the crowd, causing them to perform increasingly dangerous acts. Finally, to the relief of everyone, they ended their duel with a challenge to meet each other again on another date.

The crowd broke up. I walked around the little bazaar where I saw one of the tantrics going from stall to stall demanding goods and receiving them for free. Everyone was deathly afraid of him.

After he left I asked some of the stallkeepers why they allowed this to go on. One man answered, "If I don't give, he'll change all these vegetables into creatures. " Someone else said, "He can make snakes fall from the sky. " A third told me, "He'll change the color of my wife's skin. " Another said, "Anything may happen. This man is heartless. He can do what he likes, and no policeman will dare touch him. He has Chatan working for him. "

The word chatan is derived from the Sanskrit chetana (conscious- ness). Whether or not there is a relationship between this and the Arabic Shaitan or Hebrew Satan is a question for etymologists.

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Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below took place while he was working in a Kerala branch of the TV Sundaram company. In the previous installment, the narrator had attended a contest of mystic power held by two tantrics in a village bazaar. Now he will go meet one of the tantrics.

I was eager to get to the bottom of what I'd seen and heard, so without wasting more time in the bazaar I headed for the woods outside the village where the pujari said I'd find the master's residence. After a time-consuming hike through thick foliage I finally reached the place in the afternoon.

It was a small shelter of piled rock walls with a crude woodbeam roof built under a banyan tree. Scattered all around it were animal bones and skulls. There were even a couple of dried severed human hands hanging in the branches.

A very attractive young lady sat inside the doorway of the hut. She was not yet twenty and looked fresh and virginal. Her hair was worn long and loose, and she had on a simple ankle-length maroon red dress. There was a vacant look in her eyes that did not change when I spoke to her.

I asked her about the man I was looking for. She slowly mumbled "Please wait, he said you would come," which didn't really tell me what I wanted to know. I rephrased

the question and got the same reply, now repeated over and over. I could see she was under some kind of influence.

I gave up and sat down outside the stone shelter. Soon I heard someone moving through the forest. A man stepped into the clearing, and I recognized him as the tantric I'd seen demanding goods in the village. Now he didn't look so wild-eyed and fearsome. In fact he could have been any common fellow off the streets--a rickshaw driver, for instance. Still, one could see in his face a strange sort of lust: not that of a gross sensualist, but a lust for power. One might say he had the same sort of air about him as a successful businessman, a mixture of ruthless ambition and cocky confidence. But his success was not in business. It was in the black arts.

Wordlessly, he led me into his hut. The far side of its dark, disjointed interior was taken up by a stove that was simply an arrangement of bricks housing a wood fire. Upon that squatted an oversized copper kettle with two ear-shaped handles. Steam spewed out from under the lid, filling my nose with a faintly disgusting odor. Lined up against the opposite wall was a flat stone with a highly polished mirror surface, a small bookcase with thick tattered tomes crowding the shelves, and an old harmonium. In a corner I saw more of the now-familiar rice flour figurines, chilling in their combined morbidity and childishness. As I walked in, stooping, my head brushed against bones tied with knots of hair hanging from the gnarled timber rafters above.

He lit a couple of candles with the stove's fire and we sat down. Nervously, I began explaining myself and my new-found interest in tantra. He gazed at me steadily with a cold thin smile until I faltered. Then he asked in a deadly calm voice that matched his smile, "How far do you want to go?"

I said, "Well, to tell you the truth, my real interest is to develop some faith in spiritual things by actually seeing them. "

"Did you see the show I did today?" he asked, maintaining his reptilian smile.

"Oh yes, and it was very impressive. How do you perform such feats?"

"So, you want to learn something from me?"

"Yes, of course!"

He devised a schedule of appointments based on my days off from work. On the average I would see him once every two weeks, but sometimes he insisted that our meetings be separated by as much as forty days, in deference to his own obligations. He ordered me to keep my relationship with him a strict secret.

During our meetings he taught theory, reading and explaining Sanskrit verses to me from a old book. In the course of these lessons, I learned he had twelve chatans under his control. He engaged these demons in grisly tasks for paying customers, such as frightening or inducing insanity in the customers' rivals, or even killing them.

I also learned that my master had taken up vamamarga in vengeance against people who had used the same methods to hurt his family. He destroyed these enemies and

then went into business for himself. In India, vamamarga has always been the last resort of the downtrodden in securing justice and getting respect: 'Dog as a devil deified, deified lived as a god. '

Apart from my master's ruthlessness towards his enemies, I found some things in him that were admirable. One was that he was strictly self-controlled, despite the fact that he used women in many of his rituals. He was a rare man who was motivated not by sensual pleasure but by sheer power.

Another good quality of his, fortunately for me, was that once he was your friend, he would not betray you. Many tantric masters accept disciples simply because they need assistants, not because they want to impart knowledge. Since in tantra today's disciple may become tomorrow's rival, a master's students can find themselves in grave danger when he no longer needs them. But my master accepted me as a friend, knowing that I would not seriously pursue tantra later on. I was only experimenting.

For the last ten years he'd been attempting to get mystic powers by a method known as *uttara-kaula*: the worship of Shakti in the form of a virgin girl with particularly fine *lakshanas* (physical qualities). His chatans would search for such beauties as he traveled around Kerala doing his magical exhibitions.

From time to time he would place one of these women under hypnotic control and bring her to a burning ground, where bodies are cremated. There he would bathe her in liquor and invoke the power of the goddess with mantras and mudras (symbolic hand gestures). Yet during all this he had to remain completely unperturbed by sexual desires (he'd been celibate for the last thirty years). After the ceremony he let the girl go home untouched, unharmed and unable to remember what had happened.

Having completed theory, one night I assisted him in a particularly gruesome ritual. He took me to a crematorium where he had the cooperation of the man who burned the bodies. This man had pulled from the fire a smoldering half-burned carcass that we used as a kind of altar. My master sat down near the body in meditation. I had a box containing eight different powders; on signal from my master, I would sprinkle one of them on the hot, crackling corpse. The other fellow would place burning cinders on the body from time to time to keep it hot.

The powders produced different colors and flavors of smoke. With the rising of each puff from off the carcass my mind would be opened to a particular realm of thought. For instance, one powder caused thoughts of clear skies to flood my mind--the dawn sky, noon sky, sunset sky and night sky. With another I saw different kinds of clouds. Visions of bodies of water were induced by a third. Sometimes the visions were horrible, as when I saw huge piles of stool. Sometimes the visions were very sensual. In all cases, I had to keep my mind under control and not allow it to be overwhelmed by fascination, lust or revulsion.

I was being used by my master as a 'video monitor' for his own meditations. I was to sustain the images in my head undisturbed while he entered them with his mind. Each image was a door to a particular level of consciousness, and at each level he had to propitiate a particular form of Devi.

This ritual meditation went on until about an hour before sunrise. Finally he stood up and embraced me, saying, "With your help, tonight I was successful. What a mind you have!"

He explained that he had long attempted to complete this ceremony, but because of not having a suitable assistant, he'd never seen it through to the end. Now, he told me, he'd attained the power to render objects--including his own body--invisible, as well as reproduce them in multiple forms.

Such powers are called siddhis, and are obtained by yogis after long, arduous austerity and meditation that might stretch over a succession of many lifetimes. Yoga slowly opens by increments the chakras, the hidden power points of the mind.

But the tantric process, when successful, places the mind of the meditator under such intense pressure that the siddhi-chakras can be abruptly wrenched wide by a mighty burst of willpower. This is precisely why tantric ritualism combines such explosively contradictory elements as the vow of celibacy with the bathing of nude girls in liquor. This is also why tantra is so dangerous, for its forcible distortion of the mind often ends in insanity.

Likewise hazardous is the congress the tantrics have with chatans, mohinis and similar evil spirits. As an old saying goes, 'Mahouts die by elephants, snake charmers die by snakes, and tantrics die by the entities they summon and attempt to control. '

After the session in the burning ground, my master told me not to visit him again. "You have seen enough to have faith in the realm beyond the senses. If you are intelligent, you will take up a proper religious life. This path is only for wild men like me. "

And in fact my faith was greatly reinforced by my master's help. I concluded that if such displays of power as he could effect were possible through the dark practices of left-hand tantra, the miracles attributed to the Krishna murti at Guruvayur must be of an infinitely more sublime and pure nature.

During the period I was learning from my master, I visited other tantrics. There were two in particular who became the main reasons why I took heed of my master's warning to abandon vamamarga. I didn't want to become like them.

The first, who directed me to the second, was a woman who was reputed to be the most adept tantric in all of Kerala. She sometimes stayed in a ruined house in a village outside of Trichur. It was only with great difficulty that I managed to find her there as she was very secretive about her movements. It was rumored that she was wanted by the law, so I dared not make open inquiries about her for fear of being arrested as an accomplice.

When I came to the house, I saw nothing indicating recent habitation except for an old ragged quilt flung in a heap on the veranda. After looking around a bit and finding no one, I picked up a corner of the quilt to see what was beneath it. The cloth was snatched from my touch as a voice hissed from under it, "Don't touch my blanket! If you want to see me, come back after sunset!"

I dropped the quilt as if I had just seen a scorpion in its folds. Without a word in reply to the voice under the blanket, I left the house for the village square and had dinner in a small eatery. As the sun sank below the horizon, I returned to the old house.

As I mounted the veranda, the figure under the blanket stirred and sat up. Her face gave me yet another shock, for it was decrepit beyond belief and covered with infected running sores. Her hideous visage reminded me of a reoccurring nightmare I'd had as a child, in which a hag much like her peered from beneath a staircase of an old building.

But fascination for her reputed abilities overrode my loathing. As she was physically unable to stand (she moved about with the help of people over whom she had power), I sat down next to her. In a rheumy, quavering voice she said, "If sunlight touches my skin, I will die. That's why you can only see me after dark. "

I tried to introduce myself, but she cut me off. "I know you and know why you've come, but I do not deal with beginners. You are looking for drastic displays of power that will give you faith in the mystic realm. Very well; I have thousands of tantrics working under me, and I will recommend one to you who will more than satisfy your curiosity. And I guarantee--after you've met him, you will not want to become a tantric yourself. "

She told me to go back to the village and spend the night there. The next morning I would see a line of people boarding a bus. "You give the driver two rupees. Where he tells you to get down, you get down. From this veranda I will direct you the rest of the way. Now go. "

Everything transpired as she said it would. Around noon I got off the bus at a Muslim village where the main business seemed to be the sale of deep-fried plantain chips. From there I walked, following a footpath out of town and through a green field of tall grain. At the end of the field I saw a house perched atop a rocky knoll. Somehow I knew that was the place I was supposed to go.

On the veranda of the house were four young, pretty women in red dresses, each wearing her hair tied in a long pony tail; they were arrayed on either side of a flamboyantly-dressed man sporting a full beard and shoulder-length hair. He looked for all the world like a gangster, and I began to wonder if I'd stumbled upon a house of ill repute. The five sat in chairs as if they were expecting someone. As I came up the front steps to join them, I saw the veranda was also host to a large population of pet animals--cats, dogs, monkeys, and even a jackal.

"So, you've come!" the man welcomed me heartily. "And you want to see something interesting. Well," he gave me a toothy grin from within his beard, "you must see the performance we have planned for this evening. But until then, make yourself comfortable. " He introduced his female companions and hinted that they would be as friendly as I might like them to be. I modestly declined their assistance in passing the time, for I was by now curious to find out what sort of discipline this man was following.

His specialty was spying on people and locating lost objects by means of mystic sight. And to attain his power, he performed the most obscene rituals imaginable. That night I would be witness to one.

He told me that his line of tantra required no vows or austerities like those maintained by my master. In fact, he knew all about my master and his trust in me; this, he said, was the only reason why I'd been permitted to meet the old lady who had directed me to him.

He said more about her. "Her greed for power knows no limit. She has attained levels that no one else can master, and she still wants more. Her physical disabilities are the result of the terrible methods she has used to get where she is now--but that doesn't matter to her, because her satisfaction is not in the pleasures of the body. To be truthful, she cannot be satisfied. The secrets of the universe are unending, and she has set her mind on fathoming them all. Her goal is to swallow the universe. "

Tantrics consider the siddhi they call 'swallowing (internalizing) the universe' to be the summit of attainment: one has access to anything in the cosmos, on any planet, anywhere, simply by thinking about it. Thus all desires are fulfilled by the mind alone.

Yogis who know this mystic process can mentally move through the regions of the universe as easily as someone using an elevator can move from floor to floor in a building. The yogi's elevator shaft is his body's central psychic channel, which runs through the length of his spinal cord. By meditation he can link this channel to the shishumara-chakra, an astral tube coiling from the Pole Star down to the nether regions, and project his subtle mental body through it for an easy journey to other planets. He may even teleport the elements of his physical body through the channel, reassemble them in the place of his choice, and so seem to appear there out of nowhere.

Shortly before midnight, the tantric gave me a battered tin box to carry and led me to a nearby burning ground, where the body of a pregnant woman had been saved from the fire for his use. I watched in growing horror as he stood on the corpse and recited mantras. He opened the box and took out an instrument for removing the foetus from the womb of the dead woman. Then he brought out a large jar half-full of some liquid chemicals, and finally a razor-sharp knife. What he did next was unspeakable. Aghast and trembling, I fled the scene.

I went to the watchman who had let us into the burning ground. "How can you permit this?" I raged. "That woman's family paid you people to consign her body to the flames, and you're allowing such evil things to be done to her and her baby!"

The watchman cautioned me in a frightened whisper. "Don't say anything more, please! That man knows what you're speaking to me now. Don't make him angry! You must be very careful with him-- he even knows your thoughts. If you don't like what he's doing, why have you come here with him?"

Feeling ashamed of myself, I mumbled, "I only wanted to see the secrets of his power. . . ."

The watchman shook his head in pity and said, "Your curiosity will ruin you. You're a young man, you look well-bred and intelligent, why are you getting mixed up in this? Just leave. Don't spoil your life. " But I couldn't leave, as I didn't know where to go. One does not stumble around the Kerala countryside at night, for snakebite is a likely consequence. I settled down near the watchman's campfire and soon dozed off.

Some time later--it could have been one or two hours--the watchman roused me. The tantric had come out of the burning ground carrying the jar under one arm. In the other hand he held the baby's skull. "Why did you leave?" he admonished me, not unkindly. "If you want to do things that other people cannot do, you have to do things that other people cannot do!" He laughed, and his easy manner stupefied me.

"Look at this!" he exulted, thrusting the jar under my nose. I thought he would unscrew the lid, and my gorge rose. But he only wanted to explain that by treating the baby's flesh in the solution he'd made a powerful ointment. He reproved me again for not having stayed and watched how he'd done it.

"Go get the box," he ordered. "We'll go back to my place and tomorrow I'll show you what this preparation can do. " He led me through the fields back to his house. Inside, he went to bed with two of his girls. I slept fitfully on the veranda.

The next morning he set the jar down on a small table between us. Now I could see that the bottom was covered by a pasty substance. With a hand caressing the shoulder of a girl on either side of him, he leaned back in his seat and probed my mind for a moment with a quiet stare. "I think you ought to test the power of this ointment," he said, raising his eyebrows allusively. "There's a problem at your factory that you can solve with it . . . some missing cash?"

He was right. A considerable sum of cash funds had disappeared recently, and suspicion had fallen upon a Mr. Murthi, though no proof could be found against him. The tantric smeared a bit of the ointment on my thumbnail and told me to look carefully at it. As I concentrated, I saw in the nail the image of the office from which the money had been taken. I found I could alter the view with directions given in my mind, just as a TV studio director changes the image on the video screen by telling the cameraman to pan, zoom in for a close-up, and so on. But my mystic thumbnail scope was incredibly more versatile, for it even showed the past.

I saw that it was not Mr. Murthi, but another man who had entered the office surreptitiously to take the briefcase of money and hide it in his car. I followed him after work; he drove to the place of an accomplice and stashed the briefcase with him. The accomplice spent the money on black-market gold so that the cash could not be traced. And I saw how the thief had his share of the gold made into doorknobs that he placed on the doors in his home, naturally without telling his family what they were really made of.

Later I tipped off a friend at work who wrote an anonymous note to the police. They verified that the doorknobs in the man's home were solid gold. He was arrested and convicted on charges of grand larceny.

From my further discussions with him that day, I learned that when people came to the tantric for the recovery of stolen or lost property, for a fee he had one of his girls

trace the missing goods with the mystic thumbnail scope. The existence of the ghastly ointment was kept secret, of course. The customers thought it was the power of the girls themselves.

The thumbnail scope had its limitations. Though it could penetrate any closed door or wall, it could not see above or below a specific height or depth, nor look into powerful holy places or temples and could be baffled by expert singers performing certain melodies. Certain kinds of smoke would likewise render it ineffective.

I asked him about his karma. "You have attained this siddhi by very obnoxious methods. What do you think lies in wait for you in future births?"

On this point he was surprisingly philosophical. "Those who would master this knowledge must be ready to face the consequences without flinching. I will surely have to suffer for all the black deeds I have done. But that's part of the game we play.

"We tantrics view all existence as an ebb and flow of Shakti. We connect with that power, and it sweeps us up to untold heights. Later on, the same power may plunge us into despair. But what else is there? Everything is but a manifestation of Shakti. "

This man's question--'But what else is there?'--for which the tantrics have no answer, bothered me. If there was really nothing else beyond the goddess and her power, then he, and the old witch on the veranda, and my master who poured liquor over women's bodies, and the brahmin who broke coconuts on his head, had attained all there is to attain. I couldn't accept that. There had to be something more.

I was now not interested in going any further with vamamarga. But I thought that the theoretical principles and the basic discipline I'd learnt from my master were of great use to me. I had no inkling that once the lid of the Pandora's box of occult mind power had been pried off, it was not so easy to close again.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below took place after he moved from Kerala to Salem, near his hometown of Coimbatore.

After a three and a half years in Kerala I was transferred back to Tamil Nadu to work under the rather severe chief accountant of the Salem branch of TVS, Mr. S. Venkata Subrahmanian. In South India, it is common for educated English-speaking gentlemen to be addressed by the first initials of their names. Mr. Subrahmanian was therefore known to one and all as SVS.

Salem is near my place of birth, Coimbatore. I was therefore able to visit my mother frequently. My two good "same-age" friends of this time were co-workers Vaidyanathan, serious, bespectacled and a bit shy, and Shankara Subrahmania, a jolly, big-bodied chap. The first six months I lived alone in a small rented room; after that I shared a place with Shankara until the spring of 1974.

At first my chief, SVS, was very pleased me. As in the Kerala branch of TVS, in Salem I became the star of the accounting office. But by the time 1974 rolled around, SVS was fed up. No wonder.

"If you want to become a high priest of humbug, fine--but you are surely not going to do it on company time!"

SVS surely believed he was speaking for everyone else in the office. He'd had it up to the eyes; it was time to put his foot down.

I continued sketching my picture of six-armed, three-faced Dattatreya as if I hadn't heard him. Muffled snickering obliged SVS to sweep the office with a penetrating You're Next glare. Then, after a last withering scowl my way, he grumbled: "You'll end up painting that picture on the sidewalk for tossed coins, you--you poppycock dreamer!" He stalked off.

In the past, I'd been his closest assistant and had always compensated for my lapses with bursts of hard work. But today I had pushed his patience to the limit.

