

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ATMA-TATTVA PRABHU

Chapter one

COIMBATORE PASTIMES

Patter of Presentation:

Brahmin initiation, Family history stories ,Childhood, Guruvayur ,reading, Shakti Vel and face, Christianity drama, girls, jobs, a dream, Going Kerala,Ayappa,Ajnaam Nambudri,Kanchi Shankara ,The Self in the Mirror"Same girl small Kartikkeya temple (meaning) Wandering mind, philosophical confusion (Shakta Kartikkeya, Advaita, Sankhya), when I reach perfection, I'll know right philosophy Vaishnava not automatic "Multiple minds" warning from Shivananda man "Again a Mouse" Night puja ,Trouble in office,Visit to Aurobindo ashram, where it all came together: shakta, tantra, mayavada Mani Charulata,Again a mouse (explanation)

EARLY PASTIMES:

Brahmins in South: Iyengar (Sri Vaishnava) and Iyer (smarta). These are titles, not names. Mother's side of family stems from Sri Rangam (Iyengar). Mother's father moved to Kerala. S. Ventaka Subramaniam (SVS) was chief accountant in Salem office. T. Srinivasa Ragavan. First initial stands for father's name or name of home (mostly father's name). AT's name is P.R. Kannan Iyer. P stands of Parli Raghavan Kannan Iyer (or Ayer?). P.R. Kannan Iyer. Aiyar (correct spelling).

Iyengar (correct spelling). Variety Hall Road (210 Downing Street). 209 was photo shop. Small place, water pump in common courtyard of his place and backs of shops along road. Behind his house, open dirt "playground". Guruvayur temple, Shiva temple where vision of Shakti Vel happened. Went to a Catholic grammar school. Incident with Father Anthony.

Then brahmin initiation. Then DK during London Mission High School (Union High School later on) years.After school, first worked in a printing press at age 15 for two months, then to P.S. Leslie and Co. (dealing in coffee, cashews), where his two brothers were working, where I worked for 4 months.

Then he got TVS appointment. Learned under K.M. Venkatachalam. Got appointment through that Balasubramanian who became manager in Kerala branch. That's why he got called to Kerala. He arranged for the appointment while he was still in Coimbatore, but was transferred to Kerala before I got the opening. Mother's great grandparents were Iyengar (Sri Vaishnava) brahmins in Sri Rangam. They moved to Kerala because the king required Vaishnava brahmins. When the king was deposed, this family had to take up other employment. Mother was born and brought up in Cochin. Father's great grandparents, who were smartas, moved to Palghat to be minister to king. Kerala had three Hindu kingdoms: Trivandrum, Alleppey and Palghat. My grandfather was living in Kannambara, outside Palghat. He was right hand man to the king. He sent my father to study in Victoria College, in Palghat, a very prestigious institution. It was newly opened and was patronized by India's royalty. Grandfather was quite rich. Mother's brother was sent from Cochin to study in same college. They became friends. One thing they had in common was each had five sisters. My father was more prestigious, because his family was in service to the king, whereas my mother's family served the British. They lived on salary, but father's family shared the king's wealth. My father helped one boy from Kannambara to get into Victoria College; he paid his way. After my father returned from failed career in Bombay, this man gave him shelter. He had become a bank

manager in Coimbatore and gave my father a job. Story of Palghat king. King was young man. Grandfather was advisor. In the time of the king's father, notice had come from the British that he had to either maintain a Raj army encampment in his kingdom and pay a tribute to the Raj or turn over government of the kingdom to the Raj's full control. He didn't want to do either. One day on morning walk he put down his walking stick, took off his turban and, after mentioning that he didn't want to expose his people to the influence of the British, and that as king, either he's responsible for them or he has no reason to live, he entered a river as if to bathe but he drowned himself. My grandfather, the minister, was put in charge of the transference of power. Grandmother ferreted certain valuables of the king away for family's enjoyment, though that is scripturally forbidden (hence reaction). Well, real story of king is this the Brits had already incorporated his kingdom into the Raj. He was titular head and had a loyal faction of monarchists around him who were unhappy with British "gentle invasion." That's why he finally killed himself, being powerless to do anything. She had stuff taken by boat across the river from the palace to another village where it was stashed. Chembai is village, that's where ancestral home of his father's family is. Big old grand house. There were also properties of commoners who had borrowed money from the king against the family heirlooms. Some of these also went over at night, so that these people, coming to reclaim their family treasures when the old government went defunct, were left emptyhanded.

Grandfather: Subramanya Iyer, Father: Raghavan Iyer, Mother: Sharada. Grandfather lived only about five more years after death of king. But the family was doing good, of course, with all the stashed wealth. Grandmother took care of family affairs after that. She got all the daughters married to big officers in Dehli. But that took all the wealth in dowry. House and land was left. But then the Land Ceiling Act was passed, and whoever was farming that land became the owners. Father got married in Cochin. He took a job in the Imperial Bank through good offices of mother's family. But he didn't stick to this job. He went to work for an exporting company in Karachi. Went with wife and one child to what is now Pakistan. But he kept changing his employment went to Jodhpur, then Ajmere, then Jaipur. Changed job every three months. Every year a child was born. Everywhere he was valued, but he would not value any place. Sometimes he'd give whole week's salary away in charity to someone. Finally hit Bombay, got job at Evergreen Films. Around this time, Kannan was born. At time of partition, riots broke out in Bombay. Father's immediate superior, a Muslim, was stabbed on the premises, and father was accused of murder. When father was jailed, mother came to Cochin with all the children, but she was not very welcome. That very night she departed, with brood of children, two of whom had smallpox, one of those went blind. She went to Chembai, inlaws house. They gave shelter, but they harrassed, telling her the husband's misfortune was all her fault. Then father came back from Bombay, and that friend in Coimbatore gave him a salaried position in bank, whether or not he did any work. Family put up in a godown provided by that man for 2 rupees per month. Eldest brother took over support of family by working in hotels. Evening he went to school.

In North India, father twice tried to join the Shivananda Mission and take sannyasa. First time he went telling he was brahmachari, but Shivananda found out and sent him back. Second time he told I am disgusted with family, Shivananda sent him away. He went to Trichy and moved into a Jain cave near the Rock Fort, behind the Shiva temple. He lived off the remnants of the coconut offerings of the visitors to the temple. He used to sing in the cave. Some visiting relatives from Kerala heard him singing and recognized the voice, entered the cave and sent him back to mother. In Coimbatore, mother worked in houses as maid. This was because family was so big, and prices always were going up. Kannan was born in 1951. Just before his birth father was arrested for murder. Before Kannan was conceived, she went to Pandharpur and did vrata: "Give me one more son, I will give him to you as sadhu, and not have any more children." On mother's side, family also did not prosper. One son kept position in bank, all his sisters got married off to outside families. Family house was divided into three and two parts were sold off. When father was 51, he was

paralyzed on one side. After a month he was cured by Ayurvedic treatment. Father was very strict in his personal habits never went to movies (even though he worked for a film company), never smoked, drank, even chewed pan. Newborn Kannan played baby Krsna in a film, which was a hit but Pop didn't even go see that. In 1972, when Kannan came back from Kerala, father was laying in bed, from mostly mental exhaustion of a troublesome life. He'd put a sign above his bed: "Unfit". Kannan was eighth son (therefore name, Kannan). Oldest kid is sister, Jaya. Oldest brother Subramanya, traditionally named after father's father. Then girl who died. Then boy, who when a baby was in a cradle that tipped over because a cat jumped on the edge. After that the boy's heart never grew. He was very small and sickly and died just after father died. Then Venkataraman, another brother. Then another sister. Four brothers, three sisters. Mother enrolled me in school when I was four by lying about my age. Should be five. I was born in February, 1951. Said I was born in June 1950. When mother was 12, an upasaka of Kartikkeya came to her house for bhiksha. He told mother, you are a pious girl, pious from the previous life. But in this lifetime you'll have to suffer the reactions of leftover bad activities. He had her sit on the wooden doorstep just outside her house (for he said only if she sits on wood can she see) and then he told her to look in the sky. She saw a chariot, Vishnu, Laxshmi and Garuda. "Your life will be full of difficulties, but always keep your devotion." This sadhu again visited her when she was in Bombay, when she was with seven children, older sister was 10 months old. He was on the way to Varanasi. "When you are 32 you'll get a child." She said "I already have seven." "These are for you, but this one is for the world" (meaning he'd renounce the home and take the world as his family). She went to Pandharpur on Janmastami. Two years later I was born. When she arranged marriage, I knew the Deities of the girls family. When we met family, I just talked about these things with them, and mother lost hope that I would be married. My father predicted: if you don't get a spiritual master, you'll start your own religion, misguide thousands of people. So get guru. This he saw in my chart at 6. Overintelligent, vac-shakti, music, art, twice I will go mad, run away, when 20, you'll become useless for material life and run off. When 7 coming home why you came back? Ticket? Just go to train, get on. Kicked off, take next train. Be useful. Mother used to chant: Krishna Krishna Mukunda Janardana Krishna

Govinda Narayana Hari Achyutananda Govinda Madhava Saccidananda Damodara Hari As small boy I learned Andal's songs to Krishna and used to sing them.

Just before Christian time, a dosha grinder used to come and recite Mahabharata. He was expert. He knew by heart. Came every saturday to 210 Downing street. He was a sincere devotee of Krishna. One at a time, the family would retire, but I would stay. He would cry Draupadi part. I would try to argue, because I was hearing from Christians. I was thinking if he'd convince me, I would surrender totally to Krishna. But he wouldn't always have answer, who was soft hearted devotee and make him cry. Mother would slap me and send me to bed. He'd talk for 5 hours. Father chanted gayatri once a year. At 5 I used to visit central library smuggle into adult section read Kundali yoga. At six I was reading a book on hypnotism, big book. Some man came to me, who wrote that book. That man came to home with me father said, yes, soon he'll be mad.

6 9 lots of reading. Brahmin Initiation: in smarta families, father's duty to make son twice born. Uncle was insisting though father didn't care.

"He's getting older, it's already late, and maybe his faithlessness is due to not having gayatri." Got out of Christian thing a few months before, and then was to get nishied. Priest was invited to do ceremony, some relatives came, but my father was lying down on a cot on the veranda outside. He hadn't taken a bath or brushed his teeth he was just laying and looking into space. Everyone else was dressed up. Kumara bhojanam had been done. Supposed to be done when boy is five. Priest told, I will say some sentences, you say "Patam, patam, patam" "I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it." I

interrupted him what do these sentence mean? First means, I will perform my worship nicely, second means I will beg in seven houses and divide the food in three parts, giving one to an unknown person, one to an animal and one part to my guru." I won't say patam to this. You say God is present here, the sacred fire is here, and I should only speak truth. I am not going to beg in seven houses, because my mother is going to cook my breakfast. What is this impertinence? Just say patam and go eat in your house! Then what is the use of all this? Sanskrit. He got upset. He turned to relatives why this boy is making this trouble? I am a brahmin, forty years old, who is he to challenge me like this? They said, please, just do as he says. Look, he'd telling me to say in front of the fire, in front of all the gods you think are present, that I will beg in seven houses. I am not going to beg in seven houses, so I cannot say patam. Tell him to recite another mantra, not that one." I turned to him, tell me a mantra that says my mother will go into the kitchen and cook some idlis for my breakfast. Every laughed. The brahmin angrily stood up and stalked to the veranda, "What kind of son have you fathered? Now you want to give him another birth, but he is not fit. He is a nastika!" My father said, "So why don't you give him nastika initiation?" The priest was flabbergasted. "You you are a bigger nastika than he!" "Look, what's wrong with him? He simply told you he will not speak a lie. That's the quality of a brahmin. He doesn't need your thread, because he's already a brahmin." The priest stormed out and made a big scene among the relatives. "What kind of family tradition am I supposed to sanctify here? The father doesn't even want his son to have a thread! Then what are we doing here today? There's no brahminism in this household!" In the meantime my father took bath, put on a clean dhoti and came out. He sat down in the priest's seat and took over. He told me, I will only recited mantras that apply to you. Then he started, that priest interrupted, father shut his ass down. Then he gave me the thread. Hand thread this is supreme pure, Well I don't know if it is, You don't know if it isn't. Put it on. Then he gave gayatri. The finer brain tissues are developed by chanting this mantra. I have failed in many things, but I always chanted this gayatri. If you don't chant, then there's no point to wear it." He turned to my mother, give the priest his dakshina. And he told him, take your money and don't raise a fuss anymore. Now he's a brahmin." Then he went back to his cot. Went upstairs, took photo, then had feast. I chanted my gayatri for three days. Change the thread once a year, I had to do that.

I was sometimes wearing for show certain functions, eating at the house of brahmin. During DK time burning effigy of cheif minister, burning down post office, staged dramas against blind faith, against castism and brahminism, against aryan culture. I wrote songs and dialogues and plot for dramas, acted, directed, composed music for 3 years, 12 15. One street singer sang a song about the death of Gandhi, how his own Congress party wanted him dead. Police arrested him for this. After a while he was released. I was intrigued, talked. He said, Wise up, kid, all political parties are like that. No! EVR is a great man. He told me EVR's father was a brahmin who had an affair with a Nayikar (Telegu vaishya). Because his father did not give support to mother and son after that, now he hates brahmins. But while he has a paid priest worshipping five-faced Ganesh at his own colony, he's telling you to go out and break Ganesh idols in the villages." Cut sikhas of brahmins also. This colony is in Erode I went there with some friends, and say the panchamukha Ganesh temple myself. Talked with people there. Later he got married to a young girl, and the party split up, with a new organization, DMK, coming out of it. Anyway I got out of school and it all became irrelevant. Second job Pierce Leslie, first job Mani printing press. At second job time I had dream. When I was 12, I almost became a Christian. Used to sing in the church. They wanted to give me jnana snan "bath of knowledge" and initiate me as Johnson. i went to church the sunday before that. The priest, Father Anthony, who was later to become the archbishop of Madras, and was the brother of Swami Chinmayananda, was distributing the Eucharist host. I also kneeled in the line. But he didn't give. He asked, "Are you a Christian?" I said, "Yes, by faith." He smiled and went on to the next man. I remained there. He was packing up to leave. "Father." "Yes son." What's highway hypnosis? What about giving me the host? "I told you, you haven't had your jana

snana." But that makes me a christian, or faith? He just smiled. And I was fried. He took high school final at age 14. SSLC (Secondary School

Leaving Certificate). 476 points out of 500 possible. Could have gotten scholarship from government to become any big man. But father refused. "You can clean your tongue with that certificate. If possible, run away. Otherwise, get some honest work." Principal came to plead case, he was a Christian. Father asked him, how many sons you have? Two Then educate them, don't educate my son. Told mother, he only wants to make my son a Christian. But even he himself couldn't become a real Christian, so what will he do with Kannan?" Mother cried for 15 days. He called Gandhi a fool, and he got suspended from school for three days. Principal went to father to complain about this, "He called Gandhi a fool!" Father answered, "Oh, he did? Then he is intelligent." Dravida Kazhagam (Dravida League). E.V. Ramaswami Naicker (known as EVR or Periyar "great man"). Had a big meeting in Chidambaram Park in Coimbatore. I am about 13 years old. He was speaking using bad language. Draupadi was not chaste, and chastity is useless, challenging the women "How meany here are chaste?" None got up, because they were chaste. Then he attacked the brahmins. He challenged brahmins to come on the stage. So some young brahmins went up. I followed. He put questions, they couldn't answer, he said, "You're shameless to pose yourselves as spiritual leaders when you can't answer my questions!" He made a big joke of it. He was over 70. His favorite expression, which he punctuated everything with, was vengayyam! (onions!) Then he looked at me. "Are you a brahmin?" "Yes." "Aren't you ashamed?" "Yes." "Break the thread!" I broke it, and everyone clapped hands, and I was garlanded, and people took photos.

KERALA SALEM NOTES

He was in Kerala for 2 and a half to 3 years. When I came to Salem from Kerala, I had faith in God; I'd been through 6 emotional attachments to women and had gotten over them. I was looking forward to undisturbed progress in my material existence. I was demanded by the Salem office, I was so much appreciated by TVS managers. Idealism was very prominent. One month after Chetamangalam(?) event, eight months before renunciation. He used to come from Salem every month to Coimbatore. Mother made arrangements to get him married. After vamabaga, Kartikkeya. Then Siddha baba. Then Shakta. Then Shivananda. Then prostitution and total frustration. Ahamgrahopasana worship of Kartikkeya. Shanmukha (six faced) is name of Kartikkeya. Skanda Purana says six flames came out the forehead of Lord Shiva; carried by Agni to a tank. Agni dropped these flames and six babies appeared on six lotus flowers in the tank. Parvati picked up six and they became one with six faces. Sanat Kumara comes as Kartikkeya to kill demons. Parvati gave him Shakti Vel, his weapon.

Incident at Murugamallai temple on hill outside of Coimbatore with girl to be married to a brother, three sisters, father, abhisheka. Learnt sankhya from a yogi who lived at a small Kartikkeya temple. I went up on advice of an old disciple of the Dattatreya Swami. This yogi said, "Why are you running around like you do, going here, going there, this Kartikkeya temple, the Chedamangalam temple, asking the old swami downstairs so many questions that he sends you up to me?" "How do you know all this?" "I am connected to your mind." "What is this?" "You simply have to develop your powers of analysis. This is sankhya." "You work in an auto company what good is it for you? You don't even work in the engine department, just the office." Was taught Sankhya. Used to get "urges" while at work suddenly drop everything and get on a bus to some temple. Sankhya Babaji. Explained Sankhya Yoga in verse to me under stars. Went to Shankara jayanti with him, and they went to Shankara ashram where philosophical discussion was held, he defeated whole roomful of Advaitists. He wore no marks, outfit etc. Two friends in Salem TVS: Vaidyanathan, Shankara Subramanian. V was colleague in the accounts department. I used to worship my pencil

with flower and incense. Room mate was Shankara Subramanian. Used to talk, talk, turn on light at midnight, all possible discussions movies, women we'd see too and from work, politics, I'd speak, he'd listen, sometimes we'd argue.

The weirdo Mani, the oddjobber. He was living in same rooming house as me and Shankara. He used to also speak philosophically, but his was the philosophy of the world, the flesh and the devil. When I was "of many minds", he said "your aim is impossible", be unclean and you'll be cool. This transpired about 2 months before I left. I'd had some "puppy love", but it was not serious. Also, during certain periods of religious observances, I was avoiding association with women, keeping brahmacharya. But even when I was mixing with women, it was not licentious these were relationships that could have grown into marriage, but did not, due to "women being like dreams." There was one girl whom I intended to marry in Kerala, but just after the pact was made, her brother was killed in my presence by a lorry and it just fizzled. He kept away when I was into religion. But when religion became an obsession that I couldn't bear, one night he came to our room in the middle of a discussion and said, "Hey, brahmin, come out, let's go. Let Shankara get some sleep. I'm going to show you what life is really all about." Then he took me into town, to a place I thought was a hotel. but hearing him speak with the manager, I realized he was arranging to visit a prostitute. I told him, "Look, I am not having anything to do with this." He said, "Hey, brahmin, you don't have to if you don't want. Just check it out, man. Dig I'll 'do business,' you wait outside." He went upstairs while I waited. Soon a servant boy came down, telling me my friend had to see me." So I followed him up and he showed me a room. Inside was Mani with two women. He said, "You're an artistic fellow. I can't decide which of these two looks better. What do you think." Jokingly, I pointed to one of the girls, who giggled foolishly. He said, "Good, brahmin. You've got an eye for women. So take her." I said, "No, I'll see you downstairs." He blocked my path. "Look, panditji, I want to help you out. You need this." I relented. I started going every week with him. After two or three times, I decided to get into it myself. I visited every day, and even took an apartment in the Salem brothel district. During my investigation of prostitution, I came across this place nich house with lawn, mother and daughter. Daughter sings, plays vina, rich men come there. Cultured prostitute. I went there for a visit, just to talk. During these forays it was not that I was daily having intimacies with these women. I was fascinated with them. Mother of cultured girl didn't like me all talk, no action (no money). She and I talked about music. She knew I'd visited prostitutes. My business with these girls was largely research. I'd go to a place, gather three or four together, set up my pictures of gurus, etc., be dressed weird, they would laugh at me and I'd discuss with them everything, find out how they became prostitutes, etc.

One day I told the old lady, "OK, mom, today I haven't come for gossiping about music, here" laid a wad of cash on her. "So you just split, mamma. I'll be takin' care o' business wif yo' li'l girl." But the girl started to cry. "I can't do this sinful thing with you. I hoped to bring out the best in you, and turn you away from sinful life." "How can you change me? You a slut yourself. You're not my wife, sister or mother. Who are you to me?" "I've considered you a saintly person all along. I am like your disciple." I said, "This is stupid talk. Whoever visits prostitutes cannot be saintly." She told about Lila Suka. I said, "Look, today I am a paying customer. Why do you refuse me? Any other fellow can walk in here with money and can take you, but to me you say no. What kind of business is this?" She said, "From today I am quitting. Get out of here. I won't see you again until the day you have embraced the saintly life." Word got around to my fellow workers that I was whoring.

All this led me to frustration. I wanted a complete change, another world, life. Philosophy: didn't like Advaita because it was so remote from experience, though of course theoretically it was the philosophy of the trade. I wanted perfection whatever it was, and when I attained that, I'd know the right philosophy. I didn't see it as a practical philosophy, though the ideas were interesting. I

was actually neutral. Sometimes I was offering the prostitutes before enjoying them, to pictures of Aurobindo, Mother, and a Sri Chakra yantra. First visit to high class girl, I put up my pictures, and she was shocked to see these pictures. Whenever I'd come I'd have bag with some books, pictures, prasad. She thought I was saintly person with weakness, and that she could help. Charulata "Moon Creeper" was her name. Dattatreya Temple. Latagiri Mountain. Chendamangalam town. Founder of temple is Sri Svayamprakasha Brahmendra Avadhuta Swami, 1871-1948. He had 4 disciples. Before I joined TVS, as a boy in Coimbatore, I had a dream of walking near a lake, the lake flooded, from down a hill next to the lake came a naked sadhu with beard and matted locks playing a five stringed instrument with a hoop shaped body and a long neck, similar to a banjo. He handed me the banjo and said, "Play this and you'll be safe." "But I've never played such an instrument." "It has five strings, you have five fingers so play." I did, and the waters couldn't touch me. After that he showed me a picture of a tree and asked me to find the cat hidden in it. Five is a recurring number of mystic significance in Hinduism. It is formed from 2 plus 3, the compound of unity and diversity. God is one, and when He manifests creation, there is two spirit and matter. Yet again, He remains singularly aloof from the two as the principle of unity within diversity, making three. We must go from duality not back to mere oneness, but to threeness -realizing that God is the source and controller of the realities of spirit and matter. So the spiritual quest is represented by the number 5, and plays a mystic role in all systems of worship in Hinduism, tantra, panchopasana and pancharatra. He was an avadhuta sannyasi. Had darshan of Dattatreya in Himalayas, came to Latagiri to make a temple for him under his instruction. He had jiva samadhi, in which he continued on with mystic activities even after death. At a small Kartikkeya temple back in Coimbatore I had another vision of the little girl from Mahabalipuram who told me, "You should do as I have requested." My archa was quite good and clean.

FOR NEXT CHAP:

After returning to Salem, I investigated Bala worship and I did take it up for a time. My attachment to Durga grew so intense that while on another holiday trip, this time to Tiruchirappalli, I had a vision of Devi herself in the Samayapura temple. Yet as profound as this experience was, it did not help me to surrender my mind to the Mother as advised by the little girl in Mahabalipuram. Insurance inspector. I put sindhur on his forehead, told him to close his eyes, he saw Durga. I'd predicted it would rain at 5:15, and it did. His wife kicked me out. Kartikkeya mantra with bija letters, repeat 36 times for 41 days with proper concentration, and one can hit a siddhi of teleporation. Put ash in a bowl covered with a plate, chant seed letters, bija (seed), pinda (body), dana. Got mantra siddhi. Many siddhas use mantra for ash transference, as people have faith in ash, and if it appears from a yogi's hand, that increases the faith.

Perfections bring fame, and fame means he uses up the siddhi demonstrating for so many adherents his power. So siddhi is weakened. Again he has to reinforce the siddhi by retiring to recharge. I could transfer ash from room to room. One night I came to my room, read a bit, then turned off light to take rest. Knock on door, nobody, thrice, window looked, naked yogi, remembered dream. Turned, and said come to Chendamangalam. I didn't know where this place was. Next day an agent came to our office to write up an order of tractor tires for the village of Chendamangalam. "Wow!! Where be it, main?" He told about the Latagiri hill, Dattatreya temple, Swami. Got letter that evening from mother, her sister's hubby working in Canara Bank got transferred to Chendamangalam, please visit. "Right, main." Took bus, went to house of sister. While sister was cooking, I went into back yard. There was a stucco wall around yard, window, I opened, saw hill and temple tower. I walked out of house as if being pulled to hill, came up, saw Dattatreya, then saw picture of tree with cat hidden in it. Under Dat there is a cave with the murti of the swami, covered with ash. I asked the pujari if I could join, become disciple of swami "He bought the

ranch in '48, main." He tole me he stawry though dude wuz woikin' in Coimbatore and split for Himmies. Made an impression on mah mind, lemme tell yoo.]

The swami's brother's descendents were doing the temple worship. I went downhill to they pad and inquired, "What happened to the lake?" Swami's niece, an old lady, asked me, "How yoo know abou' tha' lake, mofo?" I say, "I donno, jus' tell meh." She showed a painting of the landscape of the temple there was a lake where there is now a grove of trees. "This lake dried up when Swamiji left."

Aunt's hubby came in car to pick me up, been drivin' all a round. In this way I got to know people in this area. Visions flooded my mind whenever I was there. I'd see their future once I told a neighbor girl that the hubby she was arranged to marry would soon die I'd know things about them that no one outside their family could know, which they'd confirm were true, etc. I became a kind of mystic for these people. And I wandered around, visiting the four disciples of that swami and mixing with their disciples. I also came in touch with the Shivananda Ashram at this time, which was nearby Chendamangalam. The man in charge tried to get me to take up a steady sadhana, but my mind was too restless. He hinted that I'd soon have difficulties if I did not fix myself in discipline. "Many minds quote."

I was always meditating on the mystical form of Dattatreya, drawing his picture at work, even when I'd visit other temples, I'd meditate on him. One night there was all night abhisheka. I went there and stayed, and missed the next day's work. So there was trouble. I ended up in the office of the managing director, who turned out to be an Aurobindo follower. He showed me a picture of Auro and "Mother" and said, "Look, all those other gods their time is done. This is the avatara." He gave me picture and mantra and said, everything you do in your work here, offer to Auro and mother. Write out a statement I'd offer it. Make an entry offer it. Coffee break offer it. Worshipping pencil. Speaking clairvoyancies to people, whether they want to hear or not.

The result of this was that the chief accountant began thinking I was mad. I didn't like it either that I was being cast as a religious crackpot, but what could I do? I wanted to attain the high standard of spirituality as I thought Swami, Shivananda, Aurobindo, etc. had done. By this time I wasn't doing any work to speak of. I was sent back to managing director. He suggested I go to Aurobindo ashram. He wrote my mother, and we went together.

We went to Pondicherry, arrived in evening, got lodge, took rest eight thirty, at 11 I got up without mom noticing, walked out, went to a 5 faced Ganesh temple, sat in meditation there. Next morning, mother was alone and frightened, went to others, asking who has seen my son? Someone from lodge came there next morning and returned to lodge. Somehow he and my mother got to talking and he told her that he'd seen a young man in meditation at Ganesh temple who could be her son, so she came there. Then we went to the Aurobindo ashram. I stayed there 15 days.

Clock story. M.T. Pandit. Could remember letters typed for 3 years, in early '50's. He left when she dictated a letter saying she would withdraw the power of all other temples in India and concentrate it in the Aurobindo ashrama. But they served meat in dining room and women walked around in T-shirt and shorts, mixing with men in meditation. After that Ma wanted me to marry.

In Philosophy chapter (Mirror): Divyaprabandhas, Alwars he studied. Mantra siddhi, Tantra, Bala worship, clairvoyance all spouted up like fountains by a little touch. But Alwars was not a natural "hit." Vishnu festival on ekadasi in Salem, saw 12 Alwar murtis. Got Tamil book on 12 Alwars. Saw movie of their lives also, which moved me very much. I thought, "This is mystical, but it is

very pure. There is no tinge of lording." I liked it, surrender. I learned Divyaprabandhas and started singing them.

I thought 80 percent was exaggerations to bring people into the fold. Also read about Ramanuja and Madhva, and couldn't believe that such ideal persons could actually have existed.

Chapter two

MYSTIC FIRE OVER MAGNETIC MOUNTAIN

T.V. Sundaram Iyengar and Sons. Founders of South India Automobile industry. TVS came from Trichur in Kerala; his father owned a sawmill. At young age, with great ambition, he came to Madurai when automobiles were first making their appearance in India. He started a bus service in Madurai. In the beginning he would pay the people to ride on his bus. Pious man also. Used his money in good ways to help people. It grew into a big gigantic organization. Tires, body construction, insurance, trucking, finance, servicing, parts, and ventures with foreign companies, petrol, diesel, batteries. TS Rajan his oldest son, expanded company even more, then handed to successive sons and grandsons. Offered good chance for Brahmin boys to get ahead in "New India", which gave preference to lower classes. Brahmins in South: Iyengar (Sri Vaishnava) and Iyer (smarta).

These are titles, not names. Mother's side of family stems from Sri Rangam (Iyengar). Mother's father moved to Kerala. S. Ventaka Subramaniam (SVS) was chief accountant in Salem office. T. Srinivasa Ragavan. First initial stands for father's name or name of home (mostly father's name). AT's name is P.R. Kannan Iyer. P stands for Parli Raghavan Kannan Iyer (or Ayer?). P.R. Kannan Iyer. P. Srinivasa Raghavan was his chief in Salem. He declared AT was mad. Renga Raja was with AT for one and a half years in Kerala. He was room mate in Kalamassery between Alwaye and Ernakulam. He joined TVS in Coimbatore and then posted to Kalamassery. Mother's younger sister's son (cousin) B. Srinivasan or Rajaji (nickname) and Seenu (stage name). AT stayed in house of Srinivasa for first 6 months of his stay in Kalamassery. Then he moved in his own room, then Renga Raja moved in to his room, then he moved out and AT took his own cottage on a Muslim's property when into Tantric stuff. Owner lives in back in his own place.

Got job in Coimbatore with TVS and was transferred to Kerala to work in Sundaram Industries (under TVS umbrella). Arrived by train with suitcase in hand. S. Balasubramanian (Seenu's father) was branch manager in Kalamassery. I stayed with him to get oriented in his home in Ernakulam, one and one half hour from KS. Mother and father both born and raised in Kerala, father spoke very good Malayalam. Though he studied in Tamil language, Malayalam was not foreign to him. So he could pick it up.

Was disappointed by Christian thing, already disillusioned by "rationalism", so his goals had shifted from politics to economic development. Association with drama people and writing of plays had already wound up by that time also. Detail: he studied for 8 and a half years he should have studied for 10 but he got promoted. Went to school at age 4. 13 years he was out of school. 2 years in politics. 17 years old when arriving in Kalamassery. 1967 joined TVS, 1968 arrived in Kerala.

By this time was getting over hard core atheism. But still fired up against brahminism, social injustice, etc. Five months before leaving Coimbatore, he developed friendship with a girl. She was 4 years older, a dancer. She lived near his place, he was interested in dance also. It was actually a big cheating. Her father was a drunkard and her mother was using her to hook men for

money. I got emotionally attached to her but found out she was a prostitute and got fried. So this was on my mind when I was coming to Ernakulam

New office, fresh built, snakes still coming in off of land, staff all brought in from Tamil Nadu, therefore trouble with locals. Had a little training in Coimbatore, but not much. On the job training at Kalamassery. Had to learn everything for myself, was a big challenge, in 2 or 3 months had proved to be more than they expected. They thought I was a genius, half because I was doing very well, and the other half because I was propagating myself. As long as I was there, I was one of the family - mother, father, Srinivasan, his brother and sister. They're living very comfortably. Whatever I was earning I was sending to my family. I was rising star in that branch, even without my uncle's recommendation. One accountant was a devotee of Ayappa. His father was a Brahmin, his mother was a Nair (Kerala ksatriya - soldiers).

Varma is king, Nambudri is Brahmin, Nair is fighter. Started becoming interested in girls at 11 years old. Child

molestation. Singing, acting attracts girls. At five or six I would go to library and though be sent to children's side would go to adult side, and read books on Kundalini etc. One old man in library saw me reading a book on hypnosis and mesmerism, thick book, in very high Tamil language. That old man had written that book. He came to me and started speaking, what are you reading. He came to my house and met my father, telling, this boy is not ordinary. Dad said, I know it. Very soon he is going to become mad. Read Kama Sutra by Vatsyana when I was 10. Very interested in history. From 6 to 9 did much reading along these lines. This accountant is preaching enthusiastically about Ayappa. He wears black dhoti and grows a beard and has a band of boys who follow him. I wanted to get out of staying with uncle. Kerala a very conducive place for researching into esoteric phenomena.

I became attracted to investigate such phenomena, but I wanted to keep that separate from my material life as a TVS worker. I moved in the Ayappa freak's house. His name was Ramanathan. There was a house with 4 or 5 boys, a cook engaged, in Kalamassery. This was 6 months after coming to Kerala. I was asking him all sorts of skeptical, rationalistic questions, and he told me "You have to experience this. Then you will know." He told me so many stories. First comprehensive investigation. During the particular time of Ayappa observance he wore black dhoti and beard. Anyway, Ayappa temple is in Western Ghats, on Ghanda Giri (Magnetic Mountain). Sabari peak is place of this temple. This is where Sabari (lady sage) was given moksha. According to Ramayana this happened in Kishkinda, where Hanuman stayed. That means backside of Tirupathi mountain. But anyway, they say it happened here; there is also a Pampa lake here. This peak is known as Sabari Giri.

Skanda Purana gives story of Dharma shasta. Shasta means deputy. Lord Shiva's mental son (manasaputra) is Dharma shasta. He was generated from Shiva's mind when Shiva was attracted by the beauty of Vishnu's female form called Mohini murti. Because of this, Ayappa is respected by both Vaishnavas and Shaivaites in Kerala. He has two wives, Purna and Pushkala. These two are daughters of a demigod. They wanted to visit father but hubby refused. Father curses "You should feel such separation from your wives as I am feeling from my daughters. You become human being." There is a demoness named Mahishi who takes form of buffalo. She can be killed only by a brahmachari. She's in Western Ghats giving trouble to brahmins. She was killed by Dharma shasta. He is also the person who's in charge of all the goblins in Kailash. So one Kerala king prayed to Lord Shiva for a son and was told by a sage to go to the Pampa lake; there he found a baby boy with a bell tied on his neck. He called him Manikandha (bell neck). Brought him home and brought him up. Two years later queen had a boy of her own. Two boys grew up as brothers. Manikandha was supernatural child. He gave eyesight to a blind boy and other such miracles. But that queen became

envious of the fame that came to the foundling. She tried to put poison in his food, but the poison was removed from the food by Lord Siva. Some Muslim pirates were giving trouble to the kingdom, and Manikandha went there and befriended the pirate leader, whose name was Wavar. Thus the troubles from the pirates ceased. One day the queen laid down with a headache and declared, "This can only be cured by tiger's milk." This boy, Manikandha (Ayappa) goes into jungle, returned riding on the back of a female tiger with cubs following behind, and the tigress gave milk to the queen, and the queen finally accepted Ayappa as her son. When Ayappa killed the Mahishi, a demigoddess arose from the dead body who had been under curse. Her name is Maligaipuram. She begged him to marry her. He said, "There will be a temple built here on this site where I killed your accursed form as a buffalo. Every year brahmacaris will come here in commemoration of this event. When no brahmacari comes, only then will I marry you." This temple was built by the king, on top of Sabari Giri. The murti is sitting in a cross legged meditation pose. Every year in January the jewelled ornaments that Ayappa wore are brought up to the Sabara Giri, and the murti is worshiped with arati (an offering of flame lamps while bells and gongs are sounded.) Then, at that time on top of Ghanda Giri, he appears in the form of a flame. All this he instructed to the king before he departed from this world back to the heavenly realm. He made rules how one has to prepare himself to have this darshan. For 40 days a vrata must be followed. One should wear black dress and grow beard, eat once a day, and should not even look at women i.e. strict brahmacharya. He should gather paraphernalia for worship and tie it into a bundle, and have paraphernalia for his maintenance and tie that into a bundle, and carry that on his head. He should bring a coconut shell filled with ghee through an opening in the top of the shell that is closed with wax after it is filled. This ghee is to be poured on the murti as abhishek (bath offering). If someone drinks this ghee after it is offered, they'll be cured of all physical problems.

This temple is built according to a very mystical design. There are eighteen stone steps leading up from the summit of the mountain path to the temple entrance, and on either side of each step there is said to be a goblin who protects the temple from unauthorized persons who try to enter it; anyone who comes up who did not properly follow the vows will trip on the steps.

Two routes to the mountain one is 54 miles long, crossing 6 peaks and fording 4 rivers. These regions are unpopulated forest, filled with wild animals. Another route is only 4 kilometers long, but involves the performance of offerings that symbolize the crossing of the 6 peaks and so on along the long route. Those who fail in the principles may get attacked by tigers or have other mishaps. I strictly followed the vrata. I ate daily one big banana in the day and nothing else for 40 days; three times daily chant Ayappa's names in his temple; wear black clothing, grow beard. I gradually got a taste for this austerity. It built up a determination in me for the proper completion of the worship of Ayappa. It came time to fill the coconut before taking the journey. This happened in Trichur, Ramanathan's familial home. He ordered us to pray for what we want from Ayappa in return for this great sacrifice we are about to make for him. I said, "I don't want anything." He said, "No, this is not the right attitude. You should ask Ayappa for some benediction. When you complete the pilgrimage, you will see that your prayers are answered." "Look," he said angrily, "I am the guru swami (who leads new people on the pilgrimage, because he's done it 5 times already). You've got to do as I say if you want to continue on this pilgrimage. Now pray for something." "Well, for what? Give me an example." "Well, you can ask for something concerning your job a promotion, perhaps, or a transfer." "But we don't have to go to someone greater than us for these things. A job promotion I can get by my own endeavor. If this is all this whole thing that you are doing is for, then I am not going." Then he got a bit alarmed. The other pilgrims were standing around hearing me question the value of the Ayappa pilgrimage. "So don't pray for that," he reasoned with me. "Just pray for something anything you like." "Well, I am just doing this to see that light. So let that be my prayer I want to see the light on Ghanda Giri." That satisfied him, and we started. Since this was our first time, we were taken over the 4 kilometer route, starting at Pampa river. There

were many people doing this, including big cinema stars, who were getting a lot of attention from the others. But the idea of a black shirt is to put everyone on the same level – no high, no low. Everyone is supposed to be addressed as "Ayappan", identifying them with the murti, but still it comes out that big shots are addressed as "Brahmin Ayappan, Advocate Ayappan," Magistrate Ayappan, or "Doctor Ayappan", etc. On the route to the temple is the tomb of the Muslim pirate Wavar; Muslims gather here to worship, and the Hindu devotees of Ayappan stop to mix with them. At this point we had to cover our bodies with ash and then dot our ashen skin with different colors. Then we took one of a variety of weapons (arrow, club, sword, bow or spear) and dance from here to the place where Sabari got liberated.

Aya means "father", appa also means "father". Dance is meant to bring on trance, take one out of bodily consciousness. As we danced we rhythmically chanted "Swami din daka dum, Ayappa din daka dum, Swami din daka dum, Ayappa din daka dum." Then, reaching Sabari moshā place, two kilometers above the Pampa river, one leaves the weapons there. First year pilgrims carry an arrow, second year carry a club, third year a sword, and so on. Arrows are put together, clubs are put together, etc. At this time the murti of Maligaipuram (the liberated Mahishi devi) is brought from her temple next to the Ayappa temple to view the Sabari moksha place; she comes to see if new candidates (kanya-Ayappan or virgin Ayappans) have come this year; when seeing the arrows, she must go back to her temple – no marriage) Procession goes back with lights extinguished and no drumming. The jewelry of Ayappa is brought in a procession from Pandanam (where he was found by the king). A man in trance brings Ayappa's sword. A white faced eagle flies above his head the whole way from Pandanam to Sabari's place. When they reach Sabari's place, they take a short rest. That eagle flies off, and when they resume their journey another eagle appears and accompanies the procession to the Ayappa temple. Apart from this procession time, one does not see this type of bird in this region.

Females may also take this pilgrimage, but only those who are of prepubescent or post menopause age. They are called Maligaipuram, as the men are called Ayappan. Then we went the next two kilometers from Sabari moksha place to Ayappa temple, carrying our bundles on our heads. No dancing here. You must climb the 18 narrow steps with the bundle on your head, and after puja climb back down facing the temple (i.e. climb backwards). I saw people on the steps suddenly scream and fall off. I climbed up, did abhishek to the small pancha loha murti. Then the ornaments and weapons are brought and put on, and door to temple is opened. Just when temple door opens, one can see above Ghanda Giri, between the evening star (Venus) and another star, a kind of dancing flame like lumescent display which lasts for 5 minutes.