The day before yesterday I'd left work early without telling anyone. Yesterday I hadn't come to work at all, and had given no reason. Today I was at my desk, but only to draw pictures of Dattatreya. I was speaking to no one.

A few minutes later Vaidyanathan put his hand on my shoulder. "Chum, the MD (Managing Director) is asking for you. SVS has seen him and raised hell. " Wordlessly, I dropped my pencil, stood up, and ambled into the the MD's office.

He greeted me with a polite smile and invited me to sit down and explain myself. There was a few moment of dead silence while I extracted words from the ether and arranged them in my head. Then I began.

"The day before yesterday I was called from work to the Dattatreya temple in Chendamangalam. . . " He put up his hand to interrupt.

"Who called you?"

"Sri Svayamprakash Brahmendra Saraswati, the mahanta of the temple. "

"Accha. So guruji telephoned you here at the office. "

"No. He calls me through the mind. "

"Yes, quite. Kindly continue. "

"I stayed all night at the temple, because a special abhisheka (bathing ceremony) was held at midnight. " Again he interrupted.

"So guruji was having a special festival and invited you through the mind to come. "

"Yes, but he was not there visibly, because he left the world in 1948. "

"Yes, yes. Please go on. "

"Then, in the early morning hours I left the temple. I came down the hill onto the road. There I met two ghosts. I chanted a Karttikeya mantra and delivered them to the control of Shreshtaraja. The rest of the day I had to take rest. Today I am only thinking of Dattatreya. "

"Only?"

"Yes. "

He gave me that side-to-side nod of the head peculiar to Indians and leaned forward as if to take me in confidence.

After hearing my own voice relate these events, I understood for the first time that I might be losing my mind. I braced myself for what the MD was about to say.

He held up a palm and slightly patted the air above his desk while he spoke, as if my poor head was under it.

"Kannan, listen. Things have changed in India. The time of all the gods and temples is gone. Oh, simple folk may carry on with these quaint forms of Hindu piety, but you are an educated young man. You've got to keep your eyes on tomorrow, not yesterday. "

I thought, "He's just indulging me with his gentle speech and understanding manner. Of course he thinks me mad. " I was beginning to think so myself.

I wanted to open my heart to him. The MD seemed kindly disposed to me, and I really needed someone's help. "Sir," I began, "I sincerely believe in the Hindu religion. After investigating tantra, shakta, Advaita and the other paths, I have come to realize many extraordinary things. . . . " He patted the air, nodding his head patiently from side to side until my voice trailed off.

"That's all right, Kannan. I'm not saying you should give up religion. You've just got to be realistic about it, that's all. "

He opened a drawer and very reverently took out two photographs, laying them on his desk for me to see. One was of a sadhu dressed in white, with long hair and beard. The other was of a smiling woman, perhaps a Western lady, I thought.

"This"--he pointed to the sadhu's picture--"is the avatara of the age. In him all the gods reside. His name is Sri Aurobindo. And this is his shakti, whom we revere as the Mother. Though both have passed on into the realm beyond, they are still very much

with us in spirit. Their teachings blend all that you've come to value in Hinduism into one scientific synthesis. "

This wasn't quite what I had expected from the MD. His eyes were positively alight with glory. All my worries of losing my mind and my job faded. I was sure if SVS saw the MD now, he'd think him a far worse high priest of humbug than I. But he must have had something going for him to make it into the upper echelon of TVS management. Could it all be due to Aurobindo? And could Aurobindo help me get my life on the right track?

"I will now give you a mantra, Kannan," he solemnly declared. "I want you to keep these pictures on your desk and offer everything you do to Sri Aurobindo and the Holy Mother. This will bring you back to reality, and you'll attain the goal of all religions. "

I became a zealous convert. Before touching the pencil in the morning, I would do puja to it, offering incense, a flower and prayers. After writing out a bill, I'd hold it up to the photos, chant the mantra and drop the bill, sanctified, into the 'out' tray. I offered the entries I made in the ledger. And the coffee during the coffee break.

This merely increased the output of the "psychic tube" that had flickered in my head since my association with the tantrics of Kerala. Soon the whole building was awash my visions. I'd buttonhole someone almost every day, in the office or in the factory, and fill his ears with my latest revelations. If he listened long enough, I'd get a resonance going with his mind, like making a gong vibrate by striking another gong of the same pitch. I could then tap into his subconscious and receive hidden memories, or feed my own thoughts into his head. I'd leave quite a few fellow employees amazed and mystified.

But as far as SVS was concerned, I'd become a "balmy round- the-bender, dotty as a loon. " It wasn't long before I was in the MD's office again.

This time he arranged time off for me so that I could journey with Mum to Pondicherry, the site of Auroville, the ashram founded by Aurobindo in 1926. We stayed there fifteen days. I got to know M. T. Pandit, a confidante of the recently deceased Mother, quite well. He was taken by what he thought were my highly developed spiritual powers and asked me to stay permanently. But when I saw meat being served in the dining room, and foreign girls in T-shirts and shorts mixing freely with the men, I declined. Mum, a simple lady who'd never been confronted with loose Western ways before, was scandalized. She couldn't see how there could be any value in Aurobindo's teachings after seeing life in Auroville. "The chicken thief comes sporting a feather," was her way of saying, "Know a tree by the fruits. "

In any case, my visit to Auroville saved me my job for the simple reason that the MD continued to have faith in me. After I returned, he let me do pretty much what I wanted. Once in a while I might actually put in a full day's work. Other days I would work for an hour or two, then drift into idle reverie, leaving the office whenever I felt like it. But I continued collecting full pay, much to SVS's chagrin.

I'd been sharing an apartment for more than a year with Shankara Subrahmanya. He was a jolly fellow who weathered my vagaries well, even when I sometimes flicked

on the light at midnight to wake him up and harangue him on some arcane topic for an hour or two.

There was another fellow our age, an oddjobber named Mani, who lived in the same building. He too thought himself a bit of a philosopher, but one of the world, the flesh and the Devil. As long as I only spoke of religion and esoterica, he kept away. But that was not to last.

One evening as I sat wasting Shankara's time with a lecture on palmistry, Mani came to the door, a skinny wolf dressed in what I called a "hero suit", a cheap knock-off of the kind of outfits worn by Bombay cinema heroes. With sly nonchalance he said, "Hey Brahmin, let Shankara get some sleep and come out with me tonight. "

Shankara was only too glad to let me go. Mani and I ended up in what I thought was a hotel. But when Mani began negotiations with the manager, I knew immediately it was not a place where you got a good night's sleep. I took Mani aside.

"Leave me out of whatever you're arranging, okay?"

He chuckled and hit me lightly on the shoulder. "Right, Brahmin, no problem. You just sit yourself down here in the lobby. I've got a little business to take care of upstairs. I'll be with you in about (here he winked) half an hour. "

Two minutes later a servant boy came down to tell me that Mani needed my help. I followed the boy up three flights of stairs and to a room where I found Mani with two heavily made-up girls in tawdry glamour gowns. They were perfect compliments for the would-be hero.

He stood between them, an arm around each one. Flashing a big grin as I entered, he sang out, "Here's the pandit! I've got two beautiful sweeties here and I don't know which one to choose. Tell me who's the best. " The floozies giggled. In jest, I pointed to the one on the left. He steered her over to me.

"You got a real sharp eye for the ladies, panditji. So take her. "

Half-heartedly, I turned to leave. He blocked my way and sneered in my face, "Look, Brahmin, I went through a lot of trouble tonight just to help you out. You want those jinns out of your head? You want your feet back on the ground? Let the girl bring you back to reality. "

I gave in, thinking it my fate. Like the mouse that returned to its kind, I had come back full circle to the sad state I had been in when I'd fallen for a dancing girl years ago, before I'd worked for TVS or had any interest in spiritual pursuits.

In the Panchatantra, there is a story of a female mouse that was seized by a hawk, carried aloft, and dropped over the river Ganges. Below, the great sage Yajnavalkya was performing his ablutions. The mouse fell right into his cupped palms containing holy Ganges water. By contact with the combined spiritual power of the saint and the sacred water, the mouse was transformed into a baby girl.

Yajnavalkya took the child home and gave her to his wife to raise as their daughter. When the child turned twelve years of age, he thought to arrange the most excellent match for her marriage.

He first summoned the sun-god Surya, who appeared at his ashram. But the girl thought him too blazing hot. Yajnavalkya asked the sun if there was one greater than he. Surya recommended the cloud, because the cloud could cover his rays.

When the cloud came, the girl deemed him too black and cold. The cloud was asked if there was anyone greater than he. He suggested the mountain, who alone could stop his progress.

When the mountain came before the sage, the girl said he was too rough and stony. And the mountain, when asked, recommended the king of mice as his superior, because he and the other mice made holes in him.

When the king of mice was called, the mouse-girl immediately agreed, thrilling with ecstasy. She begged Yajnavalkya to make her a mouse again, and it was done.

The Kerala tantrics, Karttikeya, Brahmendra Avadhuta, Aurobindo--these had been my Yajnavalkya, sun, cloud and mountain. The tantrics had transformed me by convincing me there was a power higher than human reason. But in spite of the transformation, I could not be wedded to "a great"--a spiritual master who could lead me out of my material entanglements. Now I was back in the mousehole. I'd been warned this would happen by a friend at the Shivananda Yoga Mission. But my whimsy prevented me from heeding him.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins in Salem, Tamil Nadu, while he was working in a branch of the TV Sundaram company.

It was the end of June, 1974. As per a recent agreement with the workers' union, the company was to dispense a semi-annual cash bonus along with this month's regular pay allotment.

Our department's job was to do the calculation of each employee's bonus percentage. But two of our men had gone on leave. SVS was in a fix--how would all this work be finished before payday, tomorrow?

I bailed him out by working late, doing the jobs of three men, including the arithmetic, the counting of the cash and the sorting of the pay envelopes. Shortly before ten o'clock, the night watchman came by the office and looked in.

"How can you finish all this tonight? It is that you're not coming to work tomorrow?"

I brushed him off with a confident grin, assuring him that I was nearly done and there were no problems. Nodding, he ambled out. But his suggestion that I would not work here tomorrow sunk in.

Right then and there my determination to go on with life as I'd been living it crumbled around me. The falldown with the prostitute gnawed at my heart; it had become just the first of a string of transactions with women of the night. Yet I continued to keep up an image of myself as a mystic. My mother was fed up with me. She had tried to arrange a marriage for me, but I had made such a bad impression upon the girl's family the arrangement was scotched in the egg. And on top of that, here I was, caged like a wild beast in the TVS organization. I wanted out.

I completed the work at ten. I signed the register for my own pay envelope and pocketed it. The watchman let me out of the building and through the security gate onto the street. I stood in front of the factory for a moment, gazing at its monolithic bulk that seemed to glow a sinister dull red under the harsh spotlights. "Not in this lifetime again", I swore under my breath.

I took an autorickshaw to my apartment in a low-class part of town, where I had lived since the business with Mani and the prostitute. My roommate at this time, Mr. Joseph, was the headmaster of a Christian school. It was his habit to drink whiskey every evening, and this evening he was dead drunk. I found the door to the apartment ajar, and him sprawled out on the floor with a bottle still clutched in his fist.

I left a note on my bedroom mirror to whomever would come looking for me on behalf of the company: "Please don't look further. I have left Salem. If I ever become useful I will come back. " I extracted ten 20-Rupee notes from my pay envelope and on the back of it scribbled a message for Mr. Joseph: "Please send this money to my mother. " Pocketing the Rs. 200, I lay the envelope and my apartment key on the floor mattress in his room; I knew this was one task old Mr. Joseph could be trusted with. After all, he was a good Christian.

I tiptoed around his snoring form and exited the apartment, closing the door softly behind me. It was almost eleven. The front door of the rooming house faced a through-city highway on which express busses to Madras drove. Waiting under a flickering defective neon tube struggling for its life amidst a swirling cloud of bugs, I was lost in my thoughts.

Soon a bus came and I stepped out into the street and waved it down. A skinny wooly-headed conductor with a few days growth of beard opened the rear door. I tried to enter but he blocked my way. "What's your destination?"

I asked back, "Well, where does the bus go?" He repeated his question and I repeated mine.

He cursed and shouted, "What a stupid conversation for this time of night! Just get in here!" I boarded and the bus roared off. After half an hour of eyeing me strangely at a distance, the conductor sat down on the next seat and said with a nervous laugh, "Now are you ready to tell me where you're going?" In a wooden voice I replied, "I'm still asking you where this bus is going. " He shook his head, muttered something to

himself and then said wearily, "This bus goes as far as Arakkonam. " I paid the fare without further comment.

We pulled into Arakkonam shortly before dawn and I disembarked in front of the railway station. Nearby I saw a hotel. The only availability was a single room with a common bath and toilet across the hall from it. I took it.

I had no luggage with me, just the pants, kurta and slip-on shoes I was wearing, and my money. Dazed from the night journey and my own inner distress, I sat listlessly in the dingy room for a while. Soon I had to go to the bathroom. Stepping out into the hall, I noticed that a light was on in the room opposite mine. I heard a mother talking with her son and daughter inside--and I recognized the voices. This was the family of my uncle Balasubramanian from Kerala!

I froze, my heart pounding. Listening at their door, I could understand they were on their way to the pilgrimage town of Tirupathi to visit the famous Venkateshwara Swami temple, some seventy-five kilometers north of here. They would soon depart the hotel by car and would pay a quick visit to a Karttikeya temple just beyond Arrakonam at a place called Tiruthani. If they saw me now, my plan of leaving everything would fail. I withdrew silently into my room. Sitting on the edge of the bed in total anxiety, I said over and over to myself, "Why did I come to this town? Why did I take this lodge?"

At seven o'clock I heard them leave. With a bursting bladder I rushed into the bathroom and relieved myself. I immediately went downstairs and told the man at the desk, "I'm vacating. " His jaw dropped. "What! You just arrived!" I paid and walked out onto the sunlit street. Arrakonam, a small country town, had come to life with jingling bicycles, honking traffic and a group of marching pilgrims singing songs in praise of Karttikeya.

These pilgrims were villagers on their way to Tiruthani. Some of them carried kaveri, gaily decorated boxlike structures made from light wood. These they supported on their shoulders to ceremonially transport brass pots of water or milk meant for offering to the murti. I apathetically fell in step with them, having nothing else to do. Singing and dancing around me, they swept me along.

It wasn't many minutes before we had left Arrakonam behind. The pilgrims kept up their celebrations as we trekked across the arid, treeless and generally flat landscape. Sometimes the asphalt road we followed brought us near hills of huge boulders that reared a hundred meters or so up into the brilliant morning sky. But there were no houses. The countryside appeared uninhabited.

After about an hour we came to Tiruthani Temple, situated on the peak of a rocky hill. A big stone stairway rose majestically from the roadside to the entrance gate. The temple was crowned by a distinctively-shaped vimana (main tower). The shape signified that the deity within is Karttikeya. Around the building stood a high wall painted with red and white vertical stripes, a usual feature of temples in Tamil Nadu.

Tiruthani means "the lord's garden". Lord Karttikeya is believed to have landed here from Kailash (the heavenly abode of his father Shiva) and taken a little rest in a garden at the top of this hill. After that he went to the ocean shore at Tiruchendur and killed the demon Surapadma.

As I climbed up the stairs with my companions, they sang prayers asking favors from the murti. I was numb, almost catatonic when I got to the top. "What is my life for?", I moaned half-audibly.

At this point religion, philosophy and mysticism meant nothing to me, despite all my high-flown pretensions of the past. Utterly frustrated with myself, I would have welcomed death had I believed it would really end my existence forever. But I feared rebirth even more. I yearned for something to lift me out of my private hell. But at the same time I doubted there was any hope for me.

Now inside the temple's dark, massively-pillared interior, the pilgrims fell respectfully silent. I shuffled listlessly before the murti of Kartikkeya. He stood between his two wives Valli and Devasena, the three of them black and glistening in the flickering lamplight. The priest chanted a prayer that said "May all the bad results of sinful deeds be destroyed by your spear. " With my eyes shut tight in desperation and my palms pressed together before my face, I prayed: "Please give me some direction. "

I stumbled out into the bright sunshine with a buzzing head and wearily started down the stairs. At a small mandapa I saw an wizened old begger sitting in the shade. I sat down next to him and we started talking. He asked me "Where are you going?", just as I asked him, "Where should I go?"

He looked at me a little startled, working his toothless jaws. "You're asking me where you should go?"

"Yes. I don't know where I should go at this point in my life. Give me a sign. "

"Then go to Tirupathi. "

"No, I don't think I should go to that place because someone who will spoil my plan has just left for there. "

"No, no, don't worry about that!" he snorted. His conviction caught my attention. "You must go there. Your plan will become successful; no one will stop you. " He then quoted a poetic couplet: "'When Kartikkeya was dissatisfied by not getting the fruit, he came to the south. "' This referred to Kartikkeya's losing a test of wits to his brother Ganesh, who received as a prize a fruit from the hand of the sage Narada; in frustration, Karttikeya retired from Kailash to Tiruthani, in South India.

"Karttikeya went south," the old beggar continued, "but you--you go north. "

I gave him a few coins and walked to the bottom of the stairs. Boarding a northbound bus, I rode across the Tamil Nadu-Andhra Pradesh border to Tirupathi. All the way I glumly mulled over why I was bothering to make yet another pilgrimage to another hilltop temple to see one more mute stone idol.



Venkateshwara Swami is one of India's most popular Vishnu murtis. He is known by the name Sri Balaji to pilgrims from North India, but Srinivasa is the name South Indians prefer. Srinivasa means "the Abode of Sri", Sri being Lakshmi, the Goddess of Fortune.

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According to the Ramayana and the Puranas, in ancient times Lord Vishnu descended to earth from the spiritual realm as Prince Ramachandra. His consort Lakshmi descended as the beautiful Sita, Rama's wife. When the demon-king Ravana attempted to kidnap Sita, the fire-god Agni tricked him by substituting Vedavati for Rama's spouse. Thus Ravana took Vedavati with him to his island kingdom of Lanka, thinking she was Sita.

Vedavati is actually an illusory form of Lakshmi. She had previously appeared as a Himalayan yogini over whom Ravana had lusted; she flung herself into fire rather than endure the demon's attentions. As she disappeared into the flames, Vedavati placed a curse on Ravana, telling him she would return to destroy him and his dynasty. As Lord Vishnu's divine energy, she could not be burned. The fire-god Agni kept Vedavati with him. Together they waited for Ravana to make his move against Sita. Disguised as a sage, Ravana enticed Sita to step out of a magical

protective ring of fire so that he could abduct her. But as she stepped across the fire, Agni switched Sita for Vedavati. The real Sita was then sequestered with Agni.

It was Rama's purpose all along to destroy Ravana and his race of man-eaters. Accepting the mood of a husband whose beloved wife was in great peril, Rama attacked Lanka and destroyed Ravana and his kinsmen. But after recovering the illusory Sita, Rama ordered her to enter fire, as she had been defiled by the touch of a sinful demon.

Ever-faithful, she did as she was told--and Agni emerged from the flames bringing with him both Sita and Vedavati. Though Agni requested Rama to accept Vedavati as a second wife, Rama refused, saying, "I have vowed in this descent to have only one wife. I will accept Vedavati when I appear on earth as Srinivasa. She will then be known as Padmavati and be My bride. "

As Srinivasa, Vishnu wed Padmavati. But Lakshmi (Sri) came to disturb the marriage, claiming it was invalid because Srinivasa is always hers. As Sri and Padmavati quarreled, Srinivasa took seven steps back and became a murti. The heartbroken goddesses wailed in sorrow, but Srinivasa consoled them by telling them that they were both expansions of the same spiritual potency, the Vishnu-

shakti. The two goddesses embraced each other and then stood on either side of Srinivasa. Indeed, Lakshmi and Padmavati assumed murti forms themselves.

The Venkateshwara temple is a religious magnet that yearly draws millions of pilgrims from all corners of India. A common sacrifice these pilgrims make is head-shaving, which is done by man, woman and child alike. The temple yearly collects millions of rupees in donations; much of this money is used to help the poor and provide facilities for pilgrims.

But in my dejected cynicism I wondered, "How is it that a stone in Tirupathi can attract so many pilgrims? Someone was really clever to think up this money-making gimmick. "

I arrived in Tirupathi around noon. I boarded a bus that ferried pilgrims to and from the top of Tirumala hill, where the temple and the surrounding complex is situated. The complex is truly a city in itself, for a staff of thousands--priests, administrators, workers and their families--permanently resides there. In addition, there are never less than five thousand visiting pilgrims, and often many more.

After leaving the Tirumala bus stop and walking past by well-kept blocks of administrative offices and pilgrims' guest houses, I turned down a wide paved promenade lined by stalls proffering all sorts of goods for sale. At the end of this bustling bazaar loomed the gopuram, an ornately carved tower that soared high over the front gate of the temple.

A queue of pilgrims stretched from the cavernous temple entrance around the side of the building and back into a series of waiting halls, all filled. I took my place at the end. It was two and a half hours before I got to the Deity.

But in spite of the long wait, I felt my despair fade as I slowly traversed a vast courtyard lined with row after row of ancient, intricately carved stone columns, on my way to the sanctorum sanctorum. As I ascended the few stone steps leading to the doorway of the Deity's residence, the excitement of the devotees burst around me in chants of "Govinda! Govinda!" We quickly moved through the crowded entrance area and down the right side of a long corridor that led directly to Srinivasa, suddenly visible over the heads of the throng in front of me.

The line moved swiftly forward. I kept my eyes fixed on the Deity and felt that whatever was drawing me closer was much more than the physical factors of the forward motion of the crowd. I was entering into an intense personal exchange with Transcendence.

At the end of the corridor was the darshan or viewing area. Now I stood directly before Srinivasa, black in color and bedecked with silver, gold and jewel-encrusted ornaments. The upper portion of the Deity's face was covered by Vishnu tilak, a U-shaped white marking worn on the forehead. The bottom of the "U" should normally just fill the space between the eyebrows, but a distinctive feature of this murti is that the tilak is oversized and covers the eyes. He wore a high conical silver crown topped by a rounded peak. His decorations shimmered prismatically in the light of the votary lamps.

In the brief moment I stood before Srinivasa, I was moved by the remembrance of my mother's exclusive and abiding devotion to Vishnu as the complete form of the Supreme Truth, which other forms like Siva and Durga only partially represent. A verse from the Bhagavad-gita crossed my mind: "Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reaction. Do not fear. "



The darshan area was supervised by young but stern-looking ladies who briskly ushered the pilgrims past the Deity, sometimes with shoves between the shoulder blades of those who lingered too long. I dared not tarry. I turned and followed the queue back up the other side of the long corridor to the exit, looking over my shoulder to get yet another glimpse of Srinivasa. Leaving the residence as quickly as we had entered it, the queue continued on its route through the temple compound to the front gate.

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"Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender
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not fear. "*

Coming out of the temple from beneath the gopuram, I wandered into the bazaar again. Jostled by the teeming shoppers, I reviewed the emptiness of my life. "Just as I'm being pushed to and fro in this marketplace, so I've been pushed from one fruitless pursuit to another, with nothing to show for it. " Remembering the Bhagavad-gita again, I decided I must attain that state of deliverance from all reactions to my foolish deeds. I would surrender myself to spiritual life and become a sadhu, a wandering holy man.

From a stall dealing in North Indian clothing I bought a lenga (loose-fitting pyjama-like trousers), a gamcha (a single piece of cloth that is wrapped about the waist as a bathing suit) and a four-meter length of cotton cloth. From another place I got some turmeric. Then I went to the Swami Pushkarini, the large sacred bathing pool next to the temple. Using the turmeric as dye, I colored the lenga and long cloth yellow and set them out to dry.

I got my head shaved by one of the straight-razor barbers squatting on the concrete steps around the pool. Removing my clothing, I put on the gamcha and dipped thrice into the holy waters. As I came out, a man passing by paused to apply a dab of moist white clay from a small brass bowl in his hand to my forehead, deftly making the tilak mark with one stroke of a finger. I took this as a sign of the Lord's acknowledgment of my desire to surrender.

After I and my yellow-dyed clothing had dried, I donned the lenga and wrapped my head turban-style with the middle part of the long cloth, bringing the two lengths of excess down from the back of my neck over the top of each shoulder. I crossed the lengths at the chest and tied them around my waist.

I placed my old shirt and pants in the bag I'd gotten from the cloth stall and left my slippers at the pool. I still had 150 rupies. I decided to donate this to Srinivasa.

At the temple entrance, I saw the counter for the "special darshan" costing twenty-five rupees. This allowed one to cut his waiting time in the queue to around a quarter of an hour. I decided to have six special darshans and exhaust my money.

Coming before Srinivasa the sixth time, I noticed that I was still carrying the bag of old cloth in my hand. In my mind I asked the murti, "You are known as Hari, 'He who takes away our material attachments'. How will You take this bag from me?"



As I exited the long corridor and entered the front room of the residence, I noticed a bearded brahmin sitting in a cordoned-off area there. He was stockily-built and bare-chested. His forehead, torso, arms and spine were adorned with twelve tilak marks, signifying him to be a temple priest.

As I exited the long corridor and entered the front room of the residence, I noticed a bearded brahmin sitting in a cordoned-off area there. He was stockily-built and bare-chested. His forehead, torso, arms and spine were adorned with twelve tilak marks, signifying him to be a temple priest. He was grinding paste from a block of moist sandalwood by rubbing it on piece of flat sandstone. I broke from the line and kneeled down near him to watch. The sweet-scented sandalwood paste mixed with a little saffron or camphor was applied to the body of the murti as a refreshing cosmetic. But the paste was usually smeared on the Deity just after the early morning bathing ceremony; it was strange that he prepared it in the mid-afternoon.

I was just going to ask him if there was a special puja (worship) about to happen when he looked up at me and asked, "What do you have in that

bag?"

"Oh, just some clothing," I said, opening the bag so that he could see.

Noticing my old kurta, a style of shirt not often seen in South India, he said, "This shirt is very nice. If you're not needing it anymore, can you give it to me?"

I protested, not wanting to give a temple priest my old castoffs. But he was so insistent that I relented on the condition that he arrange a special darshan of Srinivasa for me, one in which I could stand as long as I liked before the Deity.

He readily agreed. He set the bag on a nearby shelf and took me firmly by the hand, leading me through the crowd to the long corridor.

The length of the corridor was divided down the middle by a special aisle about one meter wide that was sectioned off from the rest of the corridor by metal hand rails. This served a double purpose: it separated the incoming queue from the outgoing and allowed authorized persons a free route to the darshan area. One could enter this aisle through a metal gate where the donation box stood. A police guard in an olive drab uniform and beret was posted nearby.

The big bearded brahmin unlocked the gate with a key dangling at his waste and led me into the aisle between the rails. He strode ahead, pulling me behind him until we came to the darshan area where the pilgrims passed between us and the Deity.

He stood next to me while I viewed Srinvasa to my heart's content. I wanted to indelibly impress my mind with the form of the Lord, so I began by meditatively studying each part of that form, beginning with the feet. I gradually brought my eyes up to the Lord's two hands, the left one held in the mudra of pushing down misery, and the right one in the mudra of benediction. Just above shoulder level another two hands held the symbols of Vishnu (the disc and the conch). I studied the slightly smiling expression on Srinivasa's face and wondered if it indicated satisfaction or amusement, or perhaps something even deeper. Again I moved my eyes back to the feet of the Lord and repeated my meditation twice over.

After that I studied Sri on the Lord's right and Padmavati on His left. And then I took in the whole scene, including the backdrop of the sanctum sactorum and its floor and ceiling. I estimated I'd stood there for five or six minutes.

Finally I looked at the brahmin. He nodded his head and turned. Halfway back to the gate he motioned that I should slip over the handrail and leave with the line of exiting pilgrims. I did so, and he went ahead to the gate and let himself out.

When I got to the front room, I went back to his place, wanting to thank him before I left. But he was not there. Nor was my bag on the shelf. Nor was there even any evidence that he'd been making sandalwood paste some minutes before.

A little confused, I went to two other brahmins who were sitting nearby. "Excuse me," I spoke politely, "where is the bearded brahmin who was here a short while ago?"

They eyed me a bit strangely. "Bearded brahmin?" snorted one. The other laughed, "You think this is a Shiva temple?" True, I reminded myself, Vaishnava brahmins don't wear beards.

"He was making sandalwood paste over there," I pointed. One of the brahmins shook his head. "No, that's not done at this time. You'll have to come back at six tomorrow morning if you want to meet the brahmin who does that duty. He's gone home hours ago. "

Was I was dreaming now, or had been dreaming when I was with the man with the beard? "But he took me to have darshan through the gate. Didn't you see me?"

They both looked at each other and chuckled. One said, "We couldn't help but see you, because we've been here the whole time. You went through the darshan queue again and again. We thought you were mad. But you were not with a bearded brahmin, and you did not go through the gate. "

Leaving them joking merrily between themselves, I went to the guard and asked him if he'd seen me go through the gate. "Don't waste time here!" he shouted in Telegu. "Move along!"

"Please, just give me a moment," I implored. "I was brought through this gate a few minutes ago by a brahmin, and you were standing right here. Didn't you notice us?"

"And who do you think you are, the peshkar (head priest)?" he sneered. "It's my job to make sure only VIP's get through this gate. And you don't look like a VIP to me. "

"Well, in that case I think a miracle has happened," I gulped. He motioned me to the door and told me brusquely, "People have visions here every day. That's nothing special. Go home and don't worry about it. "

I came out of the residence in a daze.

Passing through the pavilion where prasadam (the sanctified food remnants of the Deity) is distributed, I accepted a plate of rice topped with dahl beans as my first bhiksha, or begged meal. I vowed from then on to live only by begging, and named myself Swami Atmananda.

After leaving the temple compound I returned to the bazaar, moving in the direction of the bus stand. I had to push through swarms of newly-arrived pilgrims excitedly rushing to the darshan queue. Finally I reached the thoroughfare where I saw some share taxis picking up passengers for the ride downhill.

There were eight people in a car closeby; a man called to me from the back seat and asked, "Would you like a ride down with us?" "Yes I would," I answered, "but I have no money. " He waved me over as the door opened: "I'll pay your fare, just come. "

I squeezed in and we started down the winding road to Tirupathi. All the way I was absorbed in deep contemplation on what had happened to me in the temple. I asked myself who the bearded brahmin could have been: "Perhaps Srinivasa come in disguise?" I doubted that. He surely wouldn't personally look after such a wretch as I.

My old skepticism reasserted itself: "The whole thing was imagination. " But I clearly remembered standing before the sanctum sanctorum for several minutes. So many pilgrims passed between where I was standing and the murti, and I could still see these people in my mind's eye--many with shaven heads, dressed in styles of clothing from all over India, all being hurried along by the female attendants. As I mused this over, I realized another very strange thing: I couldn't remember the form of Srinivasa at all. Just the silver conch and disc. The rest was. . . blocked.

'Well, maybe I didn't really stand there so long,' I ventured. But I simply could not convince my intelligence that it did not happen. After all, the bag full of clothing was gone. I recalled how I had mentally challenged Srinivasa to take even that last possession away; mysteriously, my challenge had been met.

At last I just shook my head and smiled to myself. 'It may be impossible to explain how it happened,' I told myself, 'but today I've been liberated. ' I had to admit that despite all my doubts this clever trickster Lord Srinivasa had definitely changed my life for the better. I felt spiritually purified, completely refreshed and, for the first time in quite a while, optimistic.



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Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins in Tirupathi, Andhra Pradesh, after he had donned the attire of a sadhu and vowed to renounce the world before the Deity of Sri Venkateshvara.



I walked the rest of the distance to Tirupathi town and stopped at the Govindaraja Swami Perumal, another beautiful Vaisnava temple.

ashram. How can I get there from here?" I saw many more Sai Baba photos under the inspector's glass desktop cover.

The taxi stopped at the bottom of the hill next to a huge statue of Hanuman. Everyone got out, they to eat at a roadside kitchen and I to begin my wanderings as a mendicant. I walked the rest of the distance to Tirupathi town and stopped at the Govindaraja Swami Perumal, another beautiful Vaisnava temple. I stood before the Deity with my palms pressed together before my chest. "Now I am finished with material life", I vowed. "Now my spiritual life must begin. "

As I left Govindaraja, it crossed my mind that I knew precious little about spiritual life except that as a swami, I should beg for my needs. I had so much to learn, and needed someone to learn it from.

Nearby I noticed a police station. I walked in, found a well- built, mustachioed inspector at his desk and sat down in front of him. He looked up and, seeing my sadhu dress, asked respectfully, "How can I help you?" I noticed a portrait of Sai Baba on the wall of his office and took this as an opportunity. "I want to go to Baba's



I stood before the Deity with my palms

He brightened visibly when I mentioned Sai *pressed together before my chest. "Now Baba and enthusiastically replied, "Go by I am finished with material life", I bus from here to Anantapur, then change vowed. "Now my spiritual life must buses there for Bukkapatnam, where you begin. "* catch the bus for Put- taparthi. Baba's Prashanti Nilayam is in Puttaparthi. "

I thanked him. After a hesitant pause I took the first step in my new life as a mendicant by asking, "Would you kindly help me in meeting the expense for this journey?"

He beamed even more. "Oh, I am very happy to send someone to Sai Baba, the avatar of the modern age. But I have nothing here. Just go down the road until you see a shop called Srinivas Wines. My wife works there--you tell her I sent you for bus fare to Prashanti Nilayam and she will be most happy to give it to you. "

Following his directions, I soon came to a shop called 'Srinivas Wines' that shelved a great assortment of bottled liquor. The walls behind the shelves were mirrored to make the stock look twice as voluminous. In the back, under a framed and garlanded color poster of Lord Srinivasa, sat a fat lady in a sari. I stepped inside and greeted her with "Sai Ram", the motto used by the Baba's followers. She returned the "Sai Ram" and politely gave me a seat. I told her why I'd come and she was very moved. Opening a drawer, she took out a wad of notes and placed it in my hand.

"May I send somebody to get the ticket for you and bring you to the bus?" she asked humbly, eager to do more service. "No need," I replied dismissively, getting into the feel of a swami's detached aplomb. "Your husband's directions will be sufficient. " As I stood up to leave, I momentarily saw my face reflected among the wine bottles. My Vishnu tilaka had rubbed off, and with my big turban and confident air, I looked like the famous Swami Vivekananda.

The way to Prashanti Nilayam proved to be rough. I got on the Anantapur bus at 5:30 PM and it drove the whole night before arriving at the last stop, several hours behind schedule. From there I caught a southbound bus to Bukkapatnam, bouncing for 50 kilometers more on a hard narrow seat. The ride from Bukkapatnam to Puttaparthi was mercifully short.

The sun-drenched country town of Puttaparthi enjoyed a measure of notoriety even before the advent of its resident mystagogue Sai Baba. In olden times it was a place of cobra worship. On the top of a hill called Uravakonda sits a huge boulder in the shape of a hooded serpent; legend has it that whoever is bitten by a snake from this place will never recover.



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I arrived at Satya Sai Baba's Prashanti Nilayam ('Abode of Perfect Peace') to cries of "Please have mercy, give, give" from a large group of ragged beggars sitting outside the front gate. Past them, flocks of well-heeled people crowded into the compound; that meant Sai Baba was here now. I viewed this scene with decidedly mixed feelings.

"He is supposed to be God", I considered, "and his followers say he has the power to remove misfortune, disease and poverty--so why are these beggars loitering here just outside his own house? And if his disciples are

really so blessed, why don't they do something more for these poor people than just throw coins?"

With these misgivings, I entered the spacious and rather beautiful ashram compound. In the middle stood Sai Baba's residence, a large apricot-colored building called the Mandir; before it, on a stretch of sandy soil called the 'darshan area', perhaps a thousand people sat on their haunches in rows, waiting for Sai Baba to appear on the upper-floor balcony. Beyond the crowd was a round, roofed stage, the Shanti Vedika. Nearby that, I saw many pilgrims camped in large open sheds.

Other buildings, arrayed around the compound wall, faced the Mandir, among them a small hospital. I'd heard that just by eating the holy ash (vibhuti) that Sai Baba mysteriously produces from his hand, the diseases of the faithful were cured. Reading the sign listing the visiting hours of the doctors, I wondered why, if he had the power to cure with ash, he needed a hospital staffed with Western-trained physicians.

A big, bearded and bright-turbaned Sikh came walking past the darshan area. I fell in step with him and asked where he was going. He was on the way to the canteen to get something to eat. We got to talking; he asked me about myself, and I told him I'd left everything for spiritual life. "I am searching for God," I said with a mild smile, "so I came to see if God is really here. "

He flashed a mischievous grin. "Well, I don't believe in any of these so-called avatars, but I happened to be on business nearby and somebody told me Sai Baba is God, so I just dropped in here to see what this God is up to. " He chuckled. Then he looked at me quizzically and asked, "You have no money?"

"No", I replied.

Stopping, he held up a forefinger and declared sonorously, "Don't worry, God is here, and he will NOT feed you. " We both burst out laughing.

Still laughing, I said, "Well, God may not feed me, but you're here, so why don't you buy me breakfast?"

"Oh, no problem", he exclaimed heartily. Slapping me on the back, he lead me into the canteen. "What's your name?"

"Swami Atmananda. "

"Oh, you're a swami?"

"Yes, I just became swami yesterday. " We had another big laugh.

The canteen served the usual South Indian fare of idli, dosha and sambar. I was ravenous, and the Sikh was obliging. "Eat up," he urged, ordering more doshas for me, "because God won't feed you, and I'm leaving in half an hour. Whatever you want, you take. Don't worry. " I packed it in, and he paid for it happily.

Coming out of the canteen, he pointed me to the inquiry office, telling me if I had any questions, I could get them answered there. We bade each other fond farewells. Then I entered the office and browsed through some of the books on display there. From a volume of his lectures on the Ramayana, I gleaned that Sai Baba's teachings consisted of standard Advaitist platitudes and little else. Advaita philosophy, the de rigueur of all popular Hindu gurus, was something I'd studied extensively but grown bored with. I was not impressed.

Putting the book back, I asked a man in the office if there was a room I might have. This gentleman, Mr. N. Kasturi, turned out to be the chief assistant to Sai Baba in Prashanti Nilayam. He answered my question by quoting the prices of guest facilities.

"But I have no money. I want to stay here for two weeks. Can't you give me a place to live?"