I came back from this a changed person. I was awe struck. I moved out of Ramanathan's place and got my own joint just across from the factory. This is the muzzie's pad. I was working hard, doing much more than is expected for new man, and I am coming up in the office. Morning I got up quite early and went to a Krishna temple quite close by in Alleppey. This I was doing only after the Ayappa experience. It was 15 minutes by bus from where I lived. I went there and did the rituals, circumambulated the temple, put sandalwood paste from the Deity on my head, accept the tualsi and flower prasadam, and bow down – all these things were new to me. And I would then come back to my room and light a lamp a small Ayappa picture I was keeping on an altar. The Muslim owner was very pleased by my strict daily observances. He would often inquire as I was leaving for work, "Is the lamp lit?" He thought this would bring good fortune to his household.

When I came back I would chant Visnu sahasra nama stotram. After the office, come back, take bath, light lamp, two friends would come, sit down and chant Visnu sahara nama. Like a club. Father used to chant Visnu sahasra nama while taking bath. I learned this in my early days, when I was faithful. At the same time I had an external life as a sort of man of the world. I went to movies,

mixed with the modern boys and girls. I wanted to live a double life. My purpose was to investigate religious and mystical things without sacrificing the sense enjoyment of a successful material life. Inside I always had the feeling that the religious side would eventually supercede the material side. I met Jitendriya Saraswati (Kanchi Shankaracharya) in Kerala on Shivaratri day. (Put this story in Magnetic Mountain chapter). Shankara came to Ernakulam to do big procession. Or Jayendra Saraswati? His predecessor has retired, he's about 15 and has taken over math. This is during tantra time. We arrived in Ernakulam from Kalamassery by early morning bus at about 3:00 AM. We came to the Shiva temple where he was staying, in a big community hall. A guard was posted in front who told us, "Everyone is sleeping." "We won't bother them, we want to see the Shankaracharya, he'll be up." He didn't stop us as we went by. The place is full of sleeping, snoring brahmins. Shankaracharya was sitting in a small room under a fan, counting mantras in his hand. Muslim and I fell flat (as I'd taught him to do). He gave us akshada (raw rice died yellow with food coloring) as a blessing and bade us to sit.

He asked us where we were coming from. I told him we lived in Kalamaserry, and that I worked for TVS. He nodded appreciately when he heard "TVS". "I am making a big procession, would you like to join us today?" I said, "My work starts at eight. I'll have to be back by then, that's why I've come so early. Work is worship (ha ha)." "Yes, yes, very good." Old man and woman walked in. Fell flat, got blessing. Old man said, "My daughter's marriage please help." He called one brahmin, said "Give them some gold for the daughter's dowry." Then old man said (after taking) "But it is not a proper match. Can you tell us a better choice for her?" He folded hands in pranam mudra, they left. Then he slapped his forehead with palm when they'd gone. He looked at me and said, "I am a sannyasi, but the householders come to me for charity. All right, so the matha has a fund for helping poor brahmins, I can let them have something from that. But then they even want me to pick a groom for the girl. Is this why I took sannyasa?" Then, changing the subject, he said to me, "You have any questions?" I said, "Just one you are awake and doing japa, but all your brahmins are sleeping. Why is that?" His eyes widened. "Oh, they are still sleeping?" The Muslim said, "They look so funny, big bellies going up and down." By his speech he revealed he was a Muslim. Shankaracharya was a bit surprised that a Muslim had come into his quarters to see him. I said, "My friend has risen very early on this holy day to some and have your darshan, while your Brahmins sleep the morning away. Is he not better than them? After all, it is not his fault that he's a Muslim he had no choice in the matter. Still, he shows respect for Shiva." "Anybody who rises in brahma muhurta on this day gets the blessings of Shiva," Shankaracharya admitted. Muslim said, "But will Lord Shiva give me blessing though I am Muslim?" Shankara said, "Shiva is Brahman. For Brahman there is no distinction, Hindu Muslim." I asked, "Then why is your procession advertised 'For Hindus'? Why not 'For Human Beings'?" He smiled and replied, "I am trying to make these Hindus into human beings." We all laughed. He rang gong and ordered the darvan, "Get a bucket of water and throw it over these brahmins. See even a Muslim has come here for darshan in brahma muhurta time; why they are still asleep?" He was Nepali, and whatever you tell a Nepali he does. So he threw water. We o'd and left.

In Guruvayur: Anjaam Nambudri. He was worshiped by local people and was a Bhagavatam reciter. Before reciting SB he would recite Sri Sri Sikastakam and give explanation. People would see him after seeing Deity. He had formerly been communist. I asked him how he'd come to recite the Srimad Bhagavatam in the Guruvayur temple. "I was a convinced Marxist. I had no faith in God whatsoever. He was arranging for a political gathering just outside the Guruvayur temple (because it is most well known place in whole city, obviously). He could not digest solid food he'd always vomit it up. This was by Garuda murti near a banyan tree just outside the front gate. His distant uncle was at that time head priest of the temple. Priest called for him, and he went out of family respect. Pujari gave him a plate of sweet rice; Anjaam said, "I am very sorry, but I cannot take solid food, it makes me ill." Priest said, take, nothing will happen, Anjaam said can't, will

timov, priest said, take it and timov, Jim. So, to please uncle, he took. Went back to work. No sickness. Later he saw his uncle again and remarked, "You know, that sweet rice gave me no problem. I wonder why?" Priest said, "You should know." "How I should know?" "You are a communist communists know everything." And he smiled. "You have a materialistic explanation for everything else, why not for this?" Anjaam said, "Give me more." He wanted to prove by getting sick that there was nothing special about prasadam. He took more, more. Nothing happened. He had his meeting. Next day he went to the doctor, who examined him by doing a test of the stool. "Its amazing, but you are digesting the food. It seems you are able to eat this kind of food. So find out how they make that rice preparation, and make it yourself." He returned to temple and took big plate of sr with 4 appams (cookies). No prob. The priest came to him and said, "This has nothing to do with diet, this is the mercy of Guruvayurappan upon you. "Hey Jack, I don't believe it." Later he hired one brahmin to cook the same prep. Brahmin said, "Hey, Slim, dig. I can do the same moves as the temple cook, but Boss, if it ain't offered to the Deity, the name'll be the same but the prints won't match." "Pipe down and cook, Stoveman." "Cool, but you'll see." Got a whole plate. Same look, smell, taste. Man ate, vomited. He told the priest what happened, the priest just said, "Krishna, Guruvayurappan", and went back in the temple. Anjaam was perplexed. When priest finished puja he told him, "Take 40 days bhajan vrata. Eat only Krishna prasada. At the end you'll be cured." He did it, communist friends were p.o.'d. He told them "Look, without life, there's no politics. Let me live." He never left. Became a temple priest. Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal Kanchi Kamakoti Pitham.

Chapter Three

THE SWORD OF THE LAMPS, AND A DEMON'S EYES

I soon came to be known as a bright young star to the Kalamassery branch management. I'd begun by handling service records as a junior assistant in the personnel department, but leaped into the ambitious role of 'office hero', tackling tasks that others were not able to handle as quickly or as skillfully as I thought they could be done. My vanity was gratified with a promotion to senior assistant to the chief payroll accountant within a few months of my arrival. The company had an unwritten rule that everyone in management should dress officially: shirt and tie tucked into trousers. I ignored it. My attire was kurta and lungi. The kurta (the traditional collarless North Indian cotton shirt) would be long, extending down to my knees, and 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. On top of that I sported long hair and a handlebar mustache. Though my dress was considered odd, nobody said anything because I was the insufferable 'office hero.' One day a spare man with slickedback hair and a peculiar gleam in his eye strode into the office and went from desk to desk collecting donations. He was dressed as a pujari, wearing lungi, a cotton wrap over his torso, and a sindhur dot on his forehead that indicated he was a Shakta (a devotee of Devi, the female principle). He was 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 had been reawakened as a result of my pilgrimage to Ghandagiri, I hadn't lost my prejudice against privileged brahmin priests. I saw no good reason why he was deserving of my money. "I said I am not giving you anything. "Be careful of your attitude," he snapped haughtily, rousing my bile.

"What are you going to do if I'm not?"

He turned to the others 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 good cause it could be that you're all so eager to part with your money for."

"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 my Muslim friend 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 (progress) 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 my friend 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: "AmmeNarayana, DeviNarayana, LakshmiNarayana, Bhadre Narayana..." These are names of Bhagavati that describe her as the energy of Lord Narayana (Vishnu).The pujari arrived on a bicycle from his job at a chemical company. Parking his bike next to the pond, he jumped in, 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 bushy headed and bearded, 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 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 indigenous South Indian equivalent of 'ole time religion' laughed at by 'city slickers.'

The mad priest hopped through the crowd handing out strands of colored thread to be worn against disease. When he came before me he declared with his customary histrionics, "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 with his body bent ninety degrees at the hips and his head swiveling left, right, up and down, he 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 pujari 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. My friend laughed out loud and it echoed through the crowd. 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. My Muslim friend also left, having lost his interest. 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 priest eyed me sharply. "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.

A chill went through my heart. I moved close and looked carefully at the sword while he stood by grinning vengefully at my confusion. "You're trying to discover 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 grasped the handle of the sword and tried to pull it. It would not budge an inch, no matter how hard I exerted myself.

He returned. His voice ringing in defiance of all the faithlessness I represented, he announced as if before his congregation, "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 whispered, gazing spellbound at the sword glinting in the flickering lamplight. "I'll organize this entire festival for you."

Now that I'd finally accepted his power, his bluster evaporated. Truly sorry for my former indiscretions, I implored, "Are we friends now?" "Yes." He smiled warmly, clapping my shoulders and looking me full in the face. "We're not only friends, we are fellow brahmins "tantric•• brahmins."

"I'd certainly be honored to learn more about tantra from you."

"Good, very good," he replied, satisfied that I'd been won over.

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 from Tamil Nadu come to assist their own local priest. I broke the barrier of caste between us by visiting their homes, mixing with them, 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 fundraising drive; we collected more money than the 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 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 a simple, compact structure beneath a low, pagoda style tiled roof, yet mysterious, with small rooms in which carved wooden and stone motifs were blended, illuminated by rows of tiered oil lamps hung by chains from the ceiling.

Rites were being performed in a cave beneath the shrine to a stone that reputedly grows in size each year. Fiery brass lamps cast a dancing orange glow all around. There were white chalk mandalas drawn on the cave floor and red sindhur markings 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 had further discussions with him.

The word tantra means 'thread' or 'woven pattern' in Sanskrit; in its mystical sense it indicates knowledge of the groundwork or 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' is only applied 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 unfortunates. The rituals are designed to engage minds absorbed in sex, intoxication and meateating. The ultimate goal is to help them overcome these obsessions and rise to a higher standard of life. As inducements, Shiva and Devi offer rewards to those who observe the vows of selfcontrol prescribed for this path.

The Kalamassery pujari, a Shakta, sought communion with Devi through temple worship and trance; from her he got his powers of prophecy, healing and swordmagic. The tantrism he practiced is known as *dakshinamarga* (the righthand path) because its rituals are 'clean', confined to symbolism only.

The lefthand *vamamarga* tantrics are much more fixed on attaining magical powers than the Shaktas. Their ritualism is most unclean, like the darkest extremes of the ceremonies of the bokor,

the voodoo sorcerors of Haiti who, interestingly, are also known as 'the priests who serve with the left hand.'

Exciting displays of power were the food of my teenage enthusiasm for the occult, so the pujari recommended I study under a master of the lefthand path.

He told me 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. They dwell in the underworld from where they visit the earthly plane, and are very active in regions where people propitiate them as gods.

The other specialty is a kind of shortcut siddhayoga, a method of gaining magical powers by meditation upon lower expansions of Shiva or Devi. The yogi offers some type of vow, sacrifice or ritual to these fearsome, 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 outwardly be a Shakta as well. There are so many intertwining branches within the general divisions of tantra that it is not always possible to make hard and fast 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.

A figurine about six inches long made from rice flour and eggs, with two bones stuck in the bottom like legs and a knot of hair stuck on the top, lay on the ground nearby. One of the tantrics recited a charm and the thing rose up and started moving towards him, rocking back and forth on the bonelegs.

At this point the crowd grew restless with people edging away out of fear. I heard some of them murmuring, "When these things start to happen, it means its getting dangerous." In their zeal to outdo one another, the tantrics called more people out of the crowd, causing them to perform outlandish and possibly injurious acts. To the relief of everyone, they finally 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 (consciousness). Whether or not there is a relationship between this and the Arabic Shaitan or Hebrew Satan is a question for etymologists.

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 wood-beam 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 earlike handles on either side. Steam spewed out from under the lid, filling my nose with a stomachunsettling odor just a bit short of disgusting. Against the other two walls were a flat stone with a highly polished mirror surface, a small bookcase with thick tattered tomes crowding the shelves, and an old harmonium. In the odd 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.

With the stove's fire he lit a couple of candles, and we sat down. Nervously, I began explaining myself and my newfound 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?"

He studied me thoughtfully for a moment. Then he replied, "I can tell you where you can get a little deeper look into the mystery of power. This will be a sort of test for you. But it will have nothing to do with me; I'll tell you where to go and give you some advice in preparation, but you'll be on your own after that. If what you see convinces you that this is not parlor magic, you may return here for some serious instruction. Are you interested?"

I nodded eagerly, very interested. He told me about a small Muslim settlement near a stand of trees known as 'shavuk', similar to pine. In the midst of the shavuk woods was a clearing. I was to go to that clearing on the next full moon night and sit and simply watch for something to appear.

"Don't fall asleep, whatever you do," he warned. "You should bring with you a pocketful of small white stones. If you get frightened, spit these stones one at a time and throw them behind you as far as you can. This will help you get away."

He paused. "If you survive this encounter, you may return here." I left in no small state of excitement, eager for the next full moon night.

On the afternoon before that night, I returned to the region with my Muslim friend. We soon found the little village the tantric had told about and made discreet inquiries about the shavuk forest. Around sundown we located it. Just in case we might need help, my friend made a quick acquaintance with a Muslim family living some hundred meters across a road that skirted the edge of the tree stand. These people confirmed there could be danger, and told us they'd keep a lamp burning in the window so that we could find our way there easily. We both had our pocketfuls of white stones.

After some hours of killing time in the village, we returned at about 11 o'clock and entered the woods. The moon was high in the cloudless night sky, flooding everything with its pale sheen. After a brief walk down a gentle incline we came to an area where some trees had been felled. In the midst of the clearing we saw a broken circular wall that rimmed an old well. We sat down on a fallen trunk some twenty meters away from it.

Not knowing what to expect, our attention was drawn to each and every rustle of the woods. But nothing happened. Finally, after midnight, my friend nodded into sleep. I remembered the tantric's warning and remained alert, my back to the well and my gaze moving like a searchlight along the line of trees all around.

Ten minutes after my friend fell asleep, I trembled as a cold tingle crept up my spine. Leaping to my feet and turning around, I saw something that almost made my heart stop. Bathed in the moonshine, a tall, statuesque woman stood on the well's rim. Her eyes were closed. For a moment I wondered if she was a sleepwalker.

In face and physique she did not resemble an Indian woman. She had long loose hair that hung down over the front of her body to her ankles; otherwise, she was naked. She was hauntingly voluptuous in a way that was both enticing and frightening.

Staring openmouthed at this apparition, I nudged my sleeping friend with my foot. He sat up with a start and turned to see what I was looking at, then gasped and scrambled to his feet.

At once her eyelids lifted, revealing twin orbs from hell. They flamed hotly to penetrate the darkness with a glare like the eyes

of a tigress. She fixed those terrible eyes upon mine and stepped off the well, alighting to earth as if she was not heavier than a wisp of cotton.

The woman's legs propelled her forward. I cannot say she 'walked' or 'ran', for these words are simply not able to give an accurate picture of how she advanced upon us. Her legs moved without

bending at the knees, making swift little steps of such fluid effortlessnes that I was reminded of the locomotion of a centipede. It was almost as if below the waist her body was motorized, for when her legs started, her head, upper torso and limbs snapped back slightly from the sudden forward motion.

My friend, shaking violently and gibbering, caught my hand and tried to pull me with him in a dash for the road. But I was rooted to the spot, transfixed by the mysterious woman's eyes. I tried to tell him I couldn't run, but no sound would come from my contracted throat. He let go and fled for his life just as she halved her distance from us.

What deadly hypnotic power an automobile's headlights have over a deer standing at gaze in its path, her eyes had over me. She closed the last few feet between us. I heard my friend shout from behind me, "Get ready to run!" Something flashed through the air and landed behind the woman. She broke off her mesmerising stare and turned to see what it was. As soon as she looked away, I regained control. I bolted in sheer terror to catch up with my friend who was now in the woods on his way up to the road.

He turned, took something from his mouth and threw it past my head. It was then that I remembered the stones. Still running like a madman, I fumbled in my pocket and pulled one out, popped it in my mouth for an instance, then tossed it over my shoulder without looking back. Hearts pounding, we burst out of the grove, crossed the road and entered the field at full tilt on our way to the Muslims' house.

I turned and saw the woman emerge from the trees and skitter eerily over the road right behind us. An awful thought seized my mind: "We'll never make it."

Slowing to a stumble, I plunged my hand in my pocket to snatch a whole fistfull of stones. I licked them ravenously before hurling the lot right at her, then pelted off again at full speed.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw her stoop to examine some of the stones, picking them up one by one. But as if in sudden fury she flung them down again and rose to resume her pursuit. By this time we had reached the house.

We entered breathlessly and bolted the door behind us. A man and his old mother came out of another room and bade us to sit down as they quickly drew the blinds on all the windows. That done, the man handed my friend and I each a large shinybladed knife. He rubbed the open end of half a lime on the sides of the blades and told us to hold the knives ready. In the meantime the old lady read aloud from the Koran.

Whoever or whatever the mysterious woman was, she did not try to enter. After an hour or so the man and his mother retired. My friend and I, still trembling with fright, didn't dare drop into sleep before the first rays of dawn.

Chapter Four

SECRETS OF LEFT HAND TANTRA

When we met again, the tantra master was much more forthcoming. I was greeted with a warm embrace and invited to relax under the banyan tree. I sensed that I now belonged. In an awed voice I asked him, "What was it that I saw?" He chuckled at my neophyte's excitement. "So, you were impressed?" I nodded. "You saw Mohini, a demoness from the underworld. Had you known how,

you could have entered a pact with her for the next cycle of Jupiter (twelve years). You promise to satisfy her lust once a month, and she will do your bidding in return – protect your property, destroy your enemies, whatever.

"But a pact with Mohini is very dangerous. When she comes for sexual satisfaction, she may assume eighteen forms in the course of the night, expecting you to fulfill the demands of each one. If you cannot, it will cost you your life. And if during the twelve years of your relationship with her you have an attraction to another woman, that will also cost you your life. You suddenly vomit blood – finished." I asked, "Why was she attracted to the white stones?"

"Mohini draws energy from the male sexual fluid," he answered. "Besides the pleasure of sex, this is her main interest. Of the bodily fluids, saliva is the most similar to semen; that's why throwing a white stone upon which you've spat is a sure way to divert her attention. People who drool while sleeping unknowingly invite this kind of succubus to take control of their bodies."

Looking at me appraisingly, he then asked, "Has your faith in the occult increased?" I swallowed and blurted, "Yes, how could it not? I'll never forget that experience as long as I live!"

"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, 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 utara 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 mounds of different kinds of stool, and sometimes they 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!"

Shocked beyond words, I recoiled from the quilt as if I had suddenly seen a scorpion in its folds. I went into the village 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 avowed, 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. Using a special instrument he took from the box, he removed the foetus from the womb of the dead woman. Examining the tiny limp form, he assured me it was still undead, though beyond hope of revival. He'd kept the soul within the body by a magic spell, he claimed. He pulled a razor sharp knife and a large jar half full of some solution from the box, and then, chanting more mantras, he began to butcher the baby, dropping the pieces of flesh into the jar. 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. In the darkness the jar looked empty to me. 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.

QUESTION: IF THEY'D ATTAINED EVERYTHING, THEN WHY THEY ARE STILL STRIVING FOR MORE BY THOSE PROCESSES MENTIONED?

Chapter Five

THE GATE OF DREAMS

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, Mr. S. Venkata Subrahmanian. As it is common usage for educated English speaking Tamils to be addressed by the first initials of their names, he was known to one and all as SVS.

My two good "same age" friends 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.