"I am so sorry," Kasturi answered with resigned finality, "but we don't have such arrangements. If you wish to stay for free, you may kindly move into the pilgrims' sheds. "

I changed the subject. "I'd like to see Sai Baba. Is there a way to do that?"

"Oh," he smiled benevolently, "seeing God is not so easy. Just have a look here. . . " he motioned towards the darshan area where the crowd sat expectantly in the sun. "Today they've been waiting for two hours. Some have been here for months, not leaving. No one knows when he will come down to see them. It is all divine. "

Leaving Mr. Kasturi, I entered the darshan area and sat down in in one of the rows. On my right was a Chettiar (a member of the Tamil merchant community). He started telling me about a daughter of his who could not speak; he'd left home and

business "to get the God to give her a voice. I've been here seven days-- no darshan! My time has not come. I don't know what I will do now. " His lips quivered and he abruptly turned away, his eyes brimming with tears.

I'd come to Shanti Nilayam out of curiosity, not faith, and did not relish the prospect of sitting the whole day uselessly in the sun like this man had been doing for a week. I stood up and left the compound through the gate. After aimlessly walking around Puttaparthi for a while, I found myself on a sandy road facing some newly whitewashed buildings. One was a cloth shop that had a 'Lodging' sign above a side entrance. Inside were four rooms for rent. Not seeing anyone, I sat down on the steps outside.

Mulling over how gullible these Baba followers seemed to be, I wagered to myself that the only power one needed to control such people was quick-wittedness. Just then a man came out of one of the rooms as if to leave. To test my theory, I greeted him with "Sai Ram. " He echoed my greeting.

I asked him, "What are you doing here and what prayer do you have?"

At once startled and fascinated by my cryptic question, he knelt down next to me and asked excitedly, "Where is Swami from?"

Deliberately inscrutable, I replied: "Swami is from wherever he is. Just tell me--what is your prayer?"

He was flustered. "Oh, but Swami knows my prayer. "

I gazed at him stonily. "That may be, but still we should say our prayers openly. "

He was trembling when he answered. "I am doing a big business, and I am not sure what is the outcome, so I need blessings. "

I paused, mysteriously surveying the sky as if consulting the gods. Then riveting him again with my eyes, I asked, "What time do you go for darshan?"

"Oh, I was thinking of going now, but I've heard there are so many people. I have tried six times to see Baba. I'm not complaining, you understand, it must be my sinful karma, but my time has not come. "

I said with finality, "I want to go with you for darshan. Now tell me--where are you staying?"

"I am staying here. The owner of this shop is my relative. "

"I want to stay with you. I have no place. "

"Oh, certainly! I should be very happy to have a swami stay with me. Swamis don't often come here, because they don't understand that Baba is God. Only very rarely is it revealed to them that the God they are seeking is Sai Baba. So you please come with me. "

He took me into his room and asked about my bags. I answered distainfully, "The whole world is my bag. " I refreshed myself and took a light nap. Then we both went to the darshan area.

We sat down in the first row. I could not help but think how foolish all this was: "If these people think that they can't see Sai Baba because their time hasn't come, then who is more powerful, time or him?"

Suddenly Sai Baba appeared on the balcony, holding up his right palm in the abhaya-mudra blessing. I observed him intently. After seeing how easy it was to influence his disciples, I wanted learn more. Somewhere in the back of my mind a plan was brewing.

He was a very small man. His trademark frizzy hairdo formed a black halo around his face. Wearing a longsleeved iridescent orange silk gown that reached to the floor, he flitted downstairs like a wraith. He moved ever nearer to me along the first row, taking letters from people and holding them in his left hand. I watched his walk, his gestures, his facial expressions. Finally he went past on to the end.

I noted that as he went down the row he motioned a few people to stand. Mr. Kasturi quickly gathered them in a group.

Without going on to the seven rows behind, Sai Baba came back the same way. He stopped in front of my new roommate and looked at him closely. My friend stared back goggle-eyed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. Abruptly Sai Baba turned away from him and looked at me, motioning with his finger that I should stand. I really didn't know what was going on, because this was my first time here.

My friend was bursting with excitement: "Oh, you have been called! Baba has granted your interview! Please, can you mention my case to him? Ask a blessing for me!" As I got up, he touched my feet. Kasturi directed me to join the other chosen ones.

Meanwhile Sai Baba passed swiftly through the other rows, almost as if he was floating. After finishing, he came back our way and nodded to Kasturi, saying in Telegu, "Send them up. " Then he went upstairs.

With Kasturi at the lead of our group, we ascended the stairs right behind Sai Baba. As he reached the top, Sai Baba dropped the letters into a waiting trash bin. Then he turned left and went inside his quarters. Kasturi showed us into the interview room on the right. There were six of us. We sat down on sofas to wait.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will

read below took place in Puttaparthi, at the asrama of a famous pseudo-incarnation of God.

There was a door within the interview room that opened directly to Sai Baba's quarters. After a few moments he glided through it as everybody rose with palms joined in pranam-mudra. Out of politeness, I also got up. I had a close look at his eyes; they seemed staring and unfocused.

He gave ash to a couple of people--I saw it clearly materialize from his fingers. Near me stood a girl of about ten with her father. When Sai Baba came to her he set two earring that just appeared in his hands into the lobes of her ears. Father and daughter gasped in astonishment, for her ears had not been pierced before. Now they were, and hung with gold.

Seeing this feat, everyone cried "Sai Ram! Sai Ram!" in great wonderment. Then, without acknowledging me with so much as a glance, he turned back and exited from whence he came, Mr. Kasturi on his heels.

A moment later Kasturi came back through the door and announced, "The interview is over; everyone should go now. He did not speak with you, but you are very fortunate, for you saw a miracle of Baba's power. " He waved everybody to the door that opened on the balcony, and we stood to leave.

I followed the father and daughter, but Kasturi stopped me with an outstretched hand. "Please continue to sit. Baba wants you to wait here comfortably. " I nodded, a bit nonplussed, and retook my seat. As soon as the room was cleared, Sai Baba came in again. This time he looked different.

He didn't have that entranced, almost dazed look I'd seen on his face before. Now he appeared completely normal and relaxed. I thought irreverently, "How interesting: mad looks for the masses. "

He stood in front of me. This time I didn't get up. Speaking in Sanskrit, he asked me how I was feeling and if everything was all right. I replied in Tamil, "I do not know Sanskrit; please speak to me in your native tongue. " He switched to his Telegu and asked the same question. Conversation was now possible, because Telegu and Tamil are quite similar.

I answered, "By God's grace, everything is all right. I have a place to stay, and my plan is to visit Prashanti Nilayam for two weeks. " He walked around the room as if in thought and came back to me.

"You say you want to visit for two weeks?" I nodded.

"What is your mission here?"

Remembering what I'd told the Sikh, I replied, "I am looking for God. "

He suddenly smiled and half-raised his arms, turning the palms of his hands in my direction in what I guessed was a double benison. Bending his body slightly at the knees, hips and shoulders, he tilted his head coyly to one side and uttered in a silky voice, "If you can't find God here, where will you find Him?"

I was not very impressed by this little show, and was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "Well, I'll be here for some time, and I hope to meet with you more. . . " my voice trailed off uncertainly. Eyeing me intently, he said firmly, "Any time you want, you can see me. "

Just then a servant appeared in the doorway to his apartment and gave a signal. Sai Baba waved him off. He turned to me again and asked, "Aren't you hungry?"

It was just about lunchtime, so I answered, "I wouldn't mind to eat something now, but of course I have to arrange that somebody gives me biksha. "

He smiled magnanimously. "Eat with me. "

I couldn't hide my surprise and I thanked him. He went through the door and I followed. Entering his private dining room, we sat down on plush cushions at a low round marble-topped table.

Through a wide entranceway, I could see his bedroom. I noted some of the paraphernalia of God: a silk-covered bed, and next to that a nightstand topped by an alarm clock and some medicine bottles. Behind a half-open door I glimpsed a flush toilet.

He nonchalantly sang something to himself as his man brought the lunch on a serving tray. The meal consisted of utma (vegetables fried with farina), achar (hot pickle), fried eggplant and coffee.

The utma, to my surprise, was flavored with onions; I knew that strict sadhus shunned onions, as this food gives rise to passions. Coffee, an intoxicant, would likewise be considered a worldly indulgence. But apparently Sai Baba did not care for these rules. And neither did I, for I was a self-made swami, under vows to no one.

We finished. He got up to wash and gargle, and I did the same. Then with his customary benign smile he nodded his head, indicating that I could go.

As I came down the staircase, I saw the people still sitting in rows, now gazing at me with open mouths. My friend the roommate rushed up to me with a look of awed



ecstasy fixed on his face. Others were running up behind him as we met at the bottom of the stairs.

He eagerly inquired, "What happened? After the interview the others came down but Baba kept you with him. "

I said with a nonchalant shrug, "Oh, I had lunch with him, that's all. "

Suddenly at least two hundred people were mobbing me. I was pulled towards a fancy lodging block and ended up in a big airconditioned apartment with a roomful of rich people sitting in front of me. They had locked the door and were guarding it because a big crowd had gathered outside.

It was practically an interrogation session: "What about the miracle with the earrings? And what did Baba say to you?" But I sat silent and serene in the big upholstered chair they'd given me. In my mind, I was gloating at my sudden change of fortune. I wondered if I could exploit this situation further. I had to find out what being God was really like. "Just do it," the opportunist within myself crowed. "It's not a sin; you're just giving them faith in something higher. This is the life you've been waiting for. "

In the relaxed and self-assured manner I'd picked up from him I began singing Chitta Chora (Thief of the Mind), a well-known Sai Baba song. The entire group froze in a hush. Then one by one they started clapping and singing along enthusiastically until the whole room was in an uproar. The song completed, again I was silent. The proverbial pin would have sounded like a car crash.

Finally, I spoke, softly: "What do you want from me? I am a beggar. "

"Swami," came the answer, "you're one of those rare swamis who has accepted Baba as God. Baba has said this is very extraordinary, because he is hiding from those who are engaged in religious and spiritual life. He says that at the end of their sadhana he gives them the darshan they expect--if they worship Rama, he'll appear to them as Rama. If they worship Shiva, he'll come to them as Shiva. But as Baba, only very fortunate people can see him. "

I closed my eyes. "But to me", I murmured, "he is simply a guide. "

Somebody from the back exclaimed, "Ah-hah, what a vision! His guide!" I began to perceive that whatever I said here would be accepted as "nectarean truth. "

Just then a curtain that covered the opened glass door to the balcony moved in the breeze. Seeing this, two ladies in the crowd began to weep. "Baba! Baba is here with us right now!", they sobbed.

Now I could really see how it worked. One didn't have to do anything. Such foolish people would create their own "miracle", propagate it, and make you God.

My friend was there in the group, close by. He urged, "Swami, please tell us your experience with Baba. "

"Everybody was sent out," I began, "but Mr. Kasturi asked me to remain seated, and Baba came to me. He spoke to me in Sanskrit. "

They all looked at each other with wide-open eyes. I heard murmurings of "Sanskrit! Veda! Veda coming out of his mouth. "

I continued on, even to the point of standing up to show them the pose he made when he said, "If you can't find God here, where will you find him?" And I told them how he said anytime I wanted I could have darshan. They hung onto every word.

My friend asked, "Did you speak to him about me?" I shook my head solemnly. He whined, "But I requested you to do that. "

I answered with gravity, "Either you understand he's God, or you understand he's an ordinary person. If you think he's God, then he knows. If you think he's an ordinary person, you shouldn't be here. Why should anyone have to recommend your case?"

Someone exclaimed, "That's the exact thing Baba says! 'If you think I am God, then why don't you have faith, and if you don't think I am, then why are you here?' Baba speaks the same thing!"

Another lady called from the back, "Swami, one more song? Some nectar for our ears?" So I sang a song about Vishnu, one Sai Baba also sings but which is not his composition. As the afternoon drew on I got hungry. They brought me to the canteen and of course, paid for everything.

As it turned out, my friend had also become a celebrity with these rich people because of his relationship to me. They flocked to him to get my attention, and they flocked to me to get Sai Baba's attention.

Despite my hidden cynicism about the 'God' of Prashanti Nilayam, I was yet quite drawn to him because he had pulled off his act so well. Having renounced worldly aspirations, I'd found here a whole new temptation. Nothing arouses ambition in the heart like the fame of another, and though I was loathe to admit it to myself, I envied this 'God'. The curious thing was that my crass imitation of Sai Baba's behavior was thought by his followers to be devotion to him.

I was to find out that he thought that way too.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below took place in Puttaparthi, at the asrama of a famous pseudo-incarnation of God.

A day or so later I asked my friend to take me around the village of Puttaparthi. We went to the Chitravati river, but it being the dry season, there was no water, just a channel of sand.

On a rocky mound near the riverbed stood a tamarind tree from which Sai Baba is said to have magically plucked mangos and other fruits during his youth. I clambered up the rocks and sat beneath it. At the time I was not aware of the significance Sai Baba's followers attached to this tree; I only happened to go there because it looked like a suitable spot for meditation. I sat in the lotus pose, and my friend sat next to me. With closed eyes I visualized Lord Rama, God's avatar as the prince who defeated the demon Ravana.

When I opened my eyes my friend was sitting close with his hands folded and a doglike look in his eyes. I supposed he was expecting some teaching or order from me. He looked so utterly helpless that I had to pity him. The best thing I could do, I figured, was to get him out of Puttaparthi, for here his foolishness would only increase.

"You should to go to Bangalore, where Baba has his smaller center. There will be no interview for you here. "

He asked despondently, "Swami, what paap (sin) have I done?" "You've done many", I replied. He shivered. "But just do this-- go to Bangalore. And Baba may yet see you there. " In the back of my mind I was thinking, "You fool, can't you see you're neither rich enough nor unusual enough--like me--to get Sai Baba's attention?"

Within a few days he left, after arranging with the shop owner my continued stay in his room.

On another day's stroll, I stopped at an old Satyabhama temple on the outskirts of Puttaparthi. This temple was established by Sai Baba's grandfather, Kondama Raju. It is said that his son Pedda prayed here for a second male child; subsequently, a boy was born who got the name Satya Narayana, known later as Satya Sai Baba.

I found it curious that the temple was in need of repairs as if it was neglected by Sai Baba's followers. By a strange coincidence, I'd arrived at the same time as Sai Baba's older brother, who had come to visit the temple from his home nearby.

I asked him about his famous sibling: "Do you think he is God?" He waved his hand impatiently. "This is sinful", he said with faint disgust. "That's a big mistake he's making, and God will punish him for it. He was stung by a scorpion when he was a boy, and after that time started babbling about Shirdi Sai. " (Sai Baba claims to be the reincarnation of a "Kabirpantha" fakir--a mystic on the path of the Muslim impersonalist Kabir--who hailed the town of Shirdi, near Bombay; this man, who died in 1918, was the original Sai Baba.)

"It may be that when he was stung that baba came into his body," the brother continued, "but no matter what happened, for him to claim he is Rama and Krishna is wrong. In our family we worship Rama and Krishna as God, but he has taken that position for himself. When his time comes, he will be punished for this blasphemy. "

I'd become an overnight junior celebrity at Prashanti Nilayam; in my yellow cloth I stood out in the crowd, and the news that I'd eaten lunch with Sai Baba had spread like wildfire throughout the compound. I often entertained the crowd by singing Sai Baba's songs in the style I'd learned from him. Twice daily, different rich men fed me at the canteen. Yet despite the attention I was enjoying, I was growing restless. I'd declared myself a seeker of God, but the easy life here diverted me from my intended goal.

On the seventh day, an excited Kasturi came up to me in the canteen. "Baba wants to speak to you. "

"Should I go to the darshan place?"

"No, you just go up to his quarters. "

"What, right now? Just walk in?"

"He's there waiting to see you!" Kasturi was almost frantic, so exasperated was he with my quibbling. "Please, you just immediately go to him! Even I'm not getting such chance of close contact to Baba!"

So, very casually, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, I walked up the stairs to the interview room and sat down. He didn't come out. I got up and poked my head into his dining room. But he was not there either. I entered his quarters and looked in his bedroom.

On the bed he faced me, reclining on his side, his head supported under a folded arm. As I entered he smiled broadly and lifted his hand in blessing.

I looked around for a place to sit, but there was no chair in the room. Finally I just sat down on the corner of the bed. "Kasturi said you want to see me", I began.

"Yes", he replied. "I just wanted to ask you if you've found God yet. "

"No, I haven't".

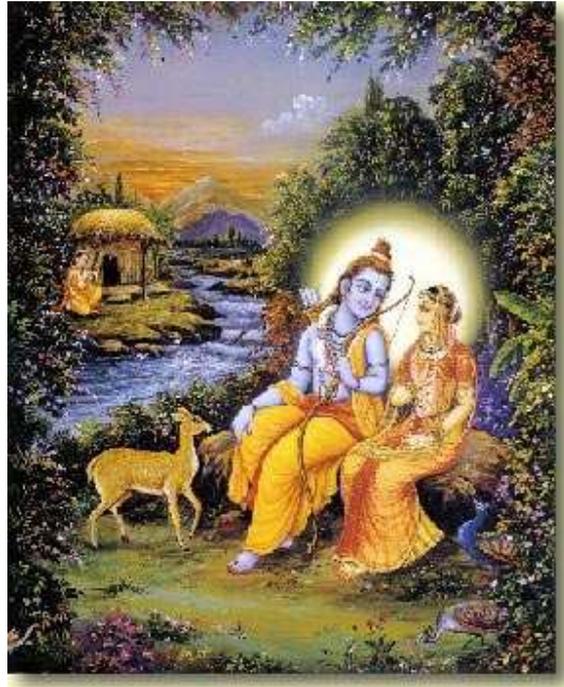
With a hint of knowing irony in his voice, he said, "Under the tamerind tree you meditated on Rama. "

"Yes, I did", I replied evenly. "That's my usual dhyana. I like to meditate on Rama, the ocean of mercy. He protects those who are weak. "

His eyes bored into mine. "But why are you looking for God elsewhere when you sit with him now?"

I let a polite, thoughtful expression register on my face before telling him, "You are a holy man and my elder, and I am very low and sinful. I don't want to say anything improper to you, please understand, but--you are not God. "

He nodded as I spoke, as if expecting my rejection of his divinity. "All right", he said when I finished, "as you see me, so I look. If you want to see me as God, I am God. If not, I'm not. But try to understand--that is what God is. " He spoke a little more along this line, peppering his arguments with the usual Advaitist slogans.



I like to meditate on Rama, the ocean of mercy. He protects those who are weak.

I interrupted him. "Excuse me, but I've read all this in your Rama Katha book. Now, one time in there you say everybody is Rama, and another time you say that you are Rama. So what do you actually mean? Look, I know you are not Rama. And to be consistent with Advaita philosophy you ought to tell your followers that the highest truth is impersonal Brahman. Advaitists say that everyone is actually only nameless formless light. You are an Advaitist, aren't you? If you are, then you should know that it is incorrect for you to say 'everyone is Rama' or 'I am Rama', because Rama is a person, and Brahman is impersonal. "

"Yes", he replied in a patient tone of voice, as if indulging a wayward child. "But I have realized Brahman, and they have not. "

I got a bit upset at this point. "Then you should make them realize it. But you deliberately keep them in a position inferior to yourself. You are pushing them down, not lifting them up. At great personal sacrifice they are coming here from many miles distant to wait outside for weeks and months just to catch a glimpse of you, and here you are, happily enjoying it all. Even ordinary politicians show more interest in their followers than you do. You just threw all those letters in the can. At least you could read them. "

"Cool down, cool down", he waved languidly. "As soon as I touch those letters, I know what is in them, and I answer through their karma. "

I stared at him in exasperation, hardly believing what I was hearing. "But karma is always happening to everyone, whether they write you letters or not. If you act through their karma, what do you need this Prashanti Nilayam for? Why do they

have to come here to see you? Please don't mind my boldness, but I am very disturbed by all this. When the curtain moves, these poor people are thinking you are there. They are so gullible, and I am sorry to say I think you are exploiting them. "

"But I was there when the curtain moved", he said self-contentedly. "You sang Chitta Chora very nicely. I was there. "

Now even more disappointed, I told him, "I know you have mystical powers. You see and hear things ordinary men cannot. So why don't you use your powers to remove their sufferings once and for all instead of playing them along like this? Why do you keep those who have surrendered to you in ignorance of their eternal spiritual existence? How will they ever get out of this miserable world of birth and death? Just giving earrings doesn't solve the problems of life. "

"All right", he said, a hint of resignation in his voice, "you will understand later on. " Then, changing the subject he asked, "You need any help here?"

"No, I am fully protected by God. "

"You don't give that credit to me?"

"To some extent I do, because these people who are paying for me are your devotees. But I see it is my karma that is supplying my upkeep in this world. And that is true for all those people out there, and that is also true for you. You have a karma that allows you to sit there, and by my karma I'm sitting here. If I had your karma and you had mine, I'd be the 'God' here, and you would be the frustrated one. "



He didn't hear me. A change had come over him. He sat up, his eyes unfocused and glittering. "I have to go down now", he said in a distant voice. "I will speak with you again. " He quickly exited, leaving me in his room alone.

I decided to have a look around. Opening a closet in his bedroom, I found it filled with orange gowns. I wanted to find his stock of ash, having myself previously experimented with teleporting ash with the aid of a mantra. But the room was bare of anything save the bed and a few standard items.

So I stretched out upon the bed as I'd seen him do and imitated his pose in jest, admiring myself in the bedroom mirror. Then I got up and looked from the balcony as he ran up and down the rows, generating mass hysteria. The police had to restrain people from mobbing him. Then he went onto the Shanti Vedika stage.

I suddenly felt sorry for this little man who would be God. "He's just a puppet," I thought. "All these people think he's Rama, and he believes it himself--but he, and they, are just being guided by some higher force over which he has no control. "

I went down to see what he was up to. Onstage, he had the crowd going in full swing. Arms upraised, he led them in song, which they responded to in a riotous chorus. As the song ended he collapsed into a chair. He was worshiped with incense,

lamp and flowers, like a murti in the temple. Then a group of Sanksrit pandits chanted the Rudram and Chamakam prayers, which are meant for Shiva, to him. This was too much for me. I walked out of the compound to my room.

By the morning of the ninth day the novelty of Prashanti Nilayam had worn off. Thoroughly fed up with the label of 'the swamiji who loves Baba' that everyone had put on me, I decided to go. I went to Kasturi and shook his hand, saying, "Thank you and goodbye. "

He was surprised: "You're going? I thought you would stay here. You sing so sweetly. We had one swamiji from Rishikesh who also sang for Baba, and Baba took very nice care of him. He will take care of you too. "

"God is taking care of me. What can Baba do? Let him take care of himself first," was my quick reply. "You should watch out for his health--when he gets into those running moods, I think it isn't good for him. "

"What?!" Kasturi spluttered. "What is this you are saying?!" "No, never mind, I didn't say anything", I reassured him, smiling brightly. I waved him off and went into the canteen to bid adieu to the manager.

Today there were only about a hundred people gathered at the darshan area. It had been announced that Sai Baba would go to Bangalore; his big foreign-made automobile was ready at his private exit gate.

I went into the Mandir's ground-floor bhajan hall and made obeisances before the altar upon which the forms of Krishna, Satya-Narayana and Shiva were displayed. As I came out, I looked up and saw Sai Baba motioning to me from the balcony.

I strode up the stairs and found him in the interview room sitting in a chair, his hands on the armrests. I entered, offered him my respects and took a chair facing him.

"So?" he smiled. "Going?"

"Yes," I smiled back.

"But you said you'd stay two weeks. "

"Sorry, but I've become too dissatisfied here. I'm tired of all these sentimental people and the suffering and anxiety they are putting themselves through for you. "

"Do you know where you will go next?"

"No, I don't, but I hope to end up in a peaceful place. "

All at once he rose from his seat, his eyes again glittering. He gazed down into my face and intoned meaningfully, "Until you find what you're looking for, you'll have no problem for food. "

He lifted his right palm: "I will maintain you. "

"For whatever you are doing for me," I replied, "I am very thankful. But I don't accept you as God. "

In an odd voice he prophesized, "You yourself will become God. " He moved his hand forward as if to give me vibhuti.

"No", I countered, "don't give me that ash. I don't want to take it from you like this. Just let me take it from the container. "

"But why won't you take it from my hand?" he purred.

"Well", I grinned, "I know it doesn't originate from your hand, so let me take it from where it really comes. "

"You're wrong. It does come from my hand", he insisted.

"Sorry", I grinned again. "I don't believe you. Let me take it from the container. "

Without saying another word, he went into his quarters and brought out a small pot filled with ash. Holding it out to me he said simply, "Very well. If you want, take it from here. " I sprinkled a bit on my head.

"Please go happily and remember my words to you. "

I said, "Namaste," and got up to go. He spoke once more.

"You dislike me, don't you?"

"No, you're a nice man. Why should I dislike you?"

"When you find what you're looking for, you will dislike me," he said softly in that odd prophetic voice. He left me and I went downstairs and out of the compound.

Relieved to be departing Puttaparthi, I walked out of town along the main road until I reached the highway. I turned to have my last sight of the ashram. Just then, Sai Baba's big car glided out of the special gate, drove down the road and turned onto the highway in my direction.

The automobile sidled up next to me, its motor humming. In the back I saw the familiar smiling face ringed by the frizzy hairdo. Next to him was a well-known female singer in an expensive silk sari. As his electric window buzzed down, he told the driver to turn off the engine.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how

he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins in Puttaparthi, just as he departed the asrama of a famous pseudo-incarnation of God.

"I'm going to Bangalore", Sai Baba called to me through the open window of his limousine. "Would you like to come?"

"No," I told him. "Now I'm taking my own direction. "

"But you don't know where you are going. "

"That's true, but I am going nonetheless. "

He turned to the lady next to him and said, "He doesn't even know where he's going. He's just looking. I tell him to stay, but he says 'no, I am going. ' I ask him where, he says 'I don't know. ' All the time just looking, looking. "

Then I said jokingly, "But like everybody, I am only looking for you. "

Still speaking to the lady he said, "Everybody's looking for me to become themselves. He's looking for me to become myself. "

I laughed, a bit embarrassed. I could see he knew my motivations all too well. He turned to me again. "Go to Jilallamuri and see Amma. " Amma was a woman whom many said was an incarnation of a goddess. "You'll be very happy in Jilallamuri. "

"How shall I get there?"

He said something to the lady. She took twenty-five rupees out of her handbag and handed the money to him, and he held it out to me.

"You have 25 rupees; it costs twenty-three rupees eighty to take a bus from here. Just go to the bus stand and wait. "

Taking the money, I waved, "All right, so goodbye. This is the last time we'll see each other. "

"No, we'll meet again," Sai Baba chuckled. He told his driver to start the engine, and the window glass buzzed up. Then he was off.

I went to the bus station; the Jilallamuri bus soon came and I boarded it. Rolling through the parched landscape, I reflected on my recent experiences.

Amma lived in the simple village environs of Jilillamuri with her husband and six children. She attracted much bigger crowds at her place than Sai Baba did at Prashanti Nilayam. Like Sai Baba, she was reputed to have miraculous powers of healing and problem-solving. But her crowds were fed daily free of charge with a sumptuous feast.

In the morning and the evening she gave lectures dressed in colorful silks, crown and ornaments like Devi. The rest of the day she wore a simple sari and did household chores.

She lived in a no-frills four room house with her family. In the yard she had built a spacious hall for the pilgrims. It wasn't difficult to have audience with her, and it was all the easier for me, for I came dressed as a sadhu and had been sent by Sai Baba.

I found her in the kitchen, cooking for her family. She was a plump, friendly woman with a big sindhur dot on her forehead who looked for all the world like an average Hindu housewife. She fed me first and then we talked.

I told her that I was searching for someone who could show me a higher state of spiritual awareness, and that I had not been satisfied with what I'd seen in Sai Baba. She immediately said, "Oh, then you should go see Bala Yogi. " Bala Yogi was an ascetic mystic who lived not far from Jilillamuri.

"Yes, I can go see him also", I replied, "but I see you are very advanced yourself. I am impressed by your simplicity, practicality and especially your charitable attitude to others. "

She gazed at me unblinkingly for a moment and then said, "But I cannot help you. Your problem is that you have a great desire to become God. But that is impossible. God is already God. We are like small drops that have been churned out of a big pot of yoghurt. We can't rightly claim to be the whole pot of yoghurt, though at times we hear some people speaking this way. Sai Baba says he is the whole pot. But it's all from the last life. He's left over with some power. Anyway, it is not my policy to criticize. "

Just then a man walked in. Amma got up from the table we were sitting at and touched his feet. She introduced him to me as her husband. Assuring him she'd be only a few more minutes, she then turned back to me.

I told her that Sai Baba said I would become inimical to him after I found what I was looking for. She remarked, "I also see many things, but I keep them to myself. " I asked her what she meant by 'the whole pot of yoghurt', and she explained that it is the totality of everything of which we are only tiny parts. We can only realize that totality through devotion, she said; by devotion she meant service to family, friends and fellow man.

She paused, detecting my skepticism. I commented that I'd heard this before. "I can more or less understand what you say intellectually, but I think the actual realization of this oneness that so many gurus and avatars speak about, not just you, is much more difficult than it is admitted to be. That is why I am looking for a teacher who can show me this truth you are telling me about. "

"So, that's why I am saying you should go see Bala Yogi," she replied quietly. "You won't find what you want here. Anyway"-- she closed her eyes as if meditating on some inner vision--"keep clean inwardly and outwardly. That is the only way to always feel the presence of God in everything. "

After taking her blessings, I left. I was impressed by this woman, much more impressed than I was with Sai Baba, but meeting her had not done anything for my growing desire to actually experience transcendence myself. Outside, I asked the way to Mummuvivaram, the village of Bala Yogi. I begged the fare and boarded the bus.

Bala Yogi ("little yogi") had renounced his home when he was only six years old. He came to Mummuvivaram and sat down on the ground in meditation, never to move from that place again. It was said he neither ate nor passed stool nor urine after that. Moreover, a cobra snake was his constant companion. A house had been built around Bala Yogi by the faithful, and the people of the village profited greatly from the pilgrims that flocked to see him. But he remained aloof from all this attention.

It was only possible to see him during a period of a few days out of every month. During those days a huge multitude gathered at Mummuvivaram to have darshan. It so happened that I arrived there during one of these peak periods. The darshan queue was so long that I supposed it would take me two days of standing in line before I would get a chance to see Bala Yogi. I lost heart and decided to move on.

But while I viewed the scene from a distance, a man hailed me. He'd been sent by a government minister who had noticed me. The minister, thinking by my dress that I'd come all the way from North India, invited me to have a special darshan.



Bala Yogi was said to be fifty years old but looked only thirty, having the wispy beard of a young man and long matted locks of hair on his head. His finger- and toenails had grown out long and crazily twisted. He sat glowering in the half-lotus posture with a large fired clay statue of a cobra behind him, the hood of which was poised over his head like an umbrella.

The pilgrims passed quickly before him. There was no time for anyone to have more than the briefest look. I had entered with the minister and some other big men who apparently wanted to have a private talk with the yogi. They stopped the procession of pilgrims and announced their desire to discuss improvements of the pilgrimage site. Bala Yogi simply screamed at them incoherently, sounding like nothing else than a child throwing a temper tantrum. The minister and his friends retreated quickly, and the procession resumed. An attendant asked me to leave.

I went out and stopped at a soft drink shop. There were photographs of Bala Yogi hung on the back wall. I struck up a conversation with the man behind the counter and asked if there were any relatives of Bala Yogi living in this area. "He has three brothers", the man answered, "and one doesn't like him. The other two are members of the committee that organizes the pilgrimage services in town. "

I asked for the address of the brother who had rejected Bala Yogi. He lived in the outskirts of Mummuvivaram, in the area of the family's ancestral home. I went there and found him to be an elderly man, retired from active life.

Asked about his brother, he recalled, "One fine morning the boy left home. He went over there where he is now and sat down. He wouldn't eat, and there was this cobra with him that frightened everybody away. The family used to go there and clap

hands from a distance; then he'd send the snake away and we could talk to him. But try as we might, he would not come home. Later on all these people started coming. "

"But what is his goal?" I inquired.

He shrugged. "His purpose is known to him alone. All I know is that he doesn't like people. He only stayed where is now because the family begged him to not go farther off than he'd done. You see, he was only six years old, and naturally mother and father were quite afraid to lose him. But he never cared for them--his own parents! He certainly doesn't care for these people who come to worship him now. "

Then I asked, "What do you think about all these people saying he is God or an avatar?" He answered emphatically, "Just because a man has three wives does not make him Dasaratha. " Then he explained that his father had three wives, just as King Dasaratha had. King Dasaratha was the father of Lord Rama. "My father had three wives, like Dasaratha, and he also had four sons, like Dasaratha. But that doesn't mean that one son must be Rama. "

It appeared that Bala Yogi needed to sit in one place to maintain his powers. There was also a secret about his connection with the cobra that I found out later in the Himalayas. And, though common folk considered him to be God, Bala Yogi himself never made such a claim; indeed, he didn't seem to care a fig what his devotees thought about him.

After bidding goodbye to the yogi's brother, I went out and sat beneath a tree to think things over. Giving up my worldly life, I had set out to become an accomplished spiritual master, but I knew I needed training. So far I'd seen three well-known masters who were said to be highly advanced. But I found Sai Baba to be a mere caricature. Amma was praiseworthy for her simplicity and dutifulness, but she could not help me in my search; at least she was honest enough to admit it. And this Bala Yogi looked like a grim misanthrope who just sneered at anyone who fell at his feet.

Considering all this, I found myself laughing at how useless my search was proving to be.

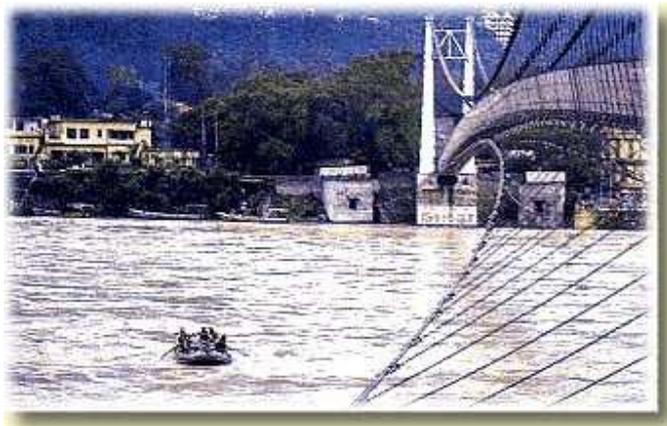
But I'd looked for only ten days. I couldn't so quickly give up hope that there was a teacher somewhere out there who was genuine and who could actually help me. I decided to go to the Himalayas.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins after he departed South India.

I traveled north to Delhi, leaving the south and its odd gods--Sai Baba, Amma and Bala Yogi-- behind. I stayed two weeks in India's capital. Little of note happened, except that I attended an outdoor program at which a bearded ex-university instructor who now called himself Acarya Rajneesh gave a talk to a crowd of "up-to-date" Indians mingled with a good number of Westerners. At the end he got everyone to dance crazily to rock 'n' roll music that blared from the stage out of enormous loudspeakers. For all that, Rajneesh singularly failed to impress me. I begged a train ticket from the Delhi stationmaster for passage to Rishikesh. Arriving there I went straight to the Shivananda Ashrama, or as it is otherwise known, The Divine Life Society.

In Salem I'd become friendly with the head of the small Shivananda Yoga Mission. The library was well-stocked with books on spiritual philosophy. I read a volume by Shivananda that seemed to speak directly to me. "The Rishis are beckoning us, this day," he wrote, "to start for Rishikesh, the center of the sages. Come, meditate on the rocks, take bath in the Ganga, gaze at the holy peaks. . . "



A view of the bridge over the Ganges River at the holy city of Rishikesh.

However, once I'd arrived at Rishikesh I didn't feel a great deal of welcome at the Divine Life Society, the headquarters of Shivananda's mission. They gave me three days stay with three meals each day free of charge, which was very nice of them. But I was looking less for a place to eat and sleep and more for personal guidance in spiritual life. What I found was a busy kitchen, a busy office, a busy printing press, and four general meditation classes a day.

In the evening satsang was held. All the sannyasis came to this gathering: Swami Krishnananda, the general secretary, Swami Premananda, the ashram commander, Swami Shankarananda, the philosopher, Swami Bhuvananda, and Swami Devananda. Morning and evening, Shankarananda gave Kenopanishad class.

On the third day I was able to meet Swami Shankarananda and put some questions before him. He warned me about my interest in clairvoyance, mystic powers and so on. "It is an impediment," he said. "I almost went mad from it himself. " He advised me to meditate with concentration, to engage my senses in active work and not be idle and speculative.

"We are very close to the Himalayas," he told me. "There are many renounced people in these environs who are adept in yoga and mediation, and some of them influence neophytes who dabble in meditation for their own purposes. These adepts can take control of the minds of the neophytes and divert them from the true path. You have to be very careful about slipping onto the mental plane. Select your path

carefully. Take a mantra. Take austerity. Do regular meditational exercises. Find a path suitable for you. Find a guru. "

"Why don't you be my guru, Swamiji?" I asked.

He held out both his palms for me to see, as if to show he held nothing in them. "I am too busy. I must concentrate my energy on writing and lecturing. And what other time I have I spend in meditation--which even includes cutting sabji two hours daily as part of my sadhana. Look, why don't you go talk to Swami Premananda about this?"

Swami Premananda wore his hair and beard long and liked shiny silk saffron cloth. When I asked him if I could become his disciple, his smile was quick and bright. It was more illuminating than what he told me.

"I know what you want. You seek to find yourself by becoming part of a spiritual assembly. " He looked at me closely as if to take me into his confidence. "You know, Kannan, years ago our Shivananda formed an institution up here that he called the Bharata Sadhu Samaja (Society of Sadhus in India). At its high point it boasted 7000 members. But real sadhus refused to join. Perhaps they thought Shivananda was trying to form a political union. No, he just wanted cooperation between genuine sadhus to weed out the criminal element. Did you know that many criminals come up here and take the dress of sadhus? So you see, you have to be very, very careful. Don't set your mind on 'joining' a group. It is very easy to fall in with the wrong people. "

"Yes," I replied, "and that is why I am coming to *you*--Swami Premananda. Never mind what others may or may not be doing, *you* are a sadhu, so there's no doubt *you* can help me. "

Premananda nodded his head from side to side, his eyes twinkling. "Fair enough. I may be a sadhu, but you are still very young. You should see more yogis and visit other groups. Have you been to Badrinatha?"