I returned to Tamil Nadu with more than just office experience. While in Kerala, my youthful interest in the opposite sex had continued to flourish, but with a difference. From left and right hand tantra, I'd learned a highly sophisticated way of interacting with the female psyche. The several close relationships I'd had with girls while in Kerala were experiments in the power of Shakti, by which the sexual drive is channeled not towards physical gratification but to heightened experiences of mind. I'd learned well from my vamamarga master that the physical act of sex spoils the opportunity to really exploit women for what they have to offer men. So on the surface at least, I'd remained a good brahmin boy. But the real fact was that my lust had assumed such cosmic proportions that I saw no point in trying to satisfy it by mere physical means.

I returned, too, with considerably reinforced faith in Hinduism. Thrice I'd taken part in the yearly pilgrimage to Ghandagiri, seeing the mysterious flame of Ayappa each time. The one year I'd delved deeply into occult tantrism had satisfied me that there is more to existence than mechanical pushes and pulls. Now I felt enough confidence to openly dedicate myself to the mainstream Hindu ritualism I had formerly ridiculed.

In Salem I became an ardent devotee of Karttikeya, a deity quite popular among Tamils. He appeals to the mystical as well as material impulses of the common man, and that suited me just fine. Moreover, I'd never forgotten the childhood vision I'd had at his shrine.

Occult 'self worship' (ahamgrahopasana) is very prominent among Karttikeya's devotees. During Thaipusan, a festival held each early spring year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who flock to his temples in Tamil Nadu, Ceylon, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius wherever South Indians have put down roots are taken possession by the god and the horde of ghosts who serve him. In the trance of Karttikeya, some even thrust spears through their tongues or cheeks. Yet they feel no pain, nor do they even bleed; they prophesize and perform minor miracles, 'becoming' the god for a while. In an interesting parallel to Christianity, South Indian Hindus believe Karttikeya to be the son of God (Shiva), born of miraculous conception. He is called Kumara, the child divine, and Mahasena, commander of the devas and militant foe of demons. His weapon is the Shakti Vel, 'the Spear of Power.'

Though he easily awards his worshipers the bounties of material enjoyment (bhoga), his intention is to instill tyaga (renunciation) in them later on, as he showed in his own life. Once he so lustfully pursued the lovely damsels of the heavenly world that the devas complained to his mother, Parvati. To teach him a lesson, she revealed that every female in the universe is a form of herself. Deeply ashamed that he had really been lusting after his own mother, he vowed to maintain brahmacharya (celibacy) from that moment on.

But I just wanted to be known as a basically normal but dedicated Hindu believer. I wasn't aware of his hidden agenda to push me to the brink of frustration so that I'd give up my materialistic life altogether.

As Coimbatore was only a few hours due southwest of Salem by train, I'd often visit home on the weekends. Overlooking Coimbatore is a large Karttikeya temple on the side of the Nilgiri hill range. One Sunday at Mum's request I went there accompanied by my brother's fiancée and her father and two sisters. The idea was to make a good impression on them of our family.

We'd walked halfway up the long stone stairway that brought pilgrims from the foot of the hill to the temple entrance, and had stopped for a rest at a shrine of Ganesh. All at once I splashed a startling remark into the gentle stream of pleasant conversation by turning to the girl and saying, "You know, before I was born, my mother had a daughter who died in infancy. You are her, born again. Welcome back to the family."

She blinked, reddened, and looked at her father for help. He winced and shook his head. "Now why do you tell such things?"

"Because I am the one you have come to see." As I answered him, it was clear that I wasn't answering him.

The four exchanged uncomfortable looks. Emboldened, I who was not I any longer wasted no words. "I am he with six faces Shanmukha, Karttikeya himself!"

"Kannan," a sister blurted, "is your head full of rubbish? You'd be in enough trouble if you blamed the god for your one face only, because simply rubbish comes out of it."

I closed my eyes and clapped my hands thrice, then sat still while they murmured amongst themselves. Within a few moments peacock appeared on the scene, announcing himself with a loud call. The peacock is Karttikeya's familiar.

Smiling slightly, I opened my eyes. With a discourteous grunt, the father got to his feet. "Let's go up now," he muttered to his daughters. I rose and joined them. "Right now there is a lady in the temple who is very devoted to me," I chatted amiably as we stepped out of the shrine's shadow onto the sunny stairway. "She is wearing a green sari and will soon come down the stairs." A group of women came out of the temple to begin their descent just as we reached the top. One wore a bright green sari. "Coincidence!" hissed the girls, their eyes flashing daggers of reproach my way. Their father walked ahead stiffly, acknowledging nothing.

Inside the temple, the priests were bathing the murti with various liquids. As they poured milk over Karttikeya's form, I felt the same substance coursing over my body. I rolled a shirtsleeve up to my elbow and told the father to look at my forearm. He frowned, then gasped as his eyes fell upon the white droplets condensing on my skin. His three daughters shrieked and clutched each other. The crowd pressed in around us, babbling excitedly. I was finally ushered outside by the priests, who didn't want their ceremony disturbed.

Though it didn't wreck my brother's engagement, this incident was the first noticeable crack in my connection to the everyday world. Later I got the mantra siddhi of Karttikeya, a perfection by which I could teleport his sacred ash (obtained as a blessing from the temple priests) from a covered bowl in a locked closet to my hand. I got this power by daily chanting a mantra a certain number of times for forty one days. But because I didn't continue the sadhana after that, it gradually faded away.

Another cryptic vista opened a few months later. One evening in my Salem boarding house, I'd just turned off the light and laid down for rest when I heard a knock at the door. I got up, flicked on the light, threw open the sliding bolt and pulled the door wide. There was nobody in the hall. I leaned out over the stairwell and scanned the ground floor below. Empty. I closed the door, put out the light and went back to bed.

Within seconds, again a knock.

I checked once more. Nothing.

When it happened a third time, I went to the window and looked out on the lane. I discerned a lone figure standing in the night shadows. He was stark naked, his body covered with ash, and had a long beard and matted locks. Raising a hand as if in blessing, he framed the words "Come to Chendamangalam" with his mouth. I heard them in my head. Then he turned and disappeared in the darkness.

It was the sadhu out of the dream of the lake that I'd had years before.

I was stunned. If I had but dreamed this now, I would have gone back to sleep and forgotten about it. Yet I turned on the light, splashed water on my face and looked in the mirror. I'd been awake the whole time! I sat up half the night, my mind in a spin. Who could this sadhu be? And where on earth if it was on earth was Chendamangalam?

The next day, one of our sales agents dropped into the office to turn in an order he'd taken for some tractor tires. He came to my desk with the down payment and I entered it in the cashbook, noting the details from his sales record slip. When I saw the customer's address, I gaped: Chendamangalam.

Barely able to hide my excitement, I asked him about the place. He told me it was a rural town not more than two hours' bus ride out of Salem. I silently vowed to visit it as soon as possible.

When I returned to my place after work I found a letter from Mum in the postbox, which I read as I walked upstairs and entered my room. Her sister's husband, a Canara Bank official, had gotten transferred to a branch near Salem. They'd moved to this area and were living in a rented house. Mum asked me to 'kindly soon visit them at the address given below.' I sat down heavily upon the bed as I saw, for the second time that day, the name of the town spoken by the mysterious sadhu.

That weekend I took the bus journey to Chendamangalam, arriving at Aunty's house before lunch. After exchanging some fond words with the family, I strolled into their back garden alone, just having a look around. The yard was enclosed by a high whitewashed brick wall with a green wooden gate set in the middle of its length. I unlatched the gate and swung it open. On the horizon I saw a hill topped by a temple, the same hill and temple from the dream of the lake.

Without a word to anyone, I walked through the gate and continued for almost an hour until I came to the foot of that hill. After ascending the temple staircase I reached the sanctum sanctorum, which was capped by a large pointed dome. Looking in, I saw a murti with three faces and six arms standing in a graceful pose on a massive black stone plinth. I recognized the symbols of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in his hands: the waterpot and scripture, the conch and lotus, the trident and strand of rudraksha beads.

The pujari came to give me flower petals that had been offered to the feet of the murti. I asked him which deity this was. He smiled, pleased at my interest. "This is Dattatreya."

Dattatreya appeared in ancient times as the son of the sage Atri and his wife Anasuya. He was a transcendental child benedicted upon the sage by the trimurti Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the three forms of the Supreme who create, maintain and destroy the universe.

The pujari showed me a cave beneath the foundation of the temple. Some five feet in diameter and twenty feet long, it was the samadhi (tomb) of a yogi whose marble ash bedecked statue sat in the

lotus position at the cave's far end, over his interred remains. It was the same sadhu I'd seen in the lane some nights ago and in the dream long before.

There were also a few framed pictures on display: some were of the yogi, some of other holy men, and one was a puzzle of a cat in a tree that the yogi had painted to entertain children visiting the temple. Again, a figment come true.

From the priest I learned that the yogi was Sri Svayamprakash Brahmendra Avadhuta Swami, who had died in 1948. I asked if it was possible that he could yet be seen in the world today. He nodded a vigorous assent: "Yes, since Swamiji passed from his physical form, he has shown himself to many people. He was a siddha yogi, so that much power he has."

He told me that Brahmendra Avadhuta had realized Brahman, the absolute primordial consciousness devoid of name, form, quality or desire. This impersonal concept of God is well established in India, having been widely promulgated down to the present day by the school of Adi Shankara, a Vedantist who lived some 1400 years ago. Its proponents call it Advaitavada, 'the doctrine of oneness.'

As a householder, Brahmendra Avadhuta had lived and worked in Coimbatore, but left it all for the Himalayas. He took the vow of sannyasa (formal renunciation of worldly life) from a guru in the avadhuta line. Among the austerities the avadhutas observe is the dighambara vrata (oath of wearing only the sky). For many years he meditated alone in the mountains until he got the inspiration to come to Latagiri hill near Chendamangalam and establish his temple to Dattatreya. He took on four disciples; each started his own ashram in the area. A family descended from his older brother was maintaining the temple when I found it.

Their house was at the bottom of the hill. I introduced myself and in the course of our get together inquired if there had ever been a lake nearby.

An old lady, the yogi's niece, spoke up for the first time: "How do you know about the lake?" I hedged, shy about revealing my dream. She pulled open the drawer of an antique cabinet and took out a yellowed sketch of the temple and hill done during Brahmendra Avadhuta's lifetime. A lake was shown at the foot of one side of the hill where now there was only a grove of small trees.

Pointing at the lake with gnarled, trembling fingers, she explained, "When Swamiji left this world, that lake dried up."

I took to visiting Chendamangalam as often as I could, becoming increasingly obsessed with Dattatreya and Brahmendra Avadhuta. My mind was drawn into a psychic vortex that seemed to emanate from the samadhi. Insights and visions streamed through this 'tube' for hours at a time, sweeping me beyond the skyline of conventional reason. I became known to some locals as a clairvoyant, for in conversation I might suddenly reveal hidden secrets of their lives or accurately predict the future, without knowing how myself. Other people thought me a crackbrain.

It was at this time that I began studying Advaita philosophy to better appreciate the level of realization Brahmendra Avadhuta had attained. I got to know his disciples and learned what I could from them. In a nearby town there was a chapter of the Shivananda Yoga Mission offering Advaitist books that I consumed by the armload. Then:

In December of 1973, I took a holiday trip with a bus tour group to Mahabalipuram, an ancient port town some eighty kilometers south of Madras. Mahabalipuram is nowadays a sleepy little seaside

resort for middle class vacationers and foreign tourists. But the many old temples and rock carvings in the area attest to its having once been a seat of high culture during the reign of the Pallava kings, a millenium and a half ago.

The last site we were to visit that afternoon was a Devi temple near the Mahabalipuram lighthouse. On the way back to the bus we briefly stopped by the Mahishamardini Mandapam, a pilgrim's shelter (mandapa) carved out of solid rock in the side of a hill. In the gray stone of the left wall we could see the worn bas-relief figure of Vishnu fighting the demons Madhu and Kaitabha; on the opposite wall was a carving of Devi with eighteen arms killing the demon Mahisha.

As I stood before the mandapa, I was overwhelmed by a sense of *deja vu*. The tour guide briskly wound things up with a few last comments, but my mind was shifting into another dimension. I didn't notice the group carry on to the bus. I was alone and the only sound was the whoosh of the salty breeze blowing in from the ocean. Though this was the first time I'd ever been here physically, I vaguely remembered that I'd had a dream some time before in which I spoke with a girl of about seven years old in a place very much like this. I sat down in the mandapa and tried to recall it. But the image wouldn't crystallize in my head.

It was growing dark. I was certain by now my bus had gone, and with it my overnight bag. But I didn't care. Rain began falling, rapidly splotching the tawny sand outside into a sodden *terra umbra*. A balding old man dressed in white scrambled down the stony hillside path from the Devi temple and took shelter in the mandapa; two ladies soon followed. As the last light died, the rain subsided.

The old man, now leaving with the ladies, looked back and asked, "You're not going? Raining has stopped." "I'm waiting for a friend," I answered evasively. "Well", he replied, "if you want to get out tonight, better you wait at the bus stand. The last bus to Madras is just now coming." Then they were gone.

The sky cleared, the swirling gossamer ghosts of spent rainclouds giving way to the moon and stars and the inscrutable black infinity behind them. The night cloaked and brooding, the antemundane mystery of existence that the day makes us forget with illusory forms and colors glided silently out of the abyss of deep space and whispered secret life into the ancient stone pantheon of Mahabalipuram. The elephants trumpeted the arrival of the night, the *apsaras* danced to entertain him, the gods and sages offered him benedictions. A true connoisseur of the timeless, he remained impassive, enigmatic. The night had seen things far stranger than a celebration of statues.

I suddenly sensed that I was not alone. Muscles tensing, nostrils flaring in alarm, I strained to see whatever it was. Something moved from behind a large boulder outside. I heard the soft tinkling of anklebells approaching as a small dark shape entered the mandapa and came before me. It was a little girl.

I stared at her hard through the moonlit gloom and remembered the dream clearly. This was the very girl herself, about seven years old and exceptionally pretty. She wore a silken blue full length skirt and matching blouse, and had a fragrant flower pinned in her hair. Her wrists were adorned with bangles and she wore a gold chain around her neck.

Smiling shyly, she sat down daintily under the bas relief of Devi. "Uncle, you're not leaving this place?" Her voice was soft and melodious. "No, I was waiting here, hoping I would meet you." "You were waiting for me?" She giggled. "Would you like some buttermilk?" She sprang up and skipped out of the mandapa and behind the rock again. I followed, half expecting her to disappear

as quickly as she appeared. She ran down a path to a nearby bungalow, its windows aglow with light. As I came up behind her, she called at the door and a lady appeared. "Please give Uncle some buttermilk," the little girl asked sweetly.

I stood outside the door with the child while the lady fetched a metal pitcher and a glass. When she returned, handing me the glass full, I asked her about the girl. "Her father is a government officer here," she told me. "I'm hired by him to take care of her. She's a very unusual child. She can predict the future."

The buttermilk was delicious. I returned the glass for a second filling, and as she poured, the lady added, "Some people in this town even think she is a goddess."

After finishing the milk, I bent and shook the child's hand. "Thank you, little princess. I think it's time for me to go, but I am very happy to have met you." She twinkled. "I'll walk with you to the bus stand." I shook my head. "No, why there? The bus is gone by now." She giggled and teasingly retorted, "Not a bus, it's a car that you'll board there!"

"This is how she always speaks," the mistress cooed affectionately, stroking the child's cheek. We all set off together for the bus stand, a short walk away.

Suddenly, en route, she stopped and tugged both our hands. "We have to go back to Mahishamardani Mandapam," she insisted repeatedly. The mistress apologized for her behavior. "She always does these things, and while some people like it and play along, others become annoyed. I hope she's not bothering you." "No, not at all." I smiled and surrendered to her pulling of my thumb. We turned and walked past the bungalow and up the short path to the mandapa. While the mistress waited outside, I sat down in the room's darkness with the little girl standing before me.

To my utter surprise she began speaking about my experiments with tantra in Kerala, using terminology known only to those who are initiated into vamabaga. She then told me I was wasting my time by dabbling in mysticism and Advaita philosophy. "If you want to become useful in life," she said firmly, "then you may take up the worship of Bala, leaving aside all these other things you are doing."

Bala is Devi as a virgin girl. Worship of Bala is one of the purest kinds of puja in the Shakta line. Being a child, she does not award the kind of destructive boons sought after by the tantrics. "But I have job," I answered almost plaintively. "Isn't that useful enough?" My mind was racing. Was Devi herself speaking through this child?

"It won't last," she said in the same firm tone. "You should become useful to everybody, to all living entities. But to come to this stage you must get free of lust, which you've failed to do by your own methods. The final goal of worship of Devi is simply to relate to the goddess and to all women in a pure way. Devi is our mother, and all females represent her. As long as you see women as objects of lust, you are as sinful as someone who lusts after his own mother. But if you respect the female principle properly as mother, you will actually become powerful. And useful."

I was speechless. How should I respond to such sagacious words coming from the mouth of a babe? But she suddenly tugged my hand and cried excitedly, "Uncle, let's go to the bus stop. Your car is ready."

We walked back the way we came and on to the bus stand. A hired Ambassador sat there with a driver behind the wheel and two foreign tourists in the back seat. The motor was running. The girl stepped up to the driver's window and exchanged some words with him. He turned to the tourists and asked them if I could ride in the car back to Madras. I offered to pay a third of the fare, and they nodded their assent. The girl then went around to the front door on the passenger's side and opened it.

"Get in, Uncle." I did as I was told. Before I could get her name, the car was rolling. Craning my neck out the window, I had my last sight of her and her mistress, silhouetted hand in hand on the dimly lit street, waving me off in that ageless night.

Chapter Six

THE SELF IN THE MIRROR

The Chandogya Upanishad relates how Indra, king of the devas, and Virochana, king of the demons, both became students of the science of self realization under Brahma. Brahma, to test them first, told them that the self was what they saw when they looked into a mirror or a pan of water. Virochana believed and went back to become a guru, teaching this to the other demons, who also believed; but Indra had second thoughts and returned to receive the true knowledge of the self as soul.

The coming of the year 1974 saw my mind roiling with confusion. I had become a bibliophage, a gourmand of esoteric books on everything from astrology to Zoroaster. And I'd been offered tantalizing glimpses into heightened states of awareness by beings mysterious and divine. But it all had left me fundamentally bewildered. So many paths to so many goals which one should I dedicate myself to? Which one led to Truth?

Though I couldn't see it at the time, the problem was the very nature of my desire to know. It is said that there are two kinds of curiosity: that for what is useful, and that for what others don't know. Mine was the latter. I wanted not so much to know as to be known by others for knowing what they did not.

And the visitations of divinities? Even if it was true a great siddha yogi or Karttikeya or Devi had come to me, they, like Brahma, held mirrors in their hands.

After returning to Salem, I took up the worship of Bala as the little girl in Mahabalipuram had advised. It did chasten my outlook on women. But I found it impossible to fix my mind exclusively in the Shakta discipline.

I had no doubt that worship of Devi, who carries twenty weapons representing twenty kinds of pious deeds recommended in the Vedas for subduing vices, purifies the base animalistic desire. I'd discovered this years before in Kerala. But I questioned the final goal of it all. The Devidham (place of Devi) is the material universe. It contains fourteen levels of worlds in which the souls transmigrating from species to species are confined. The goddess is named Durga (dur difficult, ga movement) because she imprisons these souls in matter.

The philosophy of the Shaktas is called Sambhavadarshana. The goal is to become identical to that Divine Mother who is the origin (srishti) of material existence. Everything has its support (sthiti) in her. At the time of cosmic dissolution (pralaya) everything merges into her. In Sambhavadarshana

there is nothing beyond this continual cycle of creation and destruction, so there is no provision for liberation from matter. The meditation of the Shaktas is to constantly think of themselves as women, because in their view God is the original female (adyashakti).

Durga has two sons, Ganesha and Karttikeya. Both are deputed leaders of Shiva's ganas (followers); Karttikeya is specifically Shreshtharaja, the sublord of the bhutas (ghosts). Ganesha represents material success and Karttikeya material beauty. Worship of Ganesha or Karttikeya can gradually qualify one to enter Kailash, the most elevated plane of material existence, the abode of Shiva. But even here one does not surpass the cycle of birth and death. One of the great saints of Shaivism, Sundaramurthi Nayanar, is said to have taken his birth in South India after falling from Kailash due to becoming lusty for one of Shiva's female servants.

Shiva, the master of siddha yoga, is ever fixed in meditation upon Transcendence. Those who are austere and determined enough to follow his example may by his grace cross from Kailash into Sadashivaloka, his eternal realm forever illumined by the rays of the effulgent spiritual sky, just beyond the threshold of Devidham.

This was the path taken by Brahmendra Avadhuta, and it was surely closed to people like me. I was not prepared to meditate naked in the cold Himalayas for years together.

But many of the Advaitist books I'd read averred that realizing Brahman was not so difficult; it was all a matter of mind set. One should conceive of the manifest world as maya, an illusion having no more substance than a dream. Hidden behind maya is the impersonal Absolute, the only reality. The central theme of Advaita philosophy is expressed by the declaration *tat tvam asi*, 'you are that (Brahman).' If I am Brahman, then the world is merely my own hallucination. By proper discrimination (*viveka*), I should be able to negate the world and achieve the supreme bliss of the self (*ananda*).

The Advaitist doctrine relies on clever syllogism to defend its theory that everything we see is really only formless Brahman. This has popularized it among those fond of speculation.

For instance, Advaitists say that the material world is a reflection of Brahman, like a reflection of the moon on water. To the objection that this analogy betrays Brahman's formlessness because to be reflected Brahman must have form, the reply is that form should not be mistaken for substance. When we see a reflection of something, it is of the form, not of the substance itself. Thus form is distinct from substance. And because form can be reflected it is inherently illusory. Moreover, Brahman is not a substance it is ineffable. So the rule of symmetry of comparison does not apply.

Shankara conceived of three levels of awareness: *pratibhasika*, complete illusion; *vyavaharika*, conventional or useful illusion; and *paramarthika*, transcendence. In complete illusion, one thinks the reflection is real. In conventional illusion, though still seeing it, one knows it is a reflection and acts to overcome it. That ultimately means one must become a sannyasi ordained in Shankara's line and follow the strict code of monastic life prescribed by him. In the *paramarthika* stage, one's sense of individual identity, the substance that gives form to illusion, is eradicated entirely. Only then is illusion vanquished. There are no words to describe the experience of transcendence, because words are also forms of the substance of false identity.

Because the means of awakening to transcendence is itself illusory, a cogent explanation of just how illusion is overcome is not possible in Advaitism. A great Advaitist scholar, Jayatirtha Muni, compared it to having a nightmare. When one is sufficiently frightened, one awakes, and the nightmare (the *vyavaharika* illusion) disappears.

On the vyavaharika platform the Advaitist worships the form of God (as Devi, Ganesh, Surya, Shiva or Vishnu), but with the intention of seeing the worship, worshiper and worshiped dissolve into impersonal oneness. It is sometimes said that this dissolution happens 'by the grace of maya.'

Thus Advaitists are also known as Mayavadis. Because their perfection ultimately depends on the grace of maya, there are now many Mayavadis around the world who feel no compulsion to adhere to Shankara's methods. If life be but illusion, then distinguishing between a monastic life and a licentious life is also vain illusion. His commentary on Vedanta sutra, a weighty Sanskrit lucubration of dry abstractions, was traditionally required daily reading for his followers. But nowadays Mayavadi Vedantism has been reduced to trite sloganeering like 'It's all in the mind,' 'It's all one,' and the final twist: 'I am God.'

While appreciating the slipperiness of some of the arguments, I found the Advaitist denouement disappointing. If my self is already identical with Brahman, then why is the realization of this supposedly universal truth limited to just a few rare souls? If I am one with those souls who have realized Brahman, why didn't I and everyone else realize it when they did? It added up to a free lunch I couldn't afford.

When I once expressed my dissatisfaction with Advaita philosophy to a disciple of Brahmendra Avadhuta, he sent me to a sadhu who was an adherent of the Sankhya doctrine.

There is a theistic and an atheistic form of Sankhya. The theistic Sankhya tradition begins with the Puranas and was first taught by the sage Kapila, an incarnation of Vishnu. The atheistic version is recounted in an ancient treatise called Sankhya karika by Ishvarakrishna. He gives credit to someone also named Kapila as the inventor, though no writings from that Kapila are extant. The sadhu I met was from the atheistic school.

The word sankhya means 'count'; Sankhya philosophy counts up the elements of reality and categorizes them within two ultimate principles: purusha (spirit) and prakriti (matter). Because it identifies these two as the opposite but complimentary factors of existence, Sankhya is free of the unintelligible solipsism that plagues the Advaita doctrine.

Prakriti gives form to the world, and purusha gives it consciousness, and both are real. In the purusha category are innumerable individual souls, called jivas, who are eternally distinct from one another. Under the influence of prakriti, they become bound by the three qualities (gunas) of goodness (sattva), passion (rajas) and ignorance (tamas). Thus they develop physical forms consisting of gross and subtle material elements and are forced to suffer the pains of birth, old age, disease and death repeatedly. But in their essence, the jivas are always pure.

The means to liberation in Sankhya is detachment. When the soul ceases to identify with the external coverings of the false ego, intellect, mind, senses and the sense objects, he is released from suffering. The means to detachment is self analysis through yoga.

My Sankhya teacher was invited to an Advaitist ashram to engage in debate with some of their scholars. I accompanied him, and was amazed as he defeated fifteen Mayavadi sannyasis in a row. Seeing this convinced me that the Advaitist philosophy has serious shortcomings. Further investigation of Sankhya led me to books expounding the theistic version. And here again I found two divisions: Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita, the first propounded by Ramanuja and the latter by Madhva. Both are systems of Vaishnava Vedanta in which Sankhya plays a supporting role.

In Vishishtadvaita ('qualified monism'), the jivas and prakriti are held to be qualities (visheshanam) of Vishnu, the highest truth. Ramanuja compares them to the body, and Vishnu to the soul, of Brahman. Vishnu is therefore the only Purusha. The jivas are classified as superior spiritual energy (parashakti), like Vishnu in quality. But they are small in potency, like infinitesimal particles of sunlight. Vishnu, their source, is the Greatest Being (Vibhu), just as the sun is the greatest light in the sky.

Matter is like a cloud. Though also generated by the sun, a cloud is inferior in energy to the sunlight; thus matter is called inferior energy (aparashakti). Matter is the cause of maya, and just a cloud blocks a portion of the sunlight, maya deludes some of the souls. But compared to the sun, maya is insignificant. Both the souls and maya are fully dependent upon and in that way inseparable from Vishnu. He is the transcendental Lord, eternal, full of knowledge and bliss, and ever a person. In the philosophy of qualified monism, tat tvam asi ('you are the same') means 'you, the individual soul, are the same in quality as Vishnu.' But it can never mean 'you are God.'

Madhva was implacably opposed to monism, so he boldly called his system Dvaita, or Dualism. His main target was Shankara's Advaita, but he also took exception to certain tenets of Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita.

The word advaita is taken by Shankara and to a certain extent by Ramanuja to mean 'not different.' Madhva was strictly literal: advaita means 'not two' as in the sense of the Upanishadic statement eka brahma dvitiya nasti, 'Brahman is one, there is no second.' Dvaita philosophy thus established that God is unrivalled and aloof. He has no competitor, nor is He beholden to anyone. Therefore He cannot be bewildered by maya as the Mayavadis believe. Nor can the souls and maya be said to comprise His body, because that would imply His dependence upon them.

In other words, advaita really means 'unique.' God, being unique, must be distinguished from that which is under Him. But this does imply utter severance of the souls and matter from God. For example, the statement 'the lotus is blue' is not rendered untrue by acknowledging that the flower and the color are not one and the same. Thus Madhva's Dvaita is not like the fundamental dualism of atheistic Sankhya. It upholds one God and one God only who is the source of everything. Dvaita indicates 'distinction' in the dual sense of discrimination and eminence, i.e. Dvaita distinguishes God because God is distinguished.

For the two questions I considered most important 'What is God?' and 'How do I attain God?' Ramanuja and Madhva gave identical answers: Sri Vishnu is God and is attained by bhakti (pure devotion of the soul). Both further agreed that liberation is never wrested by the strength of the jiva's knowledge or detachment, and it is certainly not awarded by matter. Liberation is granted by Divine Grace, and is not confined to those who make effort to receive it. And liberation is not merely the cessation of suffering. It is a state of positive spiritual bliss obtained through association with Vishnu, the All Blissful.

I thought the Vaishnava teachings were easily the purest of the philosophies I'd covered. But I had my reservations. Foremost was the fact that I found the other doctrines more accessible. Without much endeavor I was able to master Shakta, Shaiva, Advaita and atheistic Sankhya to the point where I could easily pass as an authority. But whenever I read the Vaishnava texts, I felt like an outsider looking in. It just didn't fit my mentality. Another doubt arose from the visits I'd made in my life to Vaishnava temples. I couldn't see anything in the priests or the faithful that really distinguished them from the general mass of pious, ritualistic Hindus. I'd read the biographies of Ramanuja and Madhva, and I believed they were ideal saints and teachers. If I'd met Vaishnavas

like them, it would be much easier to accept their fine philosophical conclusions. But from what I'd seen, the Vaishnavas were just another orthodox Hindu community going about their everyday lives.

The sampradayas or schools of Ramanuja and Madhva upheld the Hindu tradition of Brahmanism by birth. To be sure, the Vaishnavas admitted that a man, woman or child of any caste or even no caste could be blessed by Divine Grace. But it was only the Brahmins who by birthright were the special servants of Vishnu in this world. They alone were pure by nature and thus entitled to perform the temple rituals. This smacked of elitism, and I didn't like it.

It appeared that Vishnu Himself didn't always like it either. Ranganatha, the Vishnu murti at the temple of Rangakshetra in Trichy, is said to have locked the head priest out of the sanctum sanctorum because he had abused Tiruppan Alvar, a Vaishnava saint from the pariah caste. The murti refused to open the door until the priest carried Tiruppan into the temple upon his shoulders.

Andal, another famous Vaishnava saint, was a young girl who stepped boldly into the sanctum sanctorum to accept Ranganatha as her husband. As a class, women are considered ritualistically impure and are not permitted to enter the altar of the murti. But Vishnu does not care for ritualistic purity as much as pure devotion. Andal was miraculously absorbed into Ranganatha and is honored today as an expansion of Lakshmi, the feminine personification of Vishnu's spiritual potency.

I decided to just suspend belief in all these doctrines and go on with my search for a direct experience of transcendence by which I'd know intuitively which philosophy, if any, was true. But to impress others, I used to assume these standpoints rhetorically. If I happened to meet a Shakta, I might speak like an Advaitist. Or with an Advaitist, I might argue Sankhya. Like the Muslim who became an infidel while hesitating between two mosques, I was a general disappointment to everyone.

My book buying stops at the Shivananda Yoga Mission had gotten me on friendly terms with with the director, a calm, sober and well-spoken fellow a few years my senior. He disapproved of my eclecticism and argued that to make progress on any path, I had to first take up the prescribed sadhana.

"By reading books you simply grasp the tail of the eel of enlightenment. It will ever slip away from you," he told me in gentle, measured tones. "Better you stick to one thing and perfect it. I can teach you a daily program of yoga that will help you to concentrate your mind on the inner light. You will become peaceful, and where there is peace, there is God."

I tried, but my mind was too damned restless to maintain it.

When I met him again and confessed my inability to keep up the program, he closed his eyes for a moment in thoughtful silence. Then he opened them, but kept his gaze lowered as he spoke.

"The single minded animal is captured by its deadly enemy because its actions are predictable. But a man of many minds is captured because of his unsteadiness." He paused, then fixed his eyes on mine as he spoke again. "Do you know what man's deadly enemy is?"

"No," I answered in a small voice.

He quoted the Bhagavad gita: "It is lust only, Arjuna, which is born of contact with the material modes of passion and later transformed into wrath, which is the all devouring, sinful enemy of this world."

Chapter Seven

AGAIN A MOUSE

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

The chief accountant, SVS, a spartan, no nonsense company functionary with a schoolmaster's mien and sense of metaphor, was addressing me with volume control turned up for the benefit of 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 Dattatreya as if I hadn't heard him. He swept the room with a penetrating You're Next glare that put noses to the grindstone at desks where a moment before sniggering rubber necks had sat. Then, after a last withering look at me, he scowled in disgust and grumbled: "You'll end up painting that picture on the sidewalk for tossed coins, you you poppycock dreamer !" He stalked off.

It hadn't been the first time that I'd drawn Dattatreya on valuable company letterhead at my desk. On other occasions I had wasted valuable company time by rambling on endlessly about the difference between the Pashupata and Shaiva Siddhanta sects, or the distinctive features of the Seven Shaktis, or the story of the green huntress Valli and Karttikeya. All this SVS had overlooked because I'd been his star assistant for over two years and had always compensated for my eccentricities with hard work.

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

A few minutes later Vaidyanathan put his hand on my shoulder. "Chum, the M.D. (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 M.D.'s office.

He greeted me with a polite smile and invited me to sit down and explain my behavior over the last three days. After a few moment of dead silence while I extracted words from the ether and arranged them in my head, 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 M.D. 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 tried speaking up for myself, humbly, knowing full well he was just indulging me with his gentle speech and understanding manner. Of course he thought me mad. I was beginning to think so myself.

"But sir," I choked, next to tears, "I sincerely believe in the Hindu religion. After investigating tantra, Shakta, Advaita and the other paths, I have come to realize its true value and ..."

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 M.D. His eyes were positively alight with glory. All my worries of losing my mind and my job faded, for I was sure if SVS saw the M.D. now, he'd think him a far worse high priest of humbug than I. We were kindred spirits, me and old Directorji, poppycock dreamers deluxe, but somehow he'd made it into the upper echelon of TVS management. So there must be something to say about this Aurobindo thing he was raving on about.

"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 it, sanctified, into the 'out' tray. I offered the entries I made in the ledger. And the coffee during the coffee break.

This shifted my mind into the psychic 'tube', and right there at work the visions started flowing in. 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 getting a gong to 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 amazed and mystified quite a few fellow employees that way. So it wasn't that everybody thought me a strange duck quacking nonsense.

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 M.D.'s office again.

This time he arranged time off for me so that I could journey with Mum to Pondicherry, where Auroville, the ashram founded by Aurobindo in 1926, was located. We stayed there fifteen days. I got to know M.T. Pandit, a confidante of the recently deceased Mother, quite well. He was impressed with what he thought were my psychic powers. Somehow, from down the 'tube', the memory-images of a secretary (no longer in Auroville) who'd typed the Mother's letters some twenty years before were streaming into my mind. Pandit checked the information I gave him against the letters in the archives and found it accurate.

He asked me to stay, 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 accept that there was 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."

As for me, I simply incorporated what I thought was useful from Aurobindo's ideas into what I was already doing. Certainly, the daily puja to Aurobindo and the Mother was useful. It saved me my job for the simple reason that the M.D. continued to have faith in me. After returning from Auroville, 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 and leave 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 Subrahmaniam. He was a jolly fellow who weathered my vagaries well, even when I would sometimes flick on the light at midnight, wake him up and harangue him on some arcane topic for an hour or two.

There was another fellow our age, named Mani, an oddjobber, 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 talked of religion and esoterica, he kept away. But when I started to have trouble at work, I began expressing doubts about the course my life was taking.

As fascinated as I was with spirituality, I'd come to a crossroads with it and didn't know which way to turn. If I was to again concentrate on a career with TVS, I'd have to give it up completely. But that had become extremely difficult. My mind constantly percolated with clairvoyant visions and I just couldn't hide it anymore. Coping with the workaday world was becoming a major problem.

When Mani came to know of this, he stepped into my life with his smirking advice. "Listen, Aiyer, you're in trouble because you aim too high, know what I mean? Trying to be a pukka brahmin, but for what? You're too clean for your own good. If you want to clear all this hocus pocus out of your head, you got to dirty up a bit." He hinted that he "knew just what I needed, and could help me get it." I feigned disinterest, but Mani persisted day after day, sensing my resolve was crumbling. And it surely was.

Young men everywhere have a fancy for the female form. But in respectable Indian society there is only one acceptable outlet for it, and that is marriage. I'd remained unmarried and avoided scandal, not because of a lack of attraction to women, but because I'd sublimated a great deal of my sexuality with the help of right hand tantra. I had practiced it for the past five years, and since meeting the little prophetess of Mahabalipuram, I'd become quite strict.

I liked to think of my interests in women as aesthetic appreciations of the divine female principle. I especially enjoyed seeing the movements of skilled female dancers in Bharat natyam performances. And, having moved among actors, I knew how to capture a beautiful woman's attention and hold it in conversation. I'd get vicarious pleasure from watching her graceful gestures and hearing her melodious voice. Now and again I'd encourage a woman I liked to become emotionally attached to me so that I could enjoy her affections. But I always tried to keep a proper reserve: they were representations of Devi, and I couldn't sully my family's good name with shameful behavior.

By the ritualism of Shakta tantra, I had 'mistified' the raging river of youthful male lust into a quiet haze, a curtain of nebulous, dissipated libido that shone silvery white on the outside but drizzled dark and obsessive within. Deep in the foggy interior, fettered by archaic Hindu mores that steadily rusted away in the dampness, the black fiend Kali, human degradation personified, thrilled at every touch, however slight, of the filaments of my consciousness upon the female form—be it Devi or the flesh meat of pimps, it was all the same in Kali's night of the soul. And he wanted much, much more than I'd been giving him.

Now Kali had found a voice: Mani's.

One evening as I sat wasting Shankara's time, giving him 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. We 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, 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! Brahmin baby, 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, "Hey, look, Brahmin baby, I gone through a lot of trouble tonight just to help you out. You wanna get your feet back on the ground? Get those jinnis out of your head? I got the solution for you a sure cure for the too damn pure."

I gave in, thinking it my fate, like that of the mouse returned to its kind. 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.

Devi, Karttikeya, Brahmendra Avadhuta, Aurobindo these had been my Yajnavalkya, sun, cloud and mountain. Devi had transformed me with tantra, but I could not be wedded to a 'great' who could complete the transformation. Now I was back in the mousehole. I'd gotten warnings from the girl in Mahabalipuram and my friend at the Shivananda Yoga Mission. But whimsy prevented my heeding them. Now whimsy dictated I should revel in this hole I'd fallen into.

I applied the same investigative attitude in this field as I'd had in the others. I moved out of the room I'd shared with Shankara Subrahmanian and got a place in Salem's red light district. I got to know practically every prostitute in town, not simply to slake my flesh, but to study the consciousness of prostitution: the stories of the girls' lives, their dreams, their fears.

There was one who was very different from the rest. She was a high society girl who lived with her mother in a well furnished home in a wealthy neighborhood. She was beautiful, intelligent, an expert conversationalist, a talented singer, and went by the Sanskrit name Charulata ('Moon Vine').

Only rich businessmen could afford her. I didn't have that kind of money, so I used to visit her just to talk. In her I found a sympathetic friend like I'd never had before – one with whom I could speak freely from the heart, and whose advice was always sincere and helpful. For someone as wretched and misunderstood as I was at this stage of my life, Charulata was like an exotic, perfumed houri descended from the heaven of the prophets, sensuous yet angelic, full of grace and understanding. And she found a shelter in me, for secretly the life of a prostitute disgusted her. I was the only person she dared confess this to. Our friendship soon deepened into love, though we could not admit it to each other.

Charulata's mother was herself a former prostitute who acted as her manager. The mother didn't care for my visits since I only wasted her daughter's time without paying for it. But over the weeks, I scraped and saved enough money to finally be able to consummate our relationship. One day I pressed a thick fold of notes into the old lady's hand and told her to get lost for an hour. She scurried to her daughter's room to have a quick word with her, and then left the house.

I found Charulata ashen faced and trembling. "Mummy said you want to ..." was all she could say before bursting into tears. Covering her face with her hands, she dropped into an upholstered chair and bent her head to her knees, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

I was aghast. "What's wrong with you?"

Her words escaped in gasps from between pitiful cries. "I can't do this sin with you. I only wanted to help you. I thought I might change you. Now it has come to this. Please go away."

My knees were sagging. I felt helpless, stupid, and cheated.

"How are you going to change me, Charulata? Who do you think you are? You're not my wife, sister, or mother. You're a ... well, we both know what you are. So who are you to tell me to leave? I've paid your mother, and I've come to have what's mine."

Still bent double, she wailed and shook her head, refusing to look at me.

I touched her shoulder; she jumped out of the chair and slapped me. Racked by uncontrollable sobbing, she moved back unsteadily, her eyes swollen, makeup running, hair scattered and tangled. I tried to say something, but she cut me off, her voice choking.

"I always thought of you as a saintly person. I considered myself your disciple. I never saw you like the others. You're not meant for this filth!"

"You're mad, Charulata. You know I visit prostitutes all over the city. How can a man like me be saintly? What's come over you?"

She sank into another chair and wiped the tears from her eyes with the end of her sari. Gradually regaining her composure, she spoke of a Vaishnava saint named Bilvamangala, known as Lila Suka before he renounced the world.