"No. "

"Ah, then just walk up there! By the time you get back, you'll be a sadhu even if you don't want to be one. That is how I became a sadhu. "

"But Swamiji, I think I need guidance. In the past I had some very strange experiences with tantra and such things. For a couple of years now I often find my brain awash in powerful thought waves that come from. . . well, I don't know where they come from. Sometimes I fear I'm losing my mind. "

"Yes, yes, that's what it's all about!" he asserted. "Meditation means you have to face such psychic disturbances, tolerate them, and at last when you reach a point where the disturbances don't bother you, then you stay on that point. That is when you've found your path. "

"But Swamiji, you have this organization. What is it for if not to help a person like me? I've read all of Shivananda's books. He says that everything is here--

organization, food, a place to stay, classes, association. He says we don't have to wander around and eat dry leaves. "

"Yes, well, it *was* like that once," said Premananda a little philosophically. "But now it's become too institutionalized. If it comes to be known that I talked with you for 45 minutes, I may be reprimanded for not doing my regular work. Previously Shivananda used to spend hours and hours preaching to the young sadhus, but now we are given schedules we have to follow. I have a time sheet to keep. And what's more, even if you do stay here, there's no future for you. All the positions are taken up, and new people are not wanted. You seem to be a sincere boy--why don't you just walk: go to Deva Prayaga, Vashishta Gufa, Rudra Prayaga, so many holy places are nearby in these glorious mountains. Spend the next one fourth of your life on pilgrimage. Don't stay anywhere long. When you're gone through that, you'll be a mature fruit. "

Premananda was the ashram commander, so from him I got an extension on my stay--three days more. On the fifth day, as I was on my way to the dining hall, Swami Bhuvananda informed me that Swami Krishnananda, the General Secretary, had called for me. En route to Swami Krishnananda's office I met a one-eyed Gujarati vanaprastha with a scraggly beard and matted locks. He used to talk to me before meals, if only to remind me that so many young men ran away from home every year and headed to the Himalayas. Almost none stayed, as they could not find what they were looking for. Old One-Eye was a sort of "no-hope" type, but I found his ironical observations rather amusing, in spite of myself.

Giving me a knowing look, Old One-Eye fell in beside me. "Now your time here is over. He'll tell you you have to leave the ashram. That's why he's called you. Twenty years ago he did the same to me. But as you see, you find me every day at the dining hall during meals. That is only because Shivananda gave written instructions that until I die I can eat here. "

"What should I do?"

"Just look on other side of Mother Ganga. " His arm swept the riverscape that was crowded with the towers of temples and ashrams. "So many many societies for yoga and meditation. You came to this particular one because you're from Tamil Nadu and have heard about Shivananda, himself a Tamil. But the same misguidance you get here you can get in all those other places. "

As we arrived at the entrance to the office he said wryly, "I'll leave you here," and turned back toward the dining hall. I entered and offered full dandavats to Swami Krishnananda who sat on a mat on the floor behind a low table. As I stood up I pressed my palms together in pranams and intoned "Hari Om. "

He glared at me without answering. I found not a trace of sympathy in his face. I imagined him with his neck in a military collar and his shoulders pinned with brass stars.

After several seconds of cold silence he said, "What is it--first three days, then six, and still more time after that? Do you think this place is a a dharamshalla? This is an ashrama meant for serious people who practice sadhana. "

"Swamiji, I am ready to do any sadhana you give me. I've read all of Shivananda's books. I am attracted to this way of life. I've come here only for that--for spiritual life. I used to work in TVS. I had a good position, but I gave it up for finding God. Please take me. I'll do anything. I can do office work. Any service. "

"I see. You were with TVS?"

I saw some hope in his seeming change of demeanor at the mention of my former place of work, a company founded by a South Indian brahmin that was respected all over India. "Yes, Swami Maharaja. I worked in the accounting department. "

His next words seem to pounce upon me from out of his mouth. "So why don't you go back there?"

"Oh, no. I am not going back to that life. I couldn't bear it. "

"You think this is a place for people who give up their jobs?"

"But in his books Shivananda invites us to do that: to come here to holy Rishikesh, study the Vedas, practice yoga. That is why I am here. I am young, ready to work. Just take me and make what you want out of me. "

Krishnananda held up a hand like a policeman halting a car on the road. "These past five days I've been watching you. It is my responsibility to judge who is fit for ashrama life and who isn't. You just talk, talk, talk all day and are clearly averse to work. Do something useful with your life. Go back to TVS! And know this: no matter what you do, from this afternoon onward you'll get nothing more to eat at this ashrama. Be sensible. Leave here. Now. "

At that moment a rich family arrived at his door. In an instant Krishnananda's face changed from a frown to a smile. As he welcomed them he said gently, "This holy place is a shelter. " He exchanged warm talks with them for a while; at the end the father of the family wrote out a check. Accepting it graciously, the swami lifted his cloth to reveal his feet, which they thankfully touched.

As the family left, I followed them out, not bothering to speak another word to Krishnananda. I sought several persons to say goodbye to, including the one-eyed man. I found him talking to an old man with a swollen leg. I sat down inbetween them. Old One-Eye asked me, "So what did the Kannada say? He won't take Tamils, I know. "

"He didn't say anything about Tamil or Kannada, but he wants me to leave. "

"That is because he sees you are intelligent. If you join here, maybe in five-six years you'll be sitting in his place. He won't let people move up. That's why I left the railway. They wouldn't let me move up. Here it's the same thing. Just go to the Paramartha Niketan ashrama, or Gita Bhavan, or there are so many others. What do you want, anyway? You want to stay up here the rest of your life and not work hard, isn't it?" He darted a look at the old man and they both laughed. I smiled, feeling slightly foolish. But I spoke bravely what I thought my mission in life was.

"No, it's not a question of avoiding work, it's a question of what work. I want spiritual work. "

"Work and spiritual? There is no such thing. Spiritual means you tell others what to do. Go around, see all those ashrams, and tell me if it is not so. "

I knew his cynicism was as much a cover for his own failings as it was a jab at the failings of others. But I laughed anyway. Laughing helped me slough off the words Krishnananda told me. Had I thought over what he said, I would have had to confront the memory of my deceased father, who one fine day, when I was very young, abandoned the family with the intention of joining the Divine Life Mission and becoming a swami. Shivananda himself turned him away, classing my father as "unfit. " After that, for a while he even took to living in a cave. In this way a few months passed before he suddenly returned home. Near the end of his life, bedridden with illness, my father kept a sign on the wall above his head: "Unfit. "

Was I here in Rishikesh only to make the same mistake he did? I didn't want to think about it. Without admitting it to myself, I was glad Old One-Eye was running down Swami Krishnananda. It gave me an "out. " Laughing at the swami behind his back spared me from having to look deeper into my heart than I wanted to see.

In any case, this is how it developed that I came to Paramartha Niketana on the other side of the Ganges. There were sheds along the riverbank for sadhus to sleep in; I started using one. If you've got no luggage--and I had none--it wasn't bad. Mosquitos and many other bugs were your bedmates, but that is part of the life.

I took bath in Ganga daily and chanted Vishnu Sahashra Nama afterward. I studied the eleventh chapter of Bhagavad Gita. . . which meant I would think this river is Krishna, the mountains are Krishna. Such were my speculations on how everything is Brahman. In the library of Paramartha Niketana I read many books on advaita philosophy. Daily several lectures were held in the ashrama, and I attended them all.

When I wasn't sleeping, bathing, eating, studying, listening to lectures and trying to meditate, I walked. I walked all around Rishikesh and gradually became known to the residents as "the walking Madrasiwalla. "

From my exploration of the town and all its ashramas, I concluded I would like best to stay at Gita Bhavan. A well-known yogi who came from a cave in Mount Abu was visiting there at the time. He taught me tratak, a meditation upon fire, moon and the sun.

Once, as he was explaining kundalini yoga to me, he had me sit in lotus asana. He then said, "Hold your breath" as he touched my navel with his ring finger. Then he advised me to exhale slowly and meditate. I was to keep meditating and breathing in and out very slowly for 15 minutes. I did so, and just as a quarter of an hour passed I fell instantly into unconsciousness.

When I came to my senses he was not in the room. I discovered I had been "out" for two hours. Feeling strangely purified, I walked out of the room and found the yogi giving a lecture. His method was to explain everything in the light of yoga. He ridiculed those who say yoga is not for this age. All holy men, he claimed, no matter

what their path was, were advanced in Kundalini. He said Shivananda's shakti went up to "artha," therefore he did welfare work. Somebody else's went up to his svadhishthan-chakra, that's why he wrote books. And so on.

I considered asking if he would accept me as his disciple, but before I worked up the courage this yogi returned to Mount Abu. And so I moved out of the Gita Bhavan and gradually passed through 24 ashramas. In each I lived a few days. Once during this time I met Swami Krishnananda as he walked through the streets of Rishikesh with two other sannyasis. Seeing me, he marveled, "Are you still here?" I nodded and told him I'd been moving from ashrama to ashrama. A shadow of annoyance crossed his face. "You're wasting your life up here," he snorted. "You should have done what I told you and gone back to TVS. " As he stalked off with his two companions he urged me, "Do something useful!" I offered pranams and murmured "Hari Om. "

A few days later Vishvaguru Munishanandaji Maharaja arrived from Gujarat. He was a bigger name than the yogi from Mount Abu. Large crowds gathered to hear him speak, including the leading sadhus of other ashrams--except for the Shivananda ashrama. Munishananda was like a pope of yoga and advaita philosophy in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Punjab. In these parts of India he had achieved a level of "automatic importance" like that of the Kanchi Shankaracharya, whom I'd met in Kerala.

Munishananda taught dhyana yoga and standard Mayavadi philosophy. There was no doubt he was blessed with a natural aptitude for the physical exertions of yoga. He had such control over his abdominal muscles that he could roll his stomach about, a feat he often showed off during his lectures.

I got an audience with him at which I requested to be admitted to his Rishikesh ashram as a student. "What are you practicing?" he asked me.

I mentioned two routines I'd learned from the Mount Abu yogi, which were yoni mudra and tratak. He chuckled. "That's no practice. Do you meditate?"

"Yes. "

"On what?"

"Well, when I stay next to the Ganges, I meditate upon her--the river's cycle, how she comes from ocean and returns to the ocean. . . "

He gave me a sharp look. "Ganga-devi doesn't come from the ocean. She comes from Vishnu's feet!"

I apologized and explained that I wasn't experienced. "With your permission, I ought to stay here in your ashrama and learn from you. "

"You've seen my demonstration of yoga techniques?"

"Yes, but I don't think I could ever go far in that direction. I heard you say in your lecture that these things only concern the body. My interest is to master things of the spirit. "

"Very good. That you should do. It means dhyana, meditation, and I do teach that. But you have to be fixed up to learn it. I observe restlessness in you. That will never do. But listen--I'm leaving here and will return in two months. If you are still in Rishikesh when I get back, I'll teach you. In the meantime you should attend our world peace prayer at the ashrama two times a day. "

I had seen that. The ashramites gathered at these sessions to shout "Vishva ki! Kalyana Ho!" over and over.

"Prayer cleanses the heart," Munishananda continued. "Do that daily and go on with your pranayam, your yoni mudra and tratak. " He stayed three days more, during which time I attended the private meditation sessions he held for his four disciples. We sat in padmasana with closed eyes. After a while I'd peep to see what was going on around me. I saw that his disciples were also peeping. But Munishananda seemed fully absorbed in his practice. He was an extraordinary man, no doubt. He spoke four languages and quoted Sanskrit extensively in his lectures. None of this he'd learned in an academic institution. His self-education was another proof that this was not his first lifetime as a spiritual teacher.

"With the arrow of Om," he would say, "you should shoot the pranava (breath), and kill the mind. " On the last day of his stay I got another audience with him. I told him about the particular problems I had with my mind, the subtle influences that I often felt.

"Look," he said, frankly but not unkindly, "you won't obtain your spiritual life in Himalayas no matter what you do. "

"But. . . but why?"

"I want you to do one thing after I've gone. I want you to go to Neelkanth Mahadev. You'll see yourself what spiritual life in the Himalayas means. "

Neelkanth Mahadev is a holy place above Rishikesh. I vowed to Munishananda I would follow his instruction. And I did.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins in the Himalayas.

At 5:30 in the morning I began the upward trudge from the Rishikesh environs into the green Himalayan foothills. Some tree-cutters hailed me and asked where I was going. "Neelkanth Mahadev," I told them. They laughed. One of them shouted after me, "In another hour you'll be coming back!"

"No, I'm going up to pay my respects to Mahadeva Lord Shiva. "

Seeing that I was serious, the grin left his face. "This isn't pilgrimage season now," he said gravely. "Unless you are Lord Shiva's own man, you'd be better off to turn around and go back down the way you came. "

I kept walking through dense woods until the path was blocked by fallen trees. I took another route, one that led me over large boulders. My climb was not only very tiring, but gradually, as the whispery loneliness of the deep forest settled upon me, it became almost frightening. Doubt invaded my mind. Should I turn back like the woodcutter said? I finally got to a spot where it was possible to rest. I was so exhausted that I dropped into sleep and woke up that afternoon. I'd had nothing to eat. I *had* nothing to eat. There was nothing to do except to keep on walking.



The temple of Neelkanth Mahadev, where Lord Shiva drank the poison that turned his throat blue.

I finally entered a valley formed by three hills called Vishnukoot, Brahmakoot, and Manikoot. Here stood the Neelkanth Mahadeva shrine that housed a Shiva-linga. At this site Lord Shiva drank the halahala poison produced from the churning of the mil k ocean millions of years ago. Showing honor to the poison's terrible power, Mahadeva's throat (kantha) turned blue (nila). Hence the name of this holy place.

After paying obeisances to the linga, I stood outside the shrine and surveyed the steep rock-studded woodland. I sat down to meditate. Soon the valley was covered by darkness and the fierce chill of an autumn night at a thousand meters above sea level. Next to the temple were a few sheds for pilgrims; I retreated inside one where I fell into an uneasy sleep. I sensed the presence of many ghosts.

Daylight broke over the peaks above. A brahmin priest and a few other persons were worshipping in the shrine. A confluence of mountain streams flowed nearby, so I bathed in these swift waters so cold they seemed to cut into my flesh. After my ablutions, I got a bit of prasadam (sanctified foodstuffs) from the brahmin along with directions to the Manikoot peak. For nearly two kilometers I continued on my way, struggling up the slope until I arrived at Siddhon Ka Kot. The brahmin had told me that this was a place of meditation for great sages of old. He personally believed the yogis were still there, but invisible to modern people. I did feel an palpable spiritual aura about the area. But though there were caves enough, no yogis were to be seen in them.

Munishananda had told me to visit Neelkanth Mahadeva; some days after his departure from Rishikesh I happened to meet Swami Shankarananda of the Shivananda Ashram who confirmed Munishananda's advice and added that I should go even higher into the mountains beyond Neelkanth Mahadeva. Both swamis seemed certain I would attain something up here that would be of help in my spiritual quest. So far I hadn't found whatever they were hinting at, so I pushed ahead.

Trekking past a holy place called Sukhvasani Devi, I stayed my northward course. After a couple of hours I came to a huge boulder that blocked my path. A river of rubblestone had slid down from above with the boulder in its lead. It was labor to get those rocks behind me; I looked at the sky and estimated that it was just past noon.

I rounded a bend and came face to face with a little boy. A bit behind him a girl hardly in her teens tended a small herd of goats. Both youngsters looked bedraggled and dirty. They wore odd earrings that appeared to be made from leather. Before I could say a word the two started shouting and throwing stones at me.

A cave yawned in the rock face to my right. I scrambled inside to avoid being pelted by the stones. The cavern was huge and illuminated by a fire flickering in the center of the floor. Before the flames sat a bearded yogi, his wirey body perfectly immobile in the padmasana pose of meditation. His long gray hair was matted and coiled into a great bun atop his head, and his fingernails had grown out even longer than Bala Yogi's. His ancient craggy face, relumined in the orange glow, was bent towards the flames, eyes fixed and staring. Next to him lay a chinda (a yogi's forceps for picking up live coals) and a big pile of firewood.

The children did not dare enter the cave. I sat down near the yogi, but he gave me no notice. From the looks of him, he was deep in trance. I noticed a small metal trunk tucked into a shallow recess of the cave wall. After a few minutes of sitting in silence, my curiosity got the best of me. I went over to the trunk, squatted down and opened it. There were only letters inside, perhaps one hundred of them, still in their envelopes. The ones on top showed recent postmarks. As I sifted through the stack, I found some dating to before Indian independence. At the bottom were letters with postmarks from the 1880's. All were written from Meerut, the envelopes addressed to Swami Trilokeshwarananda Yogi in care of the Rishikesh post office. The oldest letters began 'Dear Sharmaji,' the later ones 'Respected Swami Maharaja.' I looked over at the yogi, still frozen in meditation. Was this Sharmaji? Had he been here for ninety years?

Closing the trunk, I got to my feet and walked around. The cave was as large as the interior of a cinema house. At the end it narrowed to a niche twice the height of a man. A shaft opened in the top of the niche, tunneling straight up into the mountain. How far up it extended I could not tell--it was pitch black.

After about half an hour a mountain woman entered the cave carrying a rough wooden bowl filled with goat's milk. She wore the same sort of earrings as the children. I tried speaking to her but she cut me off with a cold look and then ignored me completely. She stood a respectful distance from the yogi, her eyes on the ground, waiting in silence. A few moments passed as he gradually came out of his trance. When he acknowledged her with a shake of his head, she quickly stepped forward to put the bowl down near him. Just as quickly she moved back. He threw the milk into the fire and took some ash from the fireplace. As she retrieved the bowl, she extended her right hand; the yogi dropped the ash into her palm. She bowed and hurried out.

I offered my pranams and dropped to my knees before him. "Swamiji. . ." I began. He interrupted me gruffly. "What are you doing here?"

"I came for your darshan," I said meekly.

"What do you want from me?"

"I am just a sadhaka. I've come hoping to learn yoga from you. "

He winced in disgust. "You don't come here to learn. This is not a yoga school. Why don't you go down to Rishikesh and move into an ashram and learn some excercises?"

"I was there. I was sent here by Munishananda and Shankarananda. "

"Pah! How many times must I tell those fools down there not to send people up?"

"Please, can't I be your servant?"

"Serve how? I look at the fire. I don't need your help for that. "

I persisted, desperately trying not irritate him. I didn't doubt that if he cursed me, I'd be in a lot of trouble. "Swamiji, have mercy on me. I need some instruction in my spiritual life. I've come all the way up here from South India. Kindly help me. "

"What sadhana do you follow?"

"I chant Vishnu-sahasra-nama each day, and. . . . "

"This is no place for people who chant Vishnu's name," he said with finality.

"But whatever you are doing, you could show me. "

"What I am doing, you'll never be able to do. You people live on food. We live on sadhana. "

"But you could teach me to live on sadhana. "

The yogi shook his head and scowled. "I don't accept disciples. Now that you are here, you can stay one night. But don't bother me. I must do my meditation. " He stoked the fire and locked his eyes on it, tuning me out.