"Lila Suka had a courtesan named Chintamani. When he came to her in the middle of a stormy night, she rebuked him, saying 'If you were as attached to God as you are to my flesh and bones, you'd be a liberated soul.' He took her words as divine and went to Vrindavan, the holy land of Krishna, and surrendered himself to the Lord's service. I am begging you, Kannan, please likewise take my words as divine and go."

"You're not being fair. Any other man can walk in here with money and have your body. But to me, you say this."

Her hands were in her lap now. She studied them for a moment. Then she looked up at me, eyes large and somber, her mouth set in determination.

"This is the end of it, Kannan. I cannot go on another day with this life of sin. Now you have to make the same decision in your life. Don't come back here again, because you won't find me."

I turned and walked out onto the quiet, tree lined street. I didn't know whether to laugh, cry or fling myself off a bridge. My head pounded with insane echoes of my useless, useless life. The world trembled, its imagery crazy and disconnected, like glass shards hanging in the frame of a shattered mirror.

Word had gotten around of my prostitute hunting, and though I didn't mind so much the ribbing I had to take for it at work, it was an embarrassment to learn that my mother had found out. While I was at home on a weekend visit, she delicately brought up the subject of marriage.

"I've made an arrangement for you, Kannan. A nice girl..."

"Oh, you mean the girl from the Iyengar family?"

Mum blinked. "Yes, er ... how did you know?"

The 'tube' was buzzing with the news. I told Mum the name of the girl and the address of her home. I even described the sacred pictures her family kept on display inside. When we arrived at the family's house (which Mum had not yet visited), she was shocked to find that everything within was as I said it would be.

Unfortunately for my poor mother, the impression I made on the family was so peculiar that the marriage proceedings died in the egg. Afterward, she was more disgusted with me than I'd ever seen in my life. "You should commit suicide," was all she could tell me. For an Indian woman, that was probably the strongest rebuke she could make to a son.

I'd hardly reached manhood and had become a shambling clown, despised even by my own mother.

Chapter Eight

BECOME 'SWAMI ATMANANDA'

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? Is it 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. I'd been visiting as many as two prostitutes a day while keeping up a phoney mystical aura about myself. All I had done was make myself look ridiculous to Charulata, the only person who really mattered to me. Even Mum was fed up. And on top of that 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 the brothel district. My roommate at this time, Mr. Joseph, was the headmaster of a Christian school. It was his habit to get drunk 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 scribbled a message for Mr. Joseph on the back: "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 only half aware of the raucous night life that swirled around me. Soon a bus came and I stepped out into the street and waved it down. A skinny woolly headed conductor with a few days growth of beard opened the rear door. I tried to enter but he blocked my way. "You're going to which place?" 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, the conductor sat down on the next seat and said with a nervous laugh, "I think now you'll tell me where you're going, isn't it?" In a wooden voice I replied, "I'm still asking you where this bus is going." He shook his head as if talking to an idiot and sighed wearily, "This bus is going 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 with a spear painted over the entrance; the signboard said 'Shakti Vel.'

The only availability there was a single room with a common bath and toilet down the hall. 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. Then I thought of going 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 Bala Subrahmanian 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 and sat on the edge of the bed in total anxiety, thinking, "Why did I come to this town? Why did I take this lodge?"

At seven o'clock I heard them leave. I rushed into the bathroom with a bursting bladder, relieved myself, and then went downstairs to tell the man at the desk, "I'm vacating." His jaw dropped. "What! You just arrived!" I paid and walked out onto the sunlit street. The small town center of Arrakonam 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 visit 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 landscape. Though the asphalt road we followed sometimes brought us near rocky hills that abruptly reared a hundred meters or so up into the brilliant morning sky, the land here was generally flat, and appeared uninhabited. After about an hour we came to Tiruthani Temple, situated on the peak of a 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) signifying that the deity within is Karttikeya. Around the building stood a high wall painted with red and white vertical stripes, a feature of many temples in South India. Tiruthani means "the lord's garden". Lord Karttieya 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 before going to the ocean shore at Tiruchendur to kill the demon Surapadma. I climbed up the stairs with my companions who now 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. I was 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. In a way, I yearned for something that would lift me to a higher state. But at the same time I doubted there was any hope for me. Now inside the temple's dark massively pillared interior, the pilgrims were 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 glowing 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 are asking me?" "Yes. I don't know where I should go at this point in my life." "Then go to Tirupathi." "No, I don't think I should go there, 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, got on a northbound bus and 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 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 the north, but Srinivasa is the name we southerners prefer. Srinivasa means "the Abode of Sri", Sri being Lakshmi, the Goddess of Fortune. 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 was actually an illusory form of Lakshmi. She had previously appeared as a princess 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, saying she would return to destroy him and his dynasty. But as the divine energy of Lord Vishnu, she was not burned. Agni kept Vedavati with him and they waited for Ravana to make his move against Sita. When Ravana abducted Vedavati, mistaking her for Sita, 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 her, 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 the real 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 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 collects hundreds of 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 link 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 passing by well kept blocks of administrative offices and pilgrims' guest houses, I turned down a wide paved walkway lined by stalls where all sorts of goods were proffered 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 entrance around the side of the wall 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. It seemed as if I was being inexorably drawn deeper and deeper into a divine mystery as I slowly shuffled along in line past the ancient, intricately carved stone block structures that marked our approach to the sanctum sanctorum. I found the mounting ecstasy of the faithful

pilgrims around me infectious. As we ascended the few stone steps that brought us up from a vast court into 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 an awesome power drawing me closer and closer that seemed to have nothing to do with 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 I came 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 cross 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 prismaticly 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 in front the sanctum sanctorum 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. 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 was being pushed to and fro in this marketplace, so I had been pushed from one fruitless venture 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 lenga (loose fitting pyjama like trousers) 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 trousers and long cloth yellow and set the trousers 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 wrapped myself in the long cloth and immersed myself in the holy waters, dipping three times. As I came out, a man passing by paused to apply a dab of moist white clay from within 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 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 big bodied and bare chested, his forehead, torso, arms and spine 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 this was usually done just after the early morning bathing ceremony; now it was 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 caste-offs. 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 Srinivasa 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.

In another two hands the symbols of Vishnu (the disc and the conch) were held just above shoulder level. 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, the backdrop, the floor, the 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." I was beginning to wonder if 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 (sanctified food offered to the Deity) is distributed, I accepted a plate of rice and 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. I could still see these people in my mind's eye with their various dress styles from all over India, and the many shaven headed women, 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 fitfully surmised. 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. With a glow of inner satisfaction I thought, "I don't know how, 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 perhaps years, optimistic. 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 a swami should beg for his 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 ashram. How can I get there from here?" Under the inspector's glass desktop cover I spied many more Sai Baba photos. He brightened visibly upon hearing me mention Sai Baba and replied enthusiastically, "You go from here to Anantapur by bus, then change buses there for Bukkapatnam, and there catch the bus for Puttaparthi. Baba's Prashanti Nilayam is in Puttaparthi." Thanking him, I pushed back my chair to rise. Then I paused, and choosing my words carefully, took the first hesitant step in my new "spiritual life."

"Excuse me, but I have no money. Would you be able to help me in meeting the expense for this journey?" His smile did not waver.

"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 the wide entrance of a shop that opened to the street without a front wall or door of any kind. A considerable variety of shapes, sizes and colors of bottled liquor was shelved inside; the walls behind the shelves were mirrored to make the stock look twice as voluminous. Above the entrance I read the red and white sign: "Srinivas Wines".

In the back of the shop, 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 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 area around the sun drenched country town of Puttaparthi had 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.

Chapter Nine

WITH AND AGAINST SAI BABA

The first welcome I got upon my arrival at Satya Sai Baba's Prashanti Nilayam ('Abode of Perfect Peace') was from a large group of ragged beggars sitting outside the front gate. Past them, flocks of well off 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 give them a few 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, pilgrims were camped in large open sheds. Other buildings, arrayed around the compound wall, faced the Mandir. I noticed 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, and he told me 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 are here, so why don't you buy me breakfast?" "Oh, no problem", he exclaimed heartily. Slapping me on the back, he led 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. Well aware that Advaita philosophy is the derigueuer of all popular Hindu gurus, 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 see..." 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 a vacant space 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. All I could think was, "What am I doing here?" I stood up and left the compound through the gate. I walked down the sandy road to some whitewashed buildings ahead of me and noticed 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.

I was considering how gullible these Baba followers seemed to be when a man came out of one of the rooms as if to leave. I greeted him with "Sai Ram" and he echoed my greeting.

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

He was a bit astonished at my cryptic question and knelt down next to me, asking excitedly, "Where is Swami from?"

I made another mysterious statement: "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. Also, 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 he 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.

His long frizzy hair formed a black halo around his face. He wore a longsleeved iridescent orange silk gown that reached to the floor. He flitted downstairs quickly like a wraith. I watched his walk, his gestures, his facial expressions. He moved ever nearer to me along the first row, taking letters from people and holding them in his left hand. 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.

I walked up right behind him with Kasturi. As he reached the balcony at the top of the stairs, Sai Baba threw all the letters into a big metal cannister. 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.

Sai Baba entered the interview room through a door that opened from his quarters. 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. A moment later Kasturi came in through the same 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, "This is 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 alright. 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?" 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 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..." I mumbled. He looked at me intently and said, "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. We came into a room that looked like a place for confidential talks. We sat down on both sides of a small round table. Through a large entranceway I could see into his bedroom. I noted some of the paraphernalia of God: a plush bed, an alarm clock and some medicine bottles on a

nightstand, and, behind a half open door, a flush toilet. He nonchalantly sang something to himself as the servant 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'd not been given sannyasa under vows to a guru. 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 it seemed two hundred people were mobbing me. I was pulled towards a fancy lodging block and ended up in a big air conditioned 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 plush 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." Ignoring their babble, in the relaxed and self assured manner I'd picked up from him, I began singing "Chitta Chora" (Thief of My Mind), a very 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 crowd, 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 it off 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.

Chapter Ten

ODD GODS OF THE SOUTH

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

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, as if expecting some teaching or order from me. He looked so utterly helpless that I had to pity him. I figured the best thing I could do 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 Muslim fakir from the town of Shirdi, near Bombay; this man, who died in 1918, was also known as 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." The significance of the brother's final statement was not lost on me.

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. Finally I just strolled into the front room where we'd eaten together. But he was not there either. I 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 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. Why don't you just tell your followers that everyone is Brahman? Isn't this your philosophy? If it is, 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. 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 my karma allows me to sit 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 came over him and 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 sat upon the bed as he did, imitating his pose in jest and 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 him. "This man is like a puppet," I thought. "All these people think he's God, 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 Rudra 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.

On the morning of the ninth day 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 telling?!" "No, never mind, I didn't say anything", I reassured him, smiling brightly. I waved him off, saying "Sorry, I've got to go now", 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 groundfloor bhajan hall and made obeisances before the altar upon which the forms of Krishna, SatyaNarayana 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 cannot bear to see these people anymore and all 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.

"I'm going to Bangalore", he called to me. "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 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 25 rupees out of her handbag and handed the money to him, and he held it out to me.

"You have 25 rupees; it costs 23 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," he said gaily. He told his driver to start the engine, and the window 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 unlike him, she arranged that 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. 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 dahi (yoghurt). We can't claim to be the whole pot of dahi; of course at times some people may think we are. But we should tell them we are not. 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 was 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 explanation before. "I can more or less accept what you say intellectually, but I think the actual realization of this oneness that gurus and avatars speak about 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 transcendental knowledge myself. Outside, I asked the way to Mummuvivaram, the village of Bala Yogi. I begged the fare and boarded the bus.

Bala Yogi was an ascetic who 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 halflotus 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.

Chapter Eleven

ARRIVAL IN RISHIKESH

'There does not exist a ruby in every mountain, nor a pearl in the head of every elephant; neither are sadhus to be found everywhere, nor sandal trees in every forest.'

Chanakya Pandit

Chapter twelve

NORTH

Devaprayaga after Rishikesh, first point of stop en route to Badrinatha. Adi Shankara established a Ramachandra Murti here. Rama performed a yajna at the confluence, and the descendents of the priests still live here at the village. 120 families of Brahmins. Some came as far as Andhra Pradesh. Now everyone speaks Gharwali. 6 months they travel to different spots for ceremonies oblations to forefathers and gods. Few have taken to education and jobs. But present trend is one son should be clerk. Many peaks with sadhus and yogis. Military road. After Jillilamuri, I went to Dehli. Stayed 2

weeks. Not much happened. Then I collected ticket fare from the stationmaster in Dehli for coming to Hrishikesh.

In Rishikesh I went to the Shivananda Ashrama Divine Life Society. Shivananda wrote in his book: "The Rishis are beckoning us, this day, to start for Hrishikesh, the center of the sages. Come meditate on the rocks, take bath in the Ganga, look at the holy peaks" and all that jazz. I walked up to Divine Life Society. I went to reception: "I want to stay for a few days." They gave me three days, each day 3 times free food at canteen. I looked around, saw the kitchen, busy office, printing press, four meditation classes in the day. In the evening they have Satsang. All the swamis come to this program. Everyone has to come. Krishnananda, general sec, Premananda, ashram commander, Shankarananda, the philosopher, Bhuvananda, Devananda. Shankarananda gave Kenopanishad class, morning and evening. I met Shankarananda, put questions. Third day. I asked for extension, they gave 3 more days. I met on second day Jnanananda, who always sat next to temple and Nam Mandir. He'd do meditation and read near staircase going up to temple. Kept books and small typewriter under the banyan tree. I asked him why he's always sitting here, disturbed spot where people walk up and down, loud talkers visiting temple. He'd retired from police department and gave Shivananda his life saving. His money was used to build staircase and plant trees around temple. That's why he sat there. Seemed ridiculous, I raised questions, he called me argumentative. Shankarananda spoke to me about the clairvoyance business and how it is an impediment, how he almost went mad from it himself. He advised me to meditate and engage the senses in active work and not be loose.

"This is really close to the Himalayas, there are many people who engage in yoga and meditation, and some of them utilize neophytes who perform meditation for their own purpose. They can direct the minds and take them off from the path. One should be very careful about slipping onto the mental plane. Select your path mantra, austerity, exercises select a path suitable for me. Means find a guru. I asked, Why not you. I am too busy. Writing, lecturing, cutting subjekti two hours a day. But you should go see Premananda. He will joke it away. Long beard, hair, big smile, shiny cloth, told Shivananda made Bharata Sadhu Samaja, with 7000 members, but real sadhus refused to join. Shivananda didn't want to make a union, he just wanted to get a list of real sadhus to separate criminal elements, because many criminals become sadhus. What about me, I said, being sadhu, you help. He said, you are young, you should see more yogis, groups. Have you been to Badrinatha? No. "Ah, just walk there. When you come back, you'll be a sadhu even if you don't want to be that is how I became a sadhu."

I said, but I think I need guidance. I almost went crazy from brain blasting. He said, that's what it's all about, Jack. Meditation means face the music, tolerate it, and when finally you reach a point where the disturbances don't bother you, then you stay on that point, that's your path. But you have this organization here. Shivananda writes in his books that everything is here organization, food, place to stay, classes, association, don't have to wander around and eat dry leaves. Premananda said, Yes, it was like that once. 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 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: Deva Prayaga, Vashishta Gufa, Rudra Prayaga, etc. Spend one fourth of your life doing this. Don't stay anywhere.

When you're gone through that, you'll be a mature fruit. Shivananda, doctor from Malaysia who opened clinic on sadhu path, it became big yoga organization. Fifth day. I went to dining hall. Bhuvananda meet me in dining hall and said the General Secretary wanted to see me. I met a one

eyed Gujarati vanaprastha with beard and matted locks on the way. He used to talk to me before meals, tell me how so many young men would run away from home and go to the Himalayas but not find what they were looking for. He came when he was 20, now 42, "I haven't found anything except free food. So, while on the way, he said, "Now your time 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." What does one do? "Just look on other side of river" so many buildings and towers "They're all ashrams. You are here because you're from Tamil Nadu and have read about Shivananda. But the same misguidance you get here you can get in those other places." He was a no hope man. Krishnananda. Paid full dandavats, sat up and said Hari Om. He looked at me like a Russian officer. I could imagine him with big collars and stars. He said "What is three days, then six days, then you'll want more days? What do you think this place is, a dharamshalla?

This is meant for serious people who perform sadhana." So I presented my case. Yes I am ready to do any sadhana you give me. I've read Shivananda's book, I am attracted, I've come here only for spiritual life. I used to work in TVS in a good position, but I gave it up for finding God. You please take me. I'll do anything. I can do office work. Any service." He said, "Oh, you were working with TVS? So why don't you go back there?" No, I am not going back to that life. "You think this is a place for people who give up there jobs?" But Shivananda is inviting us to do that in his books: study Vedas, Yoga Vedanta academy, now I am here. I am young, ready to work, just take me and make what you want out of me. "Go back to TVS! From this afternoon you'll get nothing to eat! Go away!" Swamiji, give me some work somewhere, I'll eat only once a day, I'll just take your association, that will purify me. "You just talk, talk, talk. I don't want to see you here anymore! I've already told the dining hall, they won't feed you anymore! Your remaining time is cancelled as of right now! Now go!" A rich family came. His face changed, and he told them, this place is a shelter, gave PR talk, they gave check, he lifted cloth to show his feet so they could touch. I just left. One eyed man was sitting there talking to another old man who had an elephant leg. I sat in between them. One eye asked, So what did the Kannada say

He won't take Tamils, I know. I said, well, he didn't say anything about Tamil or Kannada, but he won't take anybody. This 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 go up. That's why I left the railway. They won't let me go up, and here is the same thing. Just go to Paramartha Niketan, Gita Bhavan, many other ashramas. What do you want, anyway? You want to stay up here the rest of your life and not work hard, isn't it (Ha ha ha). No, not a question of not working hard, it's a question of what work. I want spiritual work. He said, Work and spiritual? There is no such thing. Spiritual means, you tell others what to do. You go around and see if it is not so. And when you're through, come back and see me. You can always find me at the dining hall during meals, because Shivananda gave written instructions, until I die I can eat here. No bridge, only boats to cross Ganges. I went to Paramartha Niketana. I could get food there 3 times daily. Stayed on bank of Ganges in a shed, there are sheds for sadhus. Not bad if you've got no luggage. Of course, mosquitos and bugs, but this is part of sadhu life. Take bath in Ganga everyday, chant Vishnu Sahashra Nama after bath. And eleventh chapter of Gita. I would think this river is Krishna, the mountains are Krishna. Speculating on brahman. Studied advaita philosophy in the library and listened to classes. Many lectures going on. So here I was getting into Advaita more and more. Except for bathing, eating, I was always walking. Known as walking Madrasi walla. Explored the whole place, saw yogis, ashramas.

Then I went to Gita Bhavan. One big yogi came, who stayed there too. I stayed on the veranda. All around there were verses inscribed in the wall, I slept under the verse that said Anta Kala Ca Mam Eva Smaram Yuktva Kalevaram. That yogi was giving lectures all over Gita Bhavan, Paramartha Niketan, Shivananda Ashram. From him I learned to meditate on flame, on moon and sun. I got into that. He noticed me in his classes. He took me to his room, I told him my stowry. He told me to do

kundalini yoga. He gave me a chart and a book. Chart showd mandalas. He told me to sit in lotus, he touched my navel with ring finger, said hold your breath. For 15 minutes nothing happened. Then I went into an unconscious state, knowing I existed but aware of nothing else. When I came to my senses he ws not in the room. It had been 2 hours later. I felt all fired up, purified. I came out and he was giving a lecture, explaining everything in the light of yoga. He was ridiculing those who say yoga is not for this age, and explaining so many holy men in terms of Kundalini. He said Shivananda's shakti went up to Artha, therefore he did welfare work, somebody else's went up to Svadhisthan, that's why he wrote books, etc. He had ashram in Mt. Abu. He had cave there. Mt. Abu be in Rajashthan, Jack. He taught me yoni mudra, to heat up body through pranayam when it cold. Kept movin' around ashrams, 24 of them. Met 'Vishvaguru Munishanandaji Maharaja.' He was a big dude. In the meantime I ran into Krishnananda who was walking with two other sannyasis. "You still here?" Yep. "Where you staying." I told him I'm moving around ashramas, three days at a place. "You should have gone back to the TVS like I told you before! Your wasting your life up hear, Slimbo!" Anyway, came to Munishanandaji, big crowd, mostly sadhus, leading sadhus from other ashrams. Except for Shivananda's they were all there.

In Kumbha 1977 ISKCON was set up next to Munish, they'd blast speakers during SP's lecture, SP told me to tell them to turn it down. I went right to Munishman. "My gurudeva is giving lecture, Slim, and yall be thuddin' with them speakuhs." He said, Yeah, who done put that loudspeaker on anyway? Be only two and a half people here anyway. Chastised the manager. Put it off. Bhaktivedanta Swami be lektsherin! I said, Hey, bo, thank ye kandy. And main, mebbe yall remembuh Ah wuz stayin' wif YOO in Yo ashram long aygo in Rishiksha. He say, Oh yeah, trotak and yoni mudra, hey main gimme favv. Whu happen yo Kundalini shit, main? Y'all be a Aytch Kay, huh? Yeah, I read about you dudes in the paypuh. Be rippin' mo'fo's off, rat? Heard you even killt some dude. OK, Jack, be cool. Kalyan ho (let there be auspiciousness). I know Bhaktivedanta Swami. He's a great man. What time evening lecture? Six. I'll be there. and he came. I gave him a chair on the stage. Munish is like Kanchi in Gujarat, rajasthan, Punjab area. Dhyanyogi, Advaiti. Showed Udyana bandhu. Roll his stomach in the abdomen. Did this during lecture. After I went to him, asked to stay at his ashram. See he be givin he lecture at he ashram. He axed, whut yall be practicing, slim? I say, yoni mudra and tratak. He laugh. Jack, that no practice. Do you meditate? Yeh. On what, main? On the Ganga, it's cycle, coming from ocean and going to ocean. Ganga don't come from ocean. Come from Vishnu's feet, jack! I be not experienced, sawwry, I should ought to stay here and get into it wif you. You saw my demonstration? Yeah but Ah don't think I can ever do that. I don't think I want to do that. I like your statement that these things only concern the bawwdy. Yeah, sure, you should do dhyana, but you gotta get fixed up in something. I'm splittin' fo' two months but if yo're still here when I come back, I'll help you out. Anyway, you should just attend our world peace prayer two times a day. they shout

VISHVA KI! KALYANA HO! that makes your heart clean, do you pranayam and tratak. For three days he stayed, he invited me to his own meditation session with his 4 disciples. So we'd close eyes. After a while I'd peep to see what was going on. His disciples would also be peepin'. But he was into it. Dude speaks four languages, quotes sanskrit like anything, but is self educated (last life case again). "With the arrow of OM, you should shoot the pranava (breath), and kill the mind." (his slogan)(Following can be reply to some doubt I had) He told me, "Look Jack, you won't get your spiritual life in Himalayas anyway." How come? "Go to Nilakantha Mahadeva. You'll see yourself what spiritual life in the Himalayas means. He said, You've got what it takes to start your own pantha anyway. No, I don't wanna do that. Well, you ain't gonna make it up here. Shivananda created Chidananda (who was his successor in the org), then Vishnudevananda, Sachidananda, Chimayananda was originally a student of Shivananda, Shiv gave him sannyasa but wanted him to be cool about the fame. "As long as you desire fame, learning Upanishads is like putting knife in the hand of a monkey." But he went his own way, ended up with Birlas and became famous. Give, love,

serve, purify, meditate and realize. But many of his disciples didn't want to do the first three and so split off and formed their own societies. Among them mentioned above. When Shivananda was sick, sitting in wheelchair, Sai Baba came to north with Vice President of India. This was just before Shivananda died. SB visited the ashram, and Shivananda paid respects, SB blessed him. Everyone was upset in ashram. Especially Shankarananda, who was a telegu man, put in charge of taking care of Sai's visit. Usually Mayavadis respect each other, not one gives blessings, because they're all Narayana. Sai made a Rudraksha chain, and Shiv put it on neck, and took ash from SB's hand. As they were walking out, Shankara said to SB, it would have been more polite if you had paid your respects to your elder, who is almost Shiva (SB was not yet 30 years old). SB told him, "I am the purnaavatara. Ask me whatever you want, I'll give it to you." Why should I ask you, I can get Rudrakshas anywhere. No, ask me for anything. Then give me the Rudravina. He closed his eyes and said, but at this time it is used by the gods. I can't get it.

Well, you're staying for 3 days, if you give it to me in that time, I'll accept you as the Purnaavatar. Then he took him for a tour around the ashram. He did miracles all over the place, gave some old lady shoes, etc. Shankaranya complaint to SA, SA said, anyway, he won't stay here long. He'll be gone before 3 days. B.D. Jatti was VP. SB packed up next day and left. A short time later two Sadhus came to Shivananda with three bundles of fresh 100 rupee notes Sai had given them so that they could build a Samadhi for their departed guru. They asked him what they should do with the money. He said, spend it before it disappears. They went to spend it. When the man from the construction material place learned the money was given by Sai, he had it checked by a police friend. He got bank manager. Manager said, looking at number, wait a minute, something strange here, and called Delhi. Reserve bank told them, Yeah we just printed that series but they're not released yet. Hey, lookie here man, they be missing from our vault! Bank manager gave money from his vault and sent these notes back. I went for a cruise with Shankarananda (Shivananda philosopher) in the town. To fruit market. Early morning, 7AM. He asked me about my "experiences." I asked him, what do you want from here? He said, I want to buy 2 apples. How many? 2 or 3. Three apples will come to your feet. Just then, up the road, a fruit cart got knocked by a passing rickshaw. Some fruit fell off, and three apples came rolling down the road (little incline) to his feet. He picked them up, gave money. Then as we walked back, he sighed, "This means you're still in trouble." Yeah, what should I do? You should get out of here and start something serious. Well, Munishananda said I should go to Nilanakanda Mahadeva, but everybody tells me it is too cold now (3 months). No, just go now. And after you're there, go 4 kilometers higher, you'll see caves, yogis are there, dig it. If possible, stay there. Also I saw the ashram of one Prem Baba. Fire kunda. trident in middle. Foreigners were there only with PB, and he looked quite foreign himself (Gujarati). Italian and Australian couple. PB had you know usual sadhu profile dreadlocks the woiks. One fellow was playing an instrument called a Ganjeera, which makes strange sounds ('psychedelic', foreigners would say). Getting dark, lit fire, PB started up chillum, BUM BUM BOLONATH BUM BUM BOLE. Each one puts to head, and then smokes. I put to head but passed, lady next to me said, no no you shoulda take con more. But I am not used to this. Ees Okay, justa take. Toked til we choked, laid down. Next morning, took bath, chanted two times VSN. Later met the two girls on rickshaw in market, Italian who looked like skeleton jumped off of car and said, "Oh, you please come again, see the guru!" I said no, sorry, I am on another path. I tried to tell them the drugs were not good. The Italian girl held out her skinny limbs. "See, I have nothing. Don't matter no more. I die, become Om."

Chapter Thirteen

NORTH 2

WHERE THERE BE YOGIS

Nilakanda Mahadeva. Left Rish 5:30. Some tree cutters hailed me and asked where I was going, I said NM, they laughed, in another hour you'll be comin back JACK! No, I'm going up, Slim. Lookee here, Jack, 'less y'all be Lawd Sheevuh's own main man, y'all jest bettah figgit about' it. I kept on truckin. Came to a place where the path was blocked by fallen trees. I took another route. Had to climb over boulders. Scared. Wonderin' 'f I should turn back like the man said. I finally got to a spot where I could rest, so exhausted I dropped into sleep and woke up that afternoon. Didn't eat anything either. Woke up and kept on.

Finally got there. A small clearing where a mountain stream falls upon a Shiva linga. A signboard reads Nilakanda Mahadeva. Two sheds were there for festival pilgrims. Nothing else. I slept in a shed. Couldn't sleep well, because too many spooks. Morning daylight broke over peaks. I walked up higher. Two kilometers more, I came around the corner of a boulder, there was huge cave. Like the temple hall in Mayapur. In that one there was kunda (fireplace), chinda (forceps for picking up coals) and a yogi. Nails grown out bigger than Bala Yogi's. Matted locks. Looking at fire with crossed eyes.

Small boy, little bigger girl herding goats had shouted and thrown stones at me just before I got there. They actually drove me into the cave. Wore funny earrings, start thin, become big, looked like made of leather. Then they ran off. Man was not moving, did not acknowledge me. I looked in trunk. Some were recent, some were from before svaraj, some were really old. Addressed to Trilokeshwarananda Maharaja. Inside letters were written to Sharmaji. From Meerut. So Sharmaji had become this TLAM. Letters dated back to last century. End of cave formed a tube that went straight up. A lady came with same earring. Came with a gross wooden bowl, with milk. I tried speaking to her, but she gave me a heavy look. Yogiji got up took milk and threw in fire, gave her some ash. She went away. Then I went before him and made pranams. "Svamiji..." What are you doing here? I came for your darshan. What do you want from me. I am just a sadhaka and I've come to learn. He cut me off. You don't come here to learn. This is not a yoga school. Can't I be your servant. Serve how? I look at the fire. I don't need your help for that. I said, I need some instruction, can't you help me, I've come all the way up here. What sadhana you follow? I chant Vishnu sahasra Nama. This is no place for people who chant Vishnu's name. But whatever you are doing, you could show me. He said, 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. I don't accept disciples. Why don't you go down to Rishikesh and move in an ashrama, and learn some excercises? I was there, I was sent by Munishananda and Shankarananda. I told those guys not to send people up here. Anyway, you can stay one night, now that you are here. Then he sat, cross legged, looked at the fire, tuned me out. I went goofing around. Two in the afternoon, I was hungry, lady brought some flour and water in wood bowls, she sat down. After half an hour, he came out, did he thing. Threw up into tube, saying, Ma, take it. Then the other one he broke into half, took half, gave half to me it was just coal. Washed his hand in the ash. Dig one bread went to the fire, right. Fo the fire to eat. Other half got burned, broke, half up, then half the rest to him and to me. Gave lady ash, she split. Sat cross legged. Got dark. Stream to drink water. Inside cave was warm. I was chantin VSN, then went to leep. Wake up, dude was blickin into the fah. Thass all. In the night, weird sounds, screams, shouts from outside. Next morning went to stream for bathing (rubbing water on me).

When I came back and sat down, afterward a man came, dressed shirt pants, briefcase in hand. Early morning. I asked whut you wan', main. He say, I jest come from Meerut, need some ash. Fo' mutthah, be sick. How'd you get up here? Oh yeah, I had to climb up, slim, it be ha ARD! After 1/2 time Yogi broke med. "Look, Slim, Ah TOLE YOU not to come up here NO MO!" Mother is sick. And why you keep writing these letters to me? He looked over at me. You read those

letters? I was embarrassed. Hey, Jack, everybody who come up heah read mah lettuh. Dudes got nutthin else to do. Now this time you take enough ash that you don't come back. And don't write me no more. Dude opened he briefcase took out a box, Swmiji was puttin ash. I asked that Swamiji, How do you get letters up here. Once in 2 months, the postmaster sends a team up here with letters for me. I am the only one who gets letters. There are 60 caves higher than mine, those dudes be even more zonked than me. If you want a comfortable life, eating twice a day and doing a little meditation, you better go back down to Hrishikesh. Well, the thing is, I don't know what sadhana I should follow. I'm chanting VSN, I do trotak, I don't know what is best for me. You should go up to Badrinatha, you'll see up there. Let's go for a walk. I haven't gone on a walk for a long time. Oh how many days. Days? Thirty YEARS, Slim! Took a snake stick. He took me up a little bit and pointed out some caves. Each cave there's a sadhu. I axed, you dudes ever get together. They come down here to see me once a year. I am their connection to the world, the go between. 60 sadhus gather here at my cave. What do you all eat? Eat? I am the only one who eats, man. Just a little burned dough every few days, thass all. Those dudes live on air. How long you been here, main. Hey, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me anyway. I been here too long. Those letters you saw were written to me only after dudes found out where I was. Man, I remember the whole pop yoga seen down there in Rishiksha, Paramarthaniketana Swami starting he ashrama, all that. Didn't used to be like it is now, Slim. What about the bread in the tube. Before I was here, there was another who was doing upasana to Kali Maa. When I took over, I continued. What happened to the bread, why didn't it come back down? She takes it, man. As we walked back, the lady, boy and girl and some goats were there, he said, don't bring any milk today. I decided to walk back down to Rishikesh. Came back to Munishananda Ashrama, and then went on down to Haridwara.

Chapter Fourteen

North 3

AMONG THIEVES OF THE MIND

Haridwara, Har Ki Pairi, sunset ceremony. Hindus and Sikhs (because Guru Nanak also bathed there). After ceremony, charity giver, charity seekers, agents for lodging and prostitution. Those whose sins are washed, perform new sins, those whose sins are not washed, they are getting good and dirty before washing. Such is the goings on at a holy place. And I am sitting there thinking What is the use? Lived like a beggar there for a few days. Came in contact with strange perversions going on as guru-disciple relationship.

Met many local people, foolish, whom he could easily convince he was God. Once, as part of getting bhiksha, he attended Sai Baba Bhajan. They set up chair with pix of SB, chanted OM 21 times, then sang bhajans, different ones, to Krishna, Ganesha, even some Sikh Bhajans, inserting SB's name. I sang Chitta Chora (from the back, they are not supposed to turn around). Did it in full raga style. Murmers of "Baba has come!" Then afterwards one man came to me crying, I was not fortunate enough to go to Puttaparthi, but I feel Puttaparthi has come to me. I said, I've got nothing to do with that place. He said, but you are a Mahatma, all-pervading soul, so you are connected with everywhere.

I felt like, here's a good opportunity, but my conscience said, no, when in TVS accounting department you could have done so much cheating but you were an idealist, so why should you now be a cheater after taking to spiritual life? Wicked intelligence replied, but if they don't come to me,

they'll go to someone else. I don't want anything, just maintenance. If I can help them, let me, there's no harm. They are suffering.

I confided in one lady schoolteacher (50 yrs) who gave me bhiksha that I'd only left TVS 2 months before, am just a neophyte, but sometimes visions come into my mind, and people take that as being a sign of my divinity. I have no control over this. I've been to Rishi, stayed in ashramas, don't have a guru, just a jerk. (This lady I considered pious and intelligent, like a lady sadhu, later I found she was having illicit relationship with a sadhu who came to teach her Gita). She told me, "Shivananda, Bhagat Singh, were the same way, ordinary men who stumbled into being God. My guru told me when I meet a sadhu who says he does not know when is Amavasya, he is a great mahamat and I should serve him. (That's how she met Mahatmaji).

(NOTE AAP LIGIYE Will you take now?)

Went to Daksha Mahadeva temple at Kankal, 4 km away from Hardwar. Where daksha performed Yajna (that story can be included). A canal from the ganga has been cut to that area. Two foreigners, tall thin German with girlfriend. Hanging around. Began speaking with them. "We heard Anandamayee is here. We wanted to see her, but we don't speak the language." No problem, I inquired and found where the building was located, took them. Gate was closed, I knocked, the darwan opened it. He said, she's sick, taking rest, dosen't see people (it's midday). I said these people have come from outside, let them see the ashram at least. He was negative, no one can come. One lady came, let us in, we saw temple. I noticed she was always going upstairs, so I motioned to the tourists to follow. I went up, leading them. Anandamayi was laying in bed, attended by young girl. I pushed the foreigners forward. She told them, I am very sick, you see me in Haridwar tomorrow, I'll be giving lecture. Then she gave them each a flower, and they turned and left. I stayed she was a big'un. She sat up and said, Anand ho. Are you happy? I said, no. Everywhere there is happiness, so why you are not happy? I said, You may have happiness, mataji, but has not come my way. She told the young servant girl go out and make up a plate of lunch for me. Bed is made up in saffron, her hair was long and loose. She is about 60 years old. She said, you're always trying to do things that are not necessary. You've gone to so many places. Ananda is right there in the heart. But IT is not taking it. I said, Look mother, I started out worshipping Devi. That landed me in trouble. Then I got bewildered by a siddha yogi. Then I went to Aurobindo. Then she said, then you went mad. Then you left job, and went to Tirupati, You even went up to Nilakanda Mahadeva. You're going to go on like this for a long time. Krishna bhakti is your sadhana (referring to VSN, 11th chap), but you have so much attraction for siddhi. You got siddhis in previous lifetimes, now there's just little remnants left. You should kick this nonsense away, then you'll find your real path. Then you will have Ananda, and you will tell you have it. Please take away my troubles, you are powerful. Look, that's bogus. Troubles are vanquished through purity. When you hear someone touched someone and took away all their problems, this is all cheating. What you are seeing around here is just to give you virakti (disgust). Saaf nahi he they are not clean. Tapasya and cleanliness clears the way to Ananda. So you go down, take lunch. remember when you find your path and attain bliss, you'll tell me about it.

I went back to Haridwar. I while bathing I saw one baba doing akamashana japa, water was over his nose, only bubbles coming out. I watched while he did this for half an hour. When he came out I asked, what mantra do you chant. He said, mantra and guru should be kept secret. I said, but if you teach me, I will also do. He looked at me and shook his head. "How many things do you want to do anyway. You chant Vishnu sahashra nama, you do tratak, you keep adding, adding, and what do you get out of it? I said Babaji Maharaja, what I need is a guru. Why don't you become my guru? You seem to know me through and through. He said, This is also your problem. You think that because I or some others you meet know a few things about you that we are your gurus. You are

attracted to the unreal. You should give all this up and concentrate on the truth. Gita is the real mantra. Your eleventh chapter is enough. But I'm not satisfied with that. Nobody is satisfied. You think I am satisfied standing underwater chanting my mantra? I suddenly blurted, You are chanting the Maha Mrtya Jaya Mantra. (Shiva mantra). He said, See, now you are doing it to me. So what's the big deal then? said, I just came from Anandamayi, and you've told me the same things she has. He said, We're all on the same level around here, you dig? You see, here the minds are lifted above the senses, dig? Some of us are more powerful, so they are generating power. The rest of us receive it. We all share it. You, you're just a small fry bouncing between us. You're picking up images in your head thrown by others. That's the limit of your power. You move around, get an experience here, something else there, but it's just the limit of what you can receive. And that's all you're going to receive. You're not meant to play this game. So get out of it while you can. Otherwise you'll lose your mind to some higher power and become his agent. Behind everyone you see, no matter how great they are, there is someone greater from whom he is getting his power, and he's being manipulated by that power. Thieves of the mind, just like below are thieves of possessions. So how I will ever see the truth, with all this going on? Well, this is the way it is. Be very careful whom you choose to follow. Remember, the world is full of fools. Fools follow fools. A fool guru will have only fools as disciple. There are many of those. A sage will have disciples who are sages. Because only sages will follow him. These you won't find many. I touched his feet and he blessed me.

Saaf nahi he (they are not clean)

My doubt They're telling but not doing, so who I can follow?

Returned to Rishikesh, went to Shivananda Ashrama, to the mandir where Radha Krsna Deities are on display, one swami was chanting HK mantra, I did my VSN while looking at an old Jaipur painting of Krsna under Kadamba tree with cows. I was thinking why I don't have some engagement like these dudes? They know what they be doin', but I just be roamin' a roun'.

HEY WHAT ABOUT MAHARISHI!?! SHOULD GO RIGHT HERE!

Andhra Ashram story. Two days after Hardwar. I went to the Shrinivasa (TTD) then Andra Ashram for prasad, saw sadhu with lungi and wrap on shoulder. He had 12 Wadagali tilaks. He asked me where I was from. I am from Tamil Nad. Oh I am from Andra. We started talking. I said, how is it that Rishikesh is such a useless place for spiritual life. I expected to find great sadhus, but its very commercial, and if I do meet someone who looks together, they don't share anything. He said, "You haven't missed anything. Even if you met those people you're looking for, all they would have told you was, You're looking for yourself." I said what do you mean, he said, that's their philosophy everybody is God, and you just realize yourself to be God realized. To defeat this philosophy, Srila Ramanujacharya came. He told story of Govinda falling. He told of Alvars they were the greatest of yogis and jnanis, and they concluded kandu konden narayana yennum namam "Finally I found the name of Narayan is the ultimate Truth." (Divyaprabhanda) I learned Sankhya, Jain, and Sankara's invention finally I concluded Narayana. From Tirumangai Alwar. He condemned because they will not bring you to satisfacton. You have to do bhakti, service. used to feel distant from this philosophy before, but this time I listened for three hours. I was thinking, "My God, why is it I can't believe in this?" If I could, I would accept, and it would be so simple. I asked him, but why are you here? Nobody follows that line up here. I left due to frustration, so I came here for seclusion. I don't associate with them Mayavadi dudes, dig? I cool up here. I just stay in the Andhra Ashram. I study Ramanuja's books and I worship Sampat Kumar (Krishna). I offer Him ganges water. Sometimes I give lectures here. Why you have to criticize others? There are many paths. No this is not criticism. You are confused. So I am telling you why

you are confused. I was wondering, he has ultimate thing, but how is it he stays all alone. Why is he isolating himself? Why is he not with the other Sri Vaishnavas? Have they become materialistic that he's not happy with them?

Chapter Fifteen

NORTH

HIMALAYAN PILGRIMAGE

Then I went up to Devaprayaga, 72 clicks from Rishikesh. Stayed in cave at confluence. For first week I just sat and watched the waves of the Ganga and Alaknanda. One Professor Bhagavata Prasada Khotwala would come and bring me to his house to eat. Early in the morning the village women would come to take water (you know like 3 3:30). Then I'd get up, take my bath, wash my cloth, hang it to dry. Talked in English with that Prof. Sadhu Seva was his thing. 11 children, old house. I was studying at Institute of Mr. Joshi (astronomy institute and Vedshalla). Khotwala would always bring me when sadhus would come.

Once I lectured on atma jnana (Body mind intelligence and soul) at his school. We would walk, I noticed big dog following is around. We used it feed it sometimes. With Khotwala was a veterinary doctor who said, Slim, Ah know evvry animal in town and THAT one don't belong to nobuddy! But this dog is so big and healthy, all the others are skinny, how come, Ahhh, who cares Slim, ain't impawten'. Khotwala took me down to Babaji who lived on the side of the Bhagirathi; difficult path, easy to slip, nobody goes there, that Babaji said get out, Khotwala said, if you say git, where we will go, you are our only shelter. Took his feet. I brought a Madrasi baba to speak with you. That Baba said, Oh, Madrasi baba, what yo doin here. Why didn't you go to Shivananda ashrama? I was there, it is useless. He laughed. Then he asked, can you clean rice. I said, wellll you gimme, I'll try. He told Khotwala, tell him if he cant clean rice and sift flour, he cant get food. He had grass from mountain, doing something, put it together, take it apart, make designs, then throw it in the river. Then sit and think (like thinker pose). Wears only Koupin. Nice cave, but nothing. Khotwala left me. I asked the dude how he gets foo ood! He say, Main, do uuggs be eatin. No, but what is your method. I want to become more renounced myself. Where are you staying. River confluence. What a place for a sadhu! Everybody goes there to bath.

What are you doing there too? You look at them dudes, you'll get their sins. But I do you live, Swamiji? You never go anywhere. I do a lakh of Rama-nama daily, Jackson. I look at the pavitra Ganga, thassall. I am counting my days to leave Ganga. So, you see anything so mystical in that? You remind me of Balyogi. He tole him. Some people eat through their own mouth, other through another's mouth, other's through even an animal's mouth. due eat through snake, mon. I eat through the dog. How you do this. Just like forfathers eat through birds. I am almost a forefather because I am dead to this world. Nobody offers me shraddha, so I eat throught the dog's mouth. Khotwala came just then with dog, daying, is this your Baba? Baba sadid take it and scram, KW understood. He say, man I eet threw fie dogs. When they come back I absorb the essence from their body. One sadhu in Badri taught me this trick. For people like you, stick with sadaloka (dudes), He said, anyway, there are no sadhus here. In Guptakashi there are Sadhus. You should take a trip to Badri. you do that, you won't want to go again. He was a mantra man. Chants, looks at river, hates the world.

I stayed Devaprayag 3 months.I went up to Badrinatha. September. Second day after I arrived everything was closed. Peaks were covered by snow. Sun peeked up at 11, set at 2:30. Little

warmth. Hot spring. Sadhus hangin out there. Deity is Narayana (panchavatara): Naranarayan, Shiva, Ganesha, Vyasa. Main Deity is Narayana, half size of Srini, can only see face, coovered with flowers, sits in lotus pose, ancient Deity style. I followed the road higher, towards military camps. I was wondering where I would stay. I saw a small building, roof were pieces of stones. I smelled some cooking. Old Tamil Nadhu granny inside, cooking dosha. She's dressed in traditional style, brahmin lady. She said sit down. In five minutes I was eating like at hme, doshas and coconut chutney. And achar. I said I just came, I need to find a place to stay... she said, eat. That's what you need. 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. Then she ate, cleaned up, brough some quilts, gave me, put on, put coals in stove, (very cold), then wrapping up we sat and she said Now tell me what you're doing. I said, I am looking for a place to stay. She said, what are you doing up here. I am looking for some spiritual sadhana. She said, where are you from.

TN she started talking Tamil. She said, Ada pavi! You useless fellow! You couldn't find sadhana where you came from? Well, what are you doing up here then? I am here for no sadhana. She's here because she's fed up with her people in Madras. She had property, she sold it, put money in bank, arranged that money would be sent each month to here Badrinatha bank. I am no sadhu, and all these sadhus are the same as I, they're here for different reasons, unhappy stories, thassall. I said, I just been to Shankara math (Jyuti math), but Shankaracharya wasn't there. Ah, she said, if they make me Shankaracharya, I could do 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. But I am too busy doing housework. What about the sadhus who meditate here, they're so elevated, close to God. She said, Oh yes, at this height, if you believe God is in the sky, then we are all close to Him. I am also close to God. You don't have to look for any special help for that. You are close to God yourself, right now. OK, but I want to perform some special tapasya and have higher knowledge of God. She said, look, you're shivering. With two blankets you're cold. What tapasya are you going to do. Those other sadhus are sitting at the hot springs. If that heat wasn't there, what would they do? Why do you believe all this? I said, are you telling this place is like any other joint? No, because for 6 months people cannot live here. It is too cold. From now it becomes bad climate, so bad you can't stay longer than one hour outside, unless you're fully covered. I was trying to defend, she destroyed. She told about some of the big sadhus around, that they're good for nothing, people worship them, but it is all a joke. No one has any stuff. If he had stuff, he wouldn't be sitting there surrounded by 50 people who tell him what to do. I am 60 years old, I've been here 26 years, I haven't seen anyone like you are dreaming about. i didn't come up here to see anyone like that either.

Next day at 11, I took a walk outside after washing mouth. very cold. I walked higher. I saw one Baba sitting in a roadside hut with beard and jata (matted locks). he was sitting with no clothes. In front of him was a small desk, the surface tilted towards him, a carpet on it. I went to the hut, ther was a place for sitting. I saw behind him shelves, and ther were barrels on them filled with cashew nuts. It was a shop. When I sat down, I felt warm. I saw an electric wire going down to table, inside was heater. Very small place, walls were against his shoulders. When I came he gave me cashews. I asked, Swamiji, for how many years you've been doing tapasya? I've lived here long, but who said to you I did some tapasya? Well, you look like dighambar-vrati. Where are you coming from, he asked. I told him. He said, listen to me. I came on a pilgrimage 7 years ago. He had money and clothes under his head while he was sleeping. Then he saw some sadhus, became interested, gave away his belongings and got cloth, colored it, and became a sadhu. He collected money by begging. (He was a Gujarati) He was robbed of his collection one night by another sadhu who had knife. The guy wanted to kill him. He said, just take the money, I won't say anything, leave me with my life. He thought, even if I have cloth, they'll kill me, so he became naked. Military men took a liking for him, built him that small hut. They give him their cashew nut supply,

which he lives from. They gave heater. His hair grew, he keeps jata because it's easier than combing.

After seeing this I went around, Kedaranath, hopped military truck back to Deva Prayag. Stayed, got following of young people, preached against drinking, smoking, movies.

6 kilometers beyond Rudra Prayag I visited Vishnu Ganga, a solid peak of Sodium Silicate, transparent rock. Cave there with Shivalinga. River flows around the base. Then I stayed a week in Rudraprayag. Confluence of Mandakini and Alaknand, wrapped bodies getting whizzed. For liberation. 3 4 bodies a day I watched. Death is certain. Pathshalla dude came by, brahmacaries studying Rig Ved, Yajur Ved, bonfyd. Teacher invited me for lunch, axed if I was a brahmin, said yes, axed how'd you take sannyasa, I said I kicked everything and colored my cloth. He said, you can't escape karma like this. He was karmakandi, planting rice each day in mud at his home. He axed me wear thread while I ate, with mantras, he'd feeding, I'd perform my karma. For him I sprinkled water around before taking, with mantra. He was happy, "You do this so nice, why did you give it all up?" Well I am doing because you put this thread, I'm doing what a thread wearer should do. Afterwards i may throw it in the confluence. No, no, you keep this, you chant your gayatri. Shankara's theory only came out because people were not following karma properly, but if people follow, they can forget Shankara (here philosophical thang). Bhagavatpada did emergency mission. He criticized the gurus, they are just giving escape philosophy. I said, but you're the only representative of this view I've met in the past 4 years since I've been looking into philosophy. Nobody's taking this karma path, just taking jobs and calling that karma. Speak Jaimini philosophy. I listened for a week. He worshiped a cow before he eats in the morning, etc.

Then I went up the road. 4 times I saw a sadhu crossing the road ahead of me on his way down, with a snake stick. Fifth time, I hailed him. What are you doing, Swamiji. Sadhana? No, exercise. I'm staying in Hanuman temple ahead, come on. No cooking arrangement, just temple with flag. I asked, what do you do for your bhiksha? I only eat once in 15 days. Then I go into town. Only 15 days once? It is waste of time to go and beg, waste of time for them to cook, waste of time for me to digest it. During that time I can chant so much Rama Nama. Oh, this is interesting, how you can have so much strength without eating? He opened up a box. Gave me a seed, said you take this, drink some water, for 15 days you can also go without eating. Then why you eat once in 15 days? Why not just eat this? Oh, you have to eat, because this body was created for eating and passing, if you don't it won't function properly. Then you can't use it for meditation. Use this body for meditation, then throw it away like banana peel. But til you get liberation, you've got to use the body. So use it to the fullest, thassall, don't leave strength left fo mayer. He's a Ram Nam main. He gave me a few seeds, said these are hard to get, but you're going Gangotri, Yamunotri, take and chant a lot, baba. He gave five. Enough for whole pilgrimage. He did some bhajan, good singer. Brought me to road and continued his exercise.

Gupta Kashi: I met a Raja Yogi (they start at Pranayama or Pratyahara, spontaneously or after studying scriptures, they don't go through the yama niyam sadhanas. Asana meant for grossos. He was a giant, like a wrestler. Massive chest. Small stomach. Said he can't find disciples because no samskara; my father did garbhadana samskara properly, therefore I got it, babe. He said, like your body, no good for yoga. All these sadhus up here, they think just by mind they can attain something. All they attain is the mind. With the mind you can neither enjoy nor liberate yourself. Very critical of Advaitis. The say, I am brahman, but when it gets cold, their health breaks and their disciples carry them to the hospital. They think their liberated in this life, but if they couldn't even keep this body properly, how will they get liberation, which is beyond the body? You can't do what is less, so how you'll do more? (JACK!) They sit here and say, I am everywhere and everything is in me. What is in you is just 3 things mucous. bile and air. He was a master of Yoga Sutra.

According to him, everybody (SHankara, Ramanuja) was a yogi. And now he's the last in the line. He had a servant who prepared food he ate once daily, fruit in morning also. Drinks big 2 liters milk in the night. I stayed with him in cave and read books, asked questions, from Rajasthan. I told him I'd been doing yoni mudra pranayam for past 8 months. He showed me how to do it right. Stayed 10 days with him. Then started up higher. Yamunotri (nthing)Gangotri. One Shaivaite sadhu explained how this is not origin of Ganga. It comes from Manasarovara (in Tibet) and flows through an underground passageway to Gangotri. I climbed up with him, and he showed me peaks. He was Kapalika, with skull.

In Rudraprayag I met a class from a girl's school. Teach needed a place for them to stay I took them to a Kalikambalwala pad. Teach was grateful, invited me to give lecture in Rourkee. I bluffed as big sadhu. Then in Devaprayag I'd gotten to know the dudes. They wanted to send a package of development plans to Rourkee, where district commissioner stayed, I volunteered, threw it out of the window in the Ganga. Found nothing in Himalayas. Went to school, lectured on power, got certificate, threw that in river also, went down to Dehli.

Chapter Sixteen

NORTH

Dehli: I decided to just take a job, don't smoke or drink, no other sins, chant VSN, and be a nice guy. I stayed in a Gurudwara. One morning I went to Ganesh temple. A man came in and left five rupees at Ganesh's feet and went to circumambulate the 9 planets. I took the money and began walking out. He caught me yelling Theif Thief, and a crowd gathered. I asked him, What have I stolen? He said, you stole 5 rupees that I put before Ganesh. I said, no, you gave Ganesh 5 rupees and he gave it to me. If you don't have faith that Ganesh took your money, then why do you give him anything? And if you don't have faith that Ganesh gives money to his devotees, then why do you worship him for money yourself? He was stunned, and the others started laughing. He became humble and axed, "Are you a Swami?" I said, my name is SA, I'm from Rishikesh. Oh please come with me, brought me to his care, his name was Lakhan Pal. He took me to his house, deals in televisions, intoed me to his sister a widow, mother, servants, big capitalist's house. Then he said you must set foot in my office. While in the office I happened to notice an oversight in his employee insurance paperwork which was on his desk just awaiting his signature. I calculatated he'd lose 7000 roops by sending in the papers so made out, and I told him. His clerk admitted he didn't really understand the proper system, but this was my field in TVS, so in a hour's time I corrected the mistakes. I asked him for job. I can train up your clerk. He got permission from his granny "Whatever Swamis want we give."

So I worked, for 4 days and stayed at dude's house. I also drew pictures of Gods and goddess and gave them to the office employees, and nobody minded cause I be swami. Then there was holiday, I stayed at house, there was big puja at home altar done by widow sister, Granny axed me to attend, afterward granny left and sis came touched feet said I have no guru, you must stay and be my guru. I thought, uh oh. I said Om, and retired to the family library. So after eating that night I announced, I just wanna talk a li'l stroll. I split. I started visiting religious institutions in Dehli. It seemed that some higher direction did not want me to go back to material life. So I thought, well, maybe it's here, let me look. So I went to so many societies. And at the end I thought, they're all cheating. One day I saw a big poster: "Bhagavan Rajneesh (c) Palkadora Gardens" Palkadora Gardens is a place where biggies talk (c) Sai Baba, Cinmayananda. Famous place, mostly religious stuff. I inquired, found out where, walked that shide. Program was advertised for 5 O'clock. I got there early. Chair in the middle of stage covered with white cloth, flowers putting up in background,

western music thumping over speakers, I axed a sannyasi whut hebbnin, he say go in back, be dudes to tell ya. I ended up talking to a red haired lady called Maa Ganga. Maa Ganga brought me into into garden, and she was talking, jumbled hippie talk, first about how the real meditation is that which gives satisfaction, people are doing crazy things, blowing up bridges, or their very normal, supressed and frustrated. Crossed back and forth between. Some express their desires, but wrongly, others just repress them. Bhagavan is giving that right way of expression. He doesn't give some high ideal that people can't follow he meets them where they are, and helps them at that point. We walked 2 times around the garden. I saw other Rajneeshies respecting her. Then an Indian lady in a red gown came up, she had bobbed hair, from Western side of India, very loose weirdo woman. And Maa Ganga respected her. She told Rajneesh was coming so then we had to go. The place was filled quickly. Played booble ooble music, guys and chicks doin' the bop, looked pretty wiped out. Two people spoke before a cinemal actor, and then Dehli Rajneesh leader, in Hindi for half an hour. Rajneesh sat there in chair, restlessly. His feet jiggling around, twitching. He looked like Rasputin. Then he spoke, saying he would demonstrate samadhi. He stood up, some 25 or 30 women got on stage, few men, He was giving initiations, one lady rolled off the stage when he touched between her eyes. Reminded me of a Christian healing session. Another one just collapsed. Then he said, we will play a record, and everyone can do whatever you like: tear your shirt, run back and forth, jump up and down. Then even before the music some started going Huh-huh huh! The music came on, and they were freaking out, he was sitting in the middle, shaking his head as it went on around him. The crowd also went crazy, the Dehli indian crown. One lady was screaming because someone behind was pulling her Sari. That went on for 10 minutes. He then spoke again this is samadhi, when you find your innermost desire and just exhibit it.

Usually I was interested to meet the guru afterwards, but not this one. Then I saw this Maa Ganga preaching to one Punjabi Hindu. He was opposing her, saying, I am a member of a yoga society, how can you call putting on a record and doing foolish things samadhi? She was telling him you're just on the beginning stage, here we are reaching the heights, he was very dissatisfied and left, saying, You're misguided.. Then she turned to me, said, I find many Indians are so narrow minded. He doesn't want to see any value in what we're doing at all, just totally rejects it from the start. But our program is to keep an open mind, and respect everything. Then I asked, so you are staying at the Rajneesh Ashram in Dehli? She said, no, no, there's no peace there. To many strange people coming there all the time. I stay in the Aurobindo ashram. She invited me to come, because two Buddhists had an appointment to meet her. So we got into a van, painted up Rajneesh, dropped some people off at the Raj ash, went Auro ash, she had a room there with a servant/cook. 8:30 the two buddhists came, young Indian boys attending the university of Dehli. dressed as Lamas, black purple. They asked the Rajneesh definition of sannyasa, she said one who is not attached and feel no guilt about anything he does. They said, well we heard if you can have unlimited sex, you are a sannyasi. How is that. She said, yes, one comes to the stage where it doesn't affect him at all.

The other one said, well, what if one is not physically able to have unlimited sex? She said, the mind and body grow together. When one reaches that high platform where nothing is rejected, then the body will automatically have the strength to have unlimited sex. Like Bhagavan he can have sex repeatedly, but it does not affect him. He won't feel exhaustion, or any guilt. There is only a few people who can come to this understanding. She mentioned a few names in their movement of others who could do, including that Indian woman. Then the other Buddhist asked, but why do you call him Bhagavan? And why do you take other such terms from the Vedas and the Buddhist scriptures when these scriptures forbid such activities? She said, anyway, these methods in those scriptures are obsolete. Just like you, you follow brahmacharya, but if you deviate slightly from it, then your whole advancement is lost. People cant do this nowadays, so our method is to just turn the weaknesses in strengths by making so called sin our sadhana. So this is a whole reinterpretation, a modernization of the ideas of the old scriptures, and that's why we call him Bhagavan, because only

a Bhagavan can do this. The Buddhists had no further argument. After they left she told me a bit about herself. She was from Madhya Pradesh, though of Western parentage. From a foreigner's vegetarian community. She came to join the Pune Film Institute, and that's where she was preached to by some Rajneeshies. She's Spanish origin, but since grandfather's time her family lived in India. I asked her for some books, and she gave. I said, I'll read them and see you later. Then I will ask some questions. So next Sunday I returned, first attending the Aurobindo program, then went to her place. I was all fired up to blast away because everything I read was contradictory. It followed no philosophical pattern at all. Servant asked me to wait, she was just finishing her bath. I was getting ready for a big discussion. Then she came out and sat down, and before I could start she said, You know, I am seriously thinking of leaving Rajneesh. I said, why? I've been here for six years, and I cannot get over my repulsion for the things that go on in the ashram. See, I don't smoke eat meat, these were things I was raised not to do, and they tell me these are my hangups and I should give them up. Also they are having sex in their meditation periods, any man with any woman, and I am just unable to surrender to that. I've become a spokesperson for the movement, so I'm getting pressure that I should not be a prude. But it's just I don't know something I cannot do.

They wanted me to go to the west to "get loose", but I refused. What I do like is the philosophy. I like to speak this to others. But even that is not much appreciated, even though it comes from rajneesh, they think I am putting on airs by being too intellectual. Then I jumped in "What philosophy are you talking about? I've read those books and I don't find any. There are no definitions of anything. He uses words like body, mind, soul, but the way he uses these terms they become meaningless. You've got no tradition of philosophical development behind you, where debates were held between scholars and commentaries were written codifying your point of view. It's just Rajneesh talking, and he'd just basically talking about sex. But there is more to human consciousness than sex. You say, accept everything, keep an open mind, but I find your position very narrow minded. It's as if the mind, the intellect is the Devil. See you've just reverse sides with the traditionalists, whom you criticize. They say, "Sex is devilish and sublime thought is good", you say "sublime thought is devilish and sex is good." So how is that open minded? Why is clear thinking bad? Why is not smoking bad? Why is not eating meat bad? Then she said, My problem is I don't have a companion in life. I am a woman I need a man to give me shelter and affection. I need someone to give me a hand in my life. I don't want to live sinfully. But it is hard for me to get out of this now that I am into it. I was surprised that she even used the term 'sinful', and pointed this out to her. "Your Bhagavan says if you like pious activity and don't like sin, you can never realize the truth, because you are in duality. And now you are feeling guilty.

You told those Buddhist boys that sannyasa means no guilt. So what is your position? She had no reply. Then