When he said 'you people live on food,' I realized how hungry I was. I ventured outside; the children had gone. I found a stream and filled my belly with its icy waters.

At about two in the afternoon, the mountain woman returned bringing water and flour in two bowls. While she waited, the yogi mixed the flour and water and made dough which he divided into two lumps. After flattening the lumps into patties between his palms, he threw them into the fire. He let them sizzle for two minutes before removing one blackened pattie with his chinda. He stood and walked to the back of the cave. There he broke the bread in half, throwing a piece up into the shaft as he called out, "Take it, Ma. " The piece of bread did not fall back.

He sat down at the fire again and tore the half-pattie still in his hand into two more pieces, giving me one. The other pattie just burned to a crisp in the fire. We ate; it tasted like a piece of coal with a gummy interior. After finishing, he rubbed his hands with ash and motioned for me to do the same. Then, as before, he gave the lady a little ash. She collected her bowls and departed. Without a word he stoked his fire and went back into trance.

It grew dark outside. I chanted the Thousand Names of Vishnu and went to sleep. I was awakened repeatedly by weird sounds, shouts and screams from outside; each time I sat up but saw nothing except the yogi gazing into the fire. When I rose the next morning, he was still in meditation. I went to the stream to wash myself, and as I returned I saw a young gentleman dressed in suitjacket, shirt, tie and pants hiking up toward the cave, a briefcase in his hand. He could have only come from Neelkanth Mahadev.

If I'd seen Shiva himself coming up the path, I wouldn't have been more astonished. Stock-still, I watched him until he drew near the cave. Then I called to him. He returned my greeting with a smile. I asked him what he was doing in the mountains.

Pausing for breath, he said, "I've just come from Meerut to see Swami Trilokeshwarananda. I need some ash for my mother. She's sick. And what are you doing here?"

We got to talking and went inside the gave. The yogi had not come out of his trance, so I tried to find out as much as I could from the young man about himself and 'Sharmaji. ' But he didn't know very much about the yogi except that he was a distant relative. It appeared that his family had told him little beyond ordering him to collect some ash. They'd sent him here once before for the same purpose.

As we whispered near the fire, the yogi's meditation broke. Before the young man could say anything the yogi rasped, "You again! I told you last time not to come up here anymore. "

After falling at the yogi's feet, the man knelt before him, head bowed and hands folded in prayer. "Maharaja, have mercy on us. Mother is sick. "

"Why do you people keep writing letters to me?" The yogi shot a glance over at me. "Did you read those letters?"

I was too embarrassed to reply.

"Of course you read those letters!" the yogi exclaimed. Suddenly as spry as a playful boy, he jumped up, cackled and shook his head in all directions until the bun on his head loosened. Great ropes of hair cascaded over his body, reaching to his knees. "Everybody who comes up here reads my letters," he whooped. "The fools have nothing else to do. " He turned to his visitor from Meerut, who had backed away in fright. "Now this time you take enough ash so that you don't have to come back. And tell your people to stop writing. "

The man nodded gratefully and opened his briefcase, removing a tin box. The yogi scooped handfuls of ash from the fireplace and unceremoniously dumped them into

the box, spilling the gray powder all over the young man's clothes. When it was full to overflowing the poor fellow closed his box, returned it to the briefcase and, after bowing down once more, beat a hasty retreat from the cave.

Animatedly, the yogi strode over to a corner of the cave and picked up a snakestick (a coiled wooden walking stick). He smiled at me as if I were an old friend. "Let's go for a walk," he said. "I haven't been outside for a long time, you know. "

Taken aback at his sudden change of mood, I asked--just to keep up the conversation--"How many days was it since you last went out?"

He flung his head back and laughed. "Days! I stopped counting days a long time ago. " We stepped out into the sunlight. He took a deep breath and gazed around contentedly.

"Swamiji," I said, "How do you get letters up here?"

He snorted. "Once or twice a year the postmaster sends a team up here from Rishikesh with letters for me. I am the only one who gets letters. " He pointed with his snakestick up the valley where a rocky path wound around the mountain and disappeared. "There are sixty caves beyond mine. I'm the new man here. The sadhus up above use me as their contact to the outside world. I'm the only one who eats--once every few days, a little burned dough. They live on air. Once a year they come down to my cave, sixty sadhu-babas together! That you'd like to see!"

"Yes, I would. I'd like to go up and see them right now," I said bravely. Then my stomach growled.

He laughed, the sunlight revealing deep creases in his leathery face. "Oh, hungry young fellow! If you want a comfortable life with meals twice a day, doing a little meditation, you better go back down to Rishikesh. "

I smiled ruefully. "Swamiji, my problem is just that I don't know what sadhana to follow. I'm chanting Vishnu-sahasra-nama, I do tratak, but I don't know what is best for me. "

"What is your goal? That's the first point to settle. "

"Well. . . like those swamis in Rishikesh speak about constantly, my goal is kevalanand, oneness with God. "

He chuckled and was silent. We walked to the stream where, with cupped hands, he splashed water all over his near-naked body. Then he stood up straight, arched his head back and gazed into the sun that had moved near the granite peaks to the west. After a minute he looked at me and spoke.

"You should go up to Badrinath. You'll learn about kevalanand there. " Again he chuckled, muttering something under his breath.

"But here I could learn also, from the sadhus. . . ." He cut me off with a sarcastic barb: "Even if you threw yourself into their meditation fires, they wouldn't warm up to you. "

"Well, you said you are the new man here. How long did it take for you to be accepted by them?"

"If I told you when I came here, you wouldn't believe me anyway. I've been here too long. Too many people know about me now. Those Meerut people started to send letters to me only after they found out about this place. Before that it was peaceful here. Hah. . . I can remember Rishikesh before it became fashionable. That Paramarthaniketana Swami turned it into a tourist attraction. Before then, Rishikesh was a genuine place. "

I remembered something I'd wanted to ask him. "Swamiji--tell me, what happened to the bread you threw up into the shaft?"

"Hah. Before I moved into this cave, there was another who did worship to Kali Ma in that style. So when I took over, I continued. "

"But what happened to the bread, why didn't it come back down?"

He looked at me as if I was a fool for asking. "She takes it, that's all. "

As we walked back to his cave, the mountain woman came by with her goats and two children. "Don't bring any milk today," the yogi called to her. I bade him goodbye, deciding to walk back down to Rishikesh. For a few days I remained at the Munishananda Ashram.

During that time I visited the ashram of one Prem Baba. It was a simple place, the centerpiece being a fire kunda with a trident mounted in the middle. Prem Baba was a wild-looking Shaivite from Gujarat. It seemed he had only foreign disciples. There was a thin Italian woman, an Australian couple, a Swiss boy and a few others, all hippie types. One fellow played an instrument called a Ganjeera while Prem Baba lit his sacrificial fire. After chanting mantras and making offerings to Shiva, Babaji fired up a chillum (a clay hashish pipe), sucked in the smoke and, as he breathed it out, chanted BUM BUM BOLONATH BUM BUM BOLE.

The chillum went around the circle of disciples. Each first touched it to his or her forehead and then took a puff. When it came to me I put it to my head but passed it on without smoking. The Italian lady next to me urged, "No, no, you should-a take--con amore. "

"I don't do this," I said.

"Ees okay, just-a take. "



So I tried it out and choked on the harsh smoke. Afterward I had to lay down. When I awoke, it was the next morning. I took a bath and chanted Vishnu-sahasra-nama twice. Later in the market area I met the Italian and another European woman as they came by on a rickshaw. The Italian, hardly more than a skeleton in t-shirt and jeans, jumped down from the rickshaw and cried, "Oh, you please-a come again, see the guru!"

I said no, sorry, I am on another path. I tried to tell them that drugs were not good. The Italian girl held out her skinny limbs. "See, I have-a nothing. Don't matter no more. I die, become-a Om. "

I remembered what Trilokeshwarananda Yogi had said about Rishikesh being no longer 'a genuine place. ' I decided to go to Haridwar.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins in the holy town of Deoprayag.

In late September 1974, I moved to Deoprayag, seventy-two kilometers north of Rishikesh. This ancient settlement of brahmins clings to the sides of a forked river valley through which the waters of the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda gush. Where the forks join, the rivers form what is from then on called 'the Ganges. ' In these misty Himalayan forest environs I found the quiet haven that was wanting in Rishikesh and Haridwar.

I moved into a cave at the confluence. During my first week there I made friends with the local high school principal, Professor Bhagwat Prasad Khotwala. A cultured, hospitable gentlemen committed to sadhu-seva (service to sadhus), Dr. Khotwala made sure I never went hungry while in Deoprayag. For the next five months this was my base.

I used to often take walks with Dr. Khotwala, his astrologer friend, Mr. Joshi, and other members of Deoprayag's intelligensia. On one walk a large black dog joined us. The gentlemen were friendly to the dog; Dr. Khotwala fed it some badam (fried peanuts). I remarked that all the other dogs I'd seen in Deoprayag were mangy and neglected. Dr. Khotwala smiled and said, "But this dog is a sadhu, and we are sadhu-sevakas. " Everyone laughed, so I took his remark to be a joke.

The next day Dr. Khotwala took me to see a yogi-baba who lived on the side of the Bhagirathi River. We floundered our way down a slipperey embankment through thick bush to the yogi's den, an earthen hollow obscured by overgrowth. He came out to greet us with a hearty smile. His loincloth and matted locks were what I expected to see, but instead of having the typical emaciated physique of an ascetic,

this yogi was as stout and muscular as an athlete. Khotwala touched his feet, I made pranams, and Khotwala introduced me as 'Madrasi Baba' (South Indian baba).

"So, Madrasi Baba," the yogi began, "why have you come up here? Why didn't you go to the Shivananda Ashram?"

"I was there. It is useless. " He laughed and bade me to enter his lair. Khotwala excused himself and left. There was barely enough room for both of us to squat inside, but I noted that it was at least shelter enough to keep out the rain. His possessions consisted of a bedroll, a cloth bag and a brass kamandalu (a sadhu's water pot).

"So, you found Shivananda's ashram useless," he continued in his friendly tone once we had settled inside. "Yes, it is useless. And you are also useless, at least as far as yoga is concerned. You don't have the body for yoga, I can see that immediately. Therefore these people tell you to attain everything through the mind. But with the mind you can neither enjoy this world nor become liberated from it. All you can do is think, either your own thoughts or another's thoughts. But thinking is nothing more than thinking.

"The Rishikesh swamis think, 'I am Brahman,' but when it gets cold, their health breaks and their disciples carry them to the hospital. They think they are liberated in this life, but if they can't even maintain their bodies properly in this life, how will they attain liberation, which is beyond the body? They can't do the lesser, so how will do the more? They sit and think, 'I am everywhere and everything is in me. ' What is in you is just three things--kapha, pittha and vayu (mucous, bile and air.)"

I asked him what his sadhana was. "I chant the name of Rama one hundred thousand times daily. I also used to do a full yoga program. I gave that up because I could not find a disciple who could learn it properly. I was taught yoga from childhood by my father, who was a great master of the Patanjala system. But yoga is useful only for a strong man who is determined to sever his link with the world of the senses. I've not found one person who is either strong enough or renounced enough to learn it. It's unpracticible. So now I just stick to Rama-nama. My father taught me this also. He said this is all that is really necessary. But either by yoga or by mantra, you have to get beyond the mind. This thinking, thinking, thinking is useless. "

"Swamiji, you are so stout and strong. How do you get your food?"

"Dogs are also eating," he said, amused.

"No, but do you go to town to get bhiksha, or does someone come here and bring you food?"

"Have a look there," he pointed in the direction of a nearby tree. Peering through the underbrush I could see the large black dog I'd noticed the day before, resting itself beneath the tree.

"You eat through the mouth of your own body," he continued. "I eat through the mouth of his body. "

I mentioned Bala Yogi and his cobra.

"Yes, he's doing the same thing. There is a method to take energy from the body of a pet animal. Then you don't have to waste your time worrying about your belly. There's nothing really remarkable about it. All Hindus make offerings to their departed forefathers by putting food out for the birds. Did you ever think about what this really means? The departed forefathers eat through the mouth of the birds, by mystical connection. Millions of Hindus believe it, but only a few yogis know the actual science behind it. It comes from the Pitri-loka (the planet of the forefathers). But people like you should stick to the sadaloka (human society) for your food. "

I told him about the yogi I'd met above Nilakanda Mahadeva, and his recommendation that I go to Badrinath to find bliss. "Yes, go up there. If you do that, you'll never want to go up there again. " He laughed.

"Swamiji, have you realized bliss?" I asked him.

"I sit here, chant Rama's name and look at the river. I am counting my days until I leave this world, that's all. Mother Ganges will take me to bliss. "



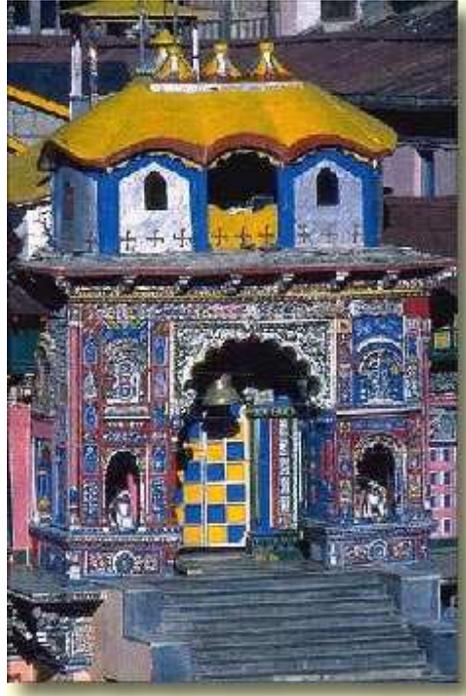
The town of Badrinath. The temple can be seen in the middle.

At the end of September, I hitched a ride with a military convoy up to Badrinath in the high Himalayas. There was almost no one there--the pilgrimage season had ended, the surrounding peaks were already white with snow, and it was bitterly cold. The sun peeked over the steaming crags at 11 o'clock and was out of sight by 2:30.

Badrinath--one of Hinduism's most ancient and sacred sites--marks the threshold of Badarikashrama, a mysterious region that lies

somewhere in the frozen wasteland beyond the perception of ordinary human beings. Seven hundred years ago the learned Vaishnava philosopher Madhva left his disciples in Badrinath and entered the forbidden region alone. After many days he returned with with a commentary on Bhagavad-gita that he had written in consultation with the great sage Vyasa, the compiler of the Vedic scriptures, who retired to Badarikashrama five thousand years ago. Madhva had also spoken to Nara and Narayan Rishi, two transcendental masters of yoga and renunciation. They instructed him to write a commentary on Srimad Bhagavatam. But except for a few pure souls like Madhva, Badarikashrama remains inaccessible. The pilgrims who come nowadays go only to the Badrinath temple to worship Nara-Narayana Rishi and Vyasa in their Vishnu murti forms.

The garbha-griha, or inner sanctum where the murtis are situated, was constructed under the direction of Adi Sankaracarya, who visited this place with his disciple Padmapada. Before their arrival there was no temple to be seen at all. Sankaracarya had a dream in which Lord Badrinarayana revealed He was under the waters of the Narada Kunda, a pond near the Alaknanda River. The great Advaitist acarya and his disciple retrieved the Deity, who had been worshiped in very olden times in a temple long disintegrated. A small temple was built that in time has been rebuilt and expanded by various kings. At the time of the first construction, Adi Sankaracarya established the Jyotirmatha, a seat of Mayavadi learning that is presided over by a sannyasi in disciplic succession who is titled the Jyotirmath Sankaracarya.



The arched entrance to the Badrinarayana temple.

Over a thousand years ago, Ramanujacarya came to Badrinath; five hundred years ago Lord Nityananda Prabhu visited also. The word badri is a local term for a berry that is a favorite of Goddess Laksmi. When Nara-Narayana Rishi came here to meditate, She appeared behind Him as a *badri* tree to give Him shade. The Badrinarayana murti sits in the yoga posture of padmasana, which makes Him a very unusual Deity, as most worshipable forms of Visnu are in a standing posture.

After visiting the temple I followed the road higher into the mountains, wondering where I would stay. I was hungry and chilled to the bones. Soon I saw a small stone house. The smoke billowing from its chimney and the smell of cooking drew me closer. An old brahmin lady answered my knock and sat me down on a straw mat inside. Within five minutes I was eating a hot South Indian-style meal of doshas (hotcakes) and coconut chutney.

Between bites I tried to tell her that I'd just arrived and needed a place to stay, but she simply dropped another dosha on my plate and said, "Eat. This is what you need now. Don't tell me about your meditation and spiritual searching and all of that. What's most important to you is on your plate. Don't let it get cold. "

After feeding me, she ate. Then she cleaned up, put coals in the stove to heat the house and wrapped me in quilted blankets. At last she sat down and said, "Now tell me what you're doing up here. "

"Well, immediately I am looking for a place to stay. And in general I am looking for a guru to teach me sadhana. "

"Where are you from?"

"From Tamil Nadu," I told her.

We'd been speaking in Hindi, but when she heard this she laughed and switched to Tamil--clearly her native tongue. "Ada pavi! You useless fellow! All this way you've come, just to waste your time. What fool told you there are gurus up here?"

"But mother, why are you up here?"

"Not for sadhana, that's for sure. I came here twenty-six years ago to get away from my family in Madras. I sold my property, came here with the money and bought this house for next to nothing. The rest of the money is in the bank, and that's what I'm living from until the end of my days.

"Now I've told you the truth about myself, which is more than you'll hear from these sadhus up here. They have also come for reasons other than sadhana. There's a naked baba up the road who came with a tourist bus from Gujarat. He was robbed by a sadhu and lost everything, including his clothes. The military people took pity on him and arranged an electrical extension for him from their outpost. He gets cashews from them too. Now he sits naked in a hut. People think, 'Such a yogi, naked in the Himalayas.' They don't see he has an electric heater behind him, and next to that, a full tin of cashews. "

"But mother, the Shankaracharya of Jyotirmath is here. You can't tell me he's not here for sadhana. "

"Fine," she said, "but if they make me Shankaracharya, I could do sadhana just as well as he. You just sit in the seat and automatically you're the guru of a few thousand people. And they come and fall at your feet. I could also sit in that seat and bless people. Why not? The Shankaracharya says we're all one, so I am the same as him. But I am too busy doing housework. "

"Ma, all I want is to learn some special tapas and to get higher knowledge of God. I want to learn from the sadhus, the real sadhus who know how to live by sadhana. "

"Look, boy, you're shivering," she hooted. "With two blankets you're cold. What special tapas are you going to do? The only sadhus you'll find up here live by the hot springs, not by sadhana. If that heat wasn't there, do you think they'd stay? From now on the climate gets so bad that you can't live longer than one hour outside unless you're fully covered. I am sixty years old and I've been here almost half my life. I haven't seen anyone like that whom you dream about. "

Seeing no further reason to stay, the next day I hopped a military truck back to Deoprayag. I gave lectures at Dr. Khotwala's school and got a following of young people. Though I basked in their acclaim, I felt like a fake. In February 1975 I got an invitation to give a lecture at a girl's school in Rourkee. I used this as a chance to leave the Himalayas.

From Rourkee I went to Kurukshetra. Some sadhu had told me I'd find what I was looking for there. But by this time I was losing all hope. My high-flown spiritual ambitions had wilted into self-serving cynicism.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins at Kuruksetra, where Lord Krsna spoke the Bhagavad-gita to Arjuna 5000 years ago.

I met a professor in his thirties who taught at the University of Kurukshetra. He was from Kerala and warmed up to me immediately when I conversed in Malayalam. In an educated and philosophical manner, I spoke to him about my life and travels. He was impressed, not having met such an engaging sadhu before, and eagerly invited me to give a lecture the next day on yoga to a class of his at the university. I chuckled, "Yoga? Yoga means sleep--to realize God through sleep, and that God is also asleep." That only increased his eagerness: "Then teach us about it!"

"If that's what you want, Professorji, that's what you'll get."

There were about thirty students in the classroom. "I hear you're interested in yoga," I began. "I'm not going to explain theory. I shall simply request you all to participate in a demonstration and experience what yoga is yourself." I told everyone to lie down on the floor. The professor and his students moved their chairs to the rear of the classroom, clearing an open area where they obediently stretched out on their backs.

"Bring your minds to the tips of your fingernails and toenails," I said in a mellifluous voice. "Slowly move your minds from there up to your wrists and ankles...now to the knees and elbows, ever inward to the torso. As your mind moves inward, let it absorb the stress of each of your limbs, leaving them numb. Inward, bring your mind ever inward, until it converges in your stomach. You are now conscious only of your stomach. All your stress is there. The rest of you is floating in a state of total relaxation and peace. Now concentrate your mind on the navel. Now lift the mind up out of the navel. You are floating upwards away from your body. Rise up, rise up, now look down. See your body and the other bodies around it--know that you are different from the body."

I chanted verses from the Yoga Sutra over and over to a slow, dreamy melody. Everyone fell asleep, and a few began to snore. Quietly I walked out.

Later that day I visited the professor at his office and collected a donation for my 'lecture.' "It was wonderful," he gushed as he handed me the money. "Swamiji, you are so powerful. You can be whatever you want, another Vivekananda!" I tied the money in my cloth, blessed him with the abhaya-mudra, and left.

I went to the Jyoti Sar, the sacred pool marking the place where Shri Krishna spoke the Bhagavad-gita to Arjuna. I sat on the stone steps leading down to the dark waters and gazed at my gently rippling reflection.

"Krishna," I prayed aloud, "what do you want from me? Either make me a devotee or a demon. I never willfully meant to go wrong. In Salem I was a victim of

uncontrolled senses. I was weak. But I am not a bad person. I just don't know what to do. Please give me a sign. What course of action should I take?"

I chanted the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad-gita, and the Thousand Names of Vishnu, and sang the songs I knew in praise of Krishna. Then I circumambulated the Jyoti Sar. Almost in a trance, I gazed upon the scattered beads of reflected sunlight that silently danced upon the pool's blue black surface. Each bead was a radiant world that twinkled in and out of existence upon the surface of eternity, and in each world I saw myself, searching. But searching for what? After Badrinath I was convinced that the search for 'myself as God' was a waste of time. So what meaning did my life as a sadhu have now? The professor said I could be whatever I wanted to be. In my heart I knew that I didn't want to be a cheater. Yet most people wanted sadhus to cheat them by posing as God. I knew all the cheating skills--but my heart wasn't in it. There was as little sense in this world of cheaters and cheated as in the shimmering water- blinks of Jyoti Sar.

With a sigh, I turned and moved on. A few steps from the Jyoti Sar was a newsstand tended by an unshaven, oafish-looking man dressed as a sannyasi. As I walked past, he offered me a magazine called Voice of the Land. I leafed through it and found an article that proclaimed, 'No one needs to make pilgrimages, no one needs to seek God.' With a forefinger laid next to these words, I asked the sannyasi, "Then what is a seeker of truth to do, if not this?"

His vapid grin revealed a mouthful of gapped, pan-stained rotten teeth. "What is meant by that is, you are God," he croaked. "Why should you seek Him anywhere? You already are what you seek."

I couldn't hide my irritation. "Almost nine months ago I left a good job in South India to find God because I was miserable. I took up the life of a wandering sadhu. I spoke to many gurus and godmen. Almost all of them told me the same thing you just said-- I am what I seek, I am God. But I am still miserable." As I spoke, the pent-up frustration spilled out of my mouth all over the orange-robed blockhead. "If I am God, then God is miserable. Is this all there is to know then? You're saying I should just be satisfied with that?" I slapped the magazine atop the pile from whence it came. "And this is your advice to everyone who comes here from far away to pay homage to Krishna? 'Oh, why have you come here? Go back--you are God.'"

Startled, he squinted at me with cheek muscles aquiver, then blurted, "But do you know who spoke these words you just read? That was Vivekananda!"

"Vivekananda or your grandfather, he's a humbug. And you peddle this trash even where the Bhagavad-gita was spoken. If you had more sense, you'd be a half-wit."

"Look, why are you criticizing me?" he whined. "If you don't like it, just walk away."

Silencing him with more insults, I continued to vent my rage at what he represented--my own failed attempt to become God. A small crowd gathered around, staring at the scene uncomprehendingly. Before stalking off, I turned to them and said, "He told me I am God, so I gave him my mercy."

From Kurukshetra I left in the direction of Kalka; my plan was to go on to Simla and return to the Himalayas. Although I saw little chance in my ever finding satisfaction in this life I was leading, I didn't know what else to do.

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I had set out from Kalka on the road to Simla when I saw a block-shaped whitewashed hut flying a triangular maroon flag from a high mast near a railway crossing just past the Kalka outskirts. The flag announced the hut to be an ashram. Perhaps this was the omen I had prayed for. Curiosity impelled me to leave the road and follow the railway tracks for three hundred or so meters until I stood in front of the ashram door.

Within the hut a sadhu baba sat on the ground before a homakunda, a meter-square pit in which a sacrificial fire (homa) blazed. The baba had matted locks and a long beard and was dressed in wine-red robes. Around his neck hung strands of large rough rudraksha beads, tangled pavitras (red and yellow garlands of silken rope), and a chain of inch-square paper-thin copper plates, each of which bore an engraved yantra design. Chanting mantras to Devi, he ladled ghee from a brass pot into the flames. An altar was built against the wall opposite the sadhu. Upon it stood a small black murti of goddess Kali, with three eyes and a blood-red tongue hanging down to her chest.

I sat down in the doorway and watched the proceedings. Finishing the fire offering, he nodded in my direction and asked, "Do you know any prayers?" I chanted about fifty verses of Lalita-sahasra-nama, a prayer comprised of one thousand names of Devi. I had learned these prayers in Kerala while studying under my tantric master. Then I switched to verses in praise of Durga composed by Adi Shankara, which I sang to a nice tune.

When I finished, the babaji showed his pleasure by blessing me. He then asked, "What is your sadhana?" I gestured to the railway tracks and joked, "Until now, I've had no signal. The signalman hasn't come to me yet. I'm waiting on the outer track for his sign to begin rolling."

He chuckled and then was suddenly grave; for a long moment he gazed at me in silence, his eyes glinting in the firelight. At last he spoke. "I am the signal man. Stay with me."

"Well, I'm just on my way to Simla."

"What will you obtain in that place? You'll find only Christians and the Theosophical Society there. It is no place for shaktas."

"I'm not really a shakta," I told him. "I've gone through the training, but I didn't stick with it. I've learned tantra, pranayama, yoga and other things as well, but I haven't found what I'm looking for."

"That's because no one put you on the proper track. Just stay here. Look around--there's nobody here to cause distraction. My ashram is outside the town, and I get no visitors. There's no disturbances except for the occasional train. You can do your yoga, chant your mantras, whatever you like. I'll just add certain things."

He gazed intently at the Kali murti for a few moments. Then with a sigh he looked back at me and said softly, "She will take you."

I was heartened. Since leaving South India I'd not met a sadhu who took personal interest in me. I wondered if my finding him was by divine design. The calm and assured way he said that Kali would accept me made me curious to find out just how profound his knowledge of both her and I was. Perhaps, just perhaps, he was the guru I'd been praying in my heart to find.

"I'm very inclined to stay with you," I said to him, "but I would like to get a sign from Ma for myself."

"Then go visit the Durga temple in Kalka," he replied. "See the deity and ask for her blessings. Then return here and tell me what your decision is." I offered pranams and walked back into Kalka.

Sketches of a Devotee's Pre-Krsna Conscious Life in India

Back in the late 1980's I tape-recorded a series of interesting stories told me by an Indian devotee, whom I shall not name to protect his privacy. These stories relate his life as a young man from a South Indian smarta brahmin family, and trace how he gradually turned away from material life to Krsna consciousness. What you will read below begins at a Durga temple in the city of Kalka.

While at the temple I asked the pujari if I could do prashna, a way of putting questions to the murti. He handed me a red and yellow flower. I touched them, and gave them back. He put them on the deity and told me to stand before the altar and think of my question. If the red flower fell, the answer was no. I gazed at Durga's form with my palms pressed together, fingertips touching my chin. 'Should I stay with the shakta baba?' After two or three minutes, the red flower dropped.

I was disappointed. But as I left the temple, I cheered myself up. 'I can check the worth of the prashna by staying with the baba,' I thought. 'Let's see if there's any truth in it. Besides, I don't have a reason to go anywhere else. It's not that the prashna gave me an alternative course of action.' I returned to the ashram and told Babaji I would remain with him.

The first three days of my stay were uneventful. In the morning I chanted Vishnu-sahasra-nama and did my trotak meditation and pranayama. I sang prayers when he did his homas to Kali, and also did simple chores like fetching firewood. Although

Babaji gave me no particular instructions as I expected a guru should, I could see that he had a clear plan in mind for me. I waited to see what would unfold.

Thrice daily he left the ashram with a plate of puja articles-- incense, flowers and a bowl of sindhur--and returned after about half an hour. On the morning of the second day he took me with him. We walked along the tracks in the direction of Kalka, crossed the Simla road and continued for a few minutes until we came to a sand and rock hill a short hike from the rail bed. Babaji led me up a trail to the top. There he showed me a sindhur-covered rock which he said was a drop of Devi's blood. In the Puranas it is said that the goddess, in her incarnation as Sati, gave up her life when her father Daksha insulted her husband Shiva. Maddened with grief, Shiva danced across the sky with her dead body which disintegrated and fell in pieces upon the earth. There are one hundred and eight important Devi temples (devi-pitham) in India that are said to be built on sites where a part of Sati's body landed. "Most people do not know that this site is also a pitha," Babaji confided to me. "The goddess has revealed this place to me alone. It is full of power. " He said this with such conviction that I believed him at once and offered my respects to the blood-red stone. He did a short puja to it and we returned.

The fourth day was amavasya (the dark moon day). That morning, as he left to worship at the pitha, Babaji told me he would go into town from the hill to get ingredients for a special festival we were to observe this evening. He also said I should not eat anything today. While he was gone, I cleaned the ashram. He returned after several hours, his cloth shoulderbag full.

After bathing, Babaji did a homa, this one a little different from the others I'd seen him do. From a metal trunk he took a khadga (a large knife, a type of weapon held by Kali) and placed it in the kunda before lighting the fire. At the completion of the fire sacrifice, he prepared eighteen kinds of offerings from various mixtures of the raw ingredients he'd brought--puffed rice, fruit, sugar candy, flat rice, and so on.

He told me we'd be doing an all-night ceremony at the pitha at which I would have to chant from dusk to dawn. I was excited. Sure that he would judge my worth as a disciple by what he saw tonight, I resolved to play my role in the ceremony with unflagging enthusiasm. A hour before sunset he set out a plate with eighteen bowls, filling each with a preparation. He gave me the plate and told me to bring it up to the pitha. "I'll come shortly," he said. "I must prepare the khadga. We'll be doing a special worship to this at the pitha also. "

Carrying the plate in my hands, I walked down the tracks and up the hill. There was a light drizzle in the air. I hoped it would not get worse and spoil Babaji's ceremony. After setting the plate down near the sacred stone, I felt the need to urinate. Considering the hill a sanctified spot, I reversed my steps and descended to the rail bed to relieve myself there. A freight train had stopped on the tracks next to the hill. I had just finished urinating when a man with a lantern came walking alongside the train. It was a signalman.

"Kon hai thum?" (Who are you?) he asked.

"I am with that trackside babaji," I answered smilingly. "Tonight is amavasya, so we're having a special puja up on the hill. I need to wash my hands after passing urine--do you have water?"

Astonished, he stared hard at me. All at once he barked, "Escape-- right now! Quickly--go!"

Not understanding what he meant, I repeated my question about water. "Never mind water," he yelled, seizing me by the shoulder. "That man is going to kill you tonight if you don't leave here. Go down the track to the Kalka station. You'll find water there. Report to the stationmaster. " He gave me a push.

Propelled by the urgency of his voice, I trotted the whole way to the station. Who was the killer the signalman warned me about? I wondered if a madman was on the loose. At last, panting and weary, I clambered from the rail bed to the station platform. I saw a spigot and washed my hands and face. After a long refreshing drink, I looked for the stationmaster.

In an office I found a man in a blue uniform. "Excuse me," I said to him, "but I've come here sent by the signalman down the track who said someone wants to kill me. "

"What are you talking about?" he asked, perplexed.

"You see, I'm staying with the babaji down the track. . . "

No sooner than these words had escaped my lips, the man ran out and shouted for a khaki-uniformed guard with an Enfield rifle on his shoulder. "Stay here with him," he ordered the guard. "I'll get the police. Don't let him go anywhere, and don't let anyone enter this room. " 'Oh no,' I thought to myself as the stationmaster rushed out. 'What have I got myself into?'

After fifteen minutes the stationmaster returned with a police inspector and his uniformed driver. The inspector ordered me to identify myself and explain my connection to the baba. I did, but I insisted he tell me what was happening.

"Yes, I'm coming to that. We have reason to believe that man was going to kill you tonight. If you make a complaint against him, we'll take action. "

"You see," the stationmaster added, "for a long time our rail workers have noticed very peculiar things about that baba. He's had assistants like you before, all strangers to these parts, and they just seem to disappear one after the other. "

The police inspector continued, "We've questioned him several times, and he always says his men just suddenly leave to go elsewhere. But bloodstained clothes have been found on the tracks near that hill. He of course denies knowing anything, and we would need more evidence to take further steps against him. But we suspect he's made human sacrifices on that hilltop. There's a rumor going around that he's killed twelve or thirteen people in this way, and that he wants to perform one thousand such sacrifices to gain total control over the elements of nature. "

As I remembered the khadga, an eerie feeling crept over me. But I didn't want to get involved in the entanglement of a police investigation. Clearly it was time I moved on. 'I should have done what the prashna said,' I moaned inwardly.

"Look," I told the inspector. "I stayed with him for four days, and I have no reason to suspect he meant me any harm. But I can see that your concern must be well-taken. I'll not return to that baba. Tomorrow I'm leaving for Simla. "

The stationmaster said earnestly, "People are gossiping about that man. They criticize us--the rail service and the police--for not doing anything about him. If you would testify, we could be rid of this scandal. "

I refused. It was likely that the suspicions against the baba were the result of nothing more than vicious rumors. In any case, he'd done nothing to me. But I wondered what would have happened had I not met the signalman. The stationmaster, genuinely worried for my safety, gave me a room at his house that night. The next day he put me on a bus to Simla, gratis. From a person at the Theosophical Society, I heard the Dalai Lama was in Dharamshalla.

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Arriving at the Dalai Lama's headquarters, I saw some purple- robed monks chanting Om Mani Padme Hum while others played badminton. I asked a young unordained monk who spoke a little English if it would be possible for me to have an audience with His Holiness. The lad shook his head emphatically: "He is Buddha. You can't see him. " But he did take me to an old ordained monk who spoke Hindi.

The old man showed me around the monastery. I offered my pranams to a huge murti of the Buddha, three times life-size, with four arms hands bearing the symbols of Vishnu in each hand. He took me to a large hall displaying many other murtis of Buddha, Buddhist saints and goddesses, all of colossal proportions. The monk explained that these forms represented different levels of buddhatva, or Buddha-consciousness. He pointedly told me they were not worshiped as living personalities, as murtis are worshiped in Hindu temples. Yet everywhere I looked I saw the familiar accouterments of tantric puja.



A temple near the foothills outside of Dharamshala. This town has special religious significance to Buddhists and Jains.

Prayer-time came. The hall filled up with monks, and my guide told me I could stay and watch. The steady drone of Om Mani Padme Hum from a hundred tongues, the serene golden Buddhas wavering in the glow of many candles, the Tibetan symbolism and architecture all around, blended in my mind to form a numbing arabesque of color and sound.

After half an hour, the Dalai Lama entered to a welcome of ringing bells and flaming lamps. The chanting stopped and everyone left the hall except His Holiness and six

monks. What seemed to be a private ceremony then commenced. I had been leaning against a column in the rear of the hall, unnoticed by anyone, and gradually become drowsy. Suddenly I felt someone tugging my cloth. I opened my eyes to see a monk gesturing that I was to come before the Dalai Lama. As I stepped forward, I saw that His Holiness was now alone. I offered prostrations to him as I'd seen the others do.

He asked me what I was doing, and I said that I'd been looking for a chance to speak to him. I explained my spiritual search. He asked about my education and what languages I knew. Then he asked about my knowledge of Buddhism. I admitted I knew very little. He invited me to stay and study, and I gratefully consented. Several South Indian monks were then called and ordered to take care of me. I was given a room. The Dalai Lama seemed to be more personally concerned about freedom for Tibet, the third world war and current world events than giving practical spiritual direction. After twelve days of reading books and attending prayer sessions, I found myself listlessly gazing out of my window at the monks playing badminton. I wrote the Dalai Lama a thank-you note and left for Delhi.

There I put up in a Sikh Gurudvara, which offered clean accommodations and hot food for a cheap price. By now I'd grown weary of my aimless wandering and decided to find a job and lead a sinless life. A chance encounter with a man named Lakhan Pal at a Ganesh temple got me a job in his television retail company as a business advisor. I brought my TVS experience to bear and showed him how to manage his office much more efficiently. But when his unmarried teenage daughter began to make eyes at me, I quit after only one week, fearing that my passions would be inflamed again.

This was a new quandary. I'd only wanted to take up an honest and unassuming life in the city and maintain the clean habits I'd adopted as a sadhu. But even this seemed to be beyond my grasp. At least now I had a little money to live on for a while. Sleeping at the Gurudvara at night, I took to wandering in my sadhu dress through the streets of Delhi by day, still searching for what I hadn't found even in

the Himalayas. Every day I visited one or two religious institutions to hear what they had to say. And I remained dissatisfied wherever I went.

Before long this self-made swami met a party of disciples of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. In their association he began to chant Hare Krsna Hare Krsna Krsna Krsna Hare Hare/Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare. Even before meeting the devotees he had begun to see the grave faults of Mayavadi philosophy, and the profound logic of Vaisnava philosophy. So he did not have much trouble giving up his search to become God. He took up the sadhana of devotional service to Krsna and in 1976 was initiated in Vrndaban by Srila Prabhupada. Srila Prabhupada ki jaya! Sri Advaita Acarya ki Jaya! Sri-Sri Gaura Nitai ki Jaya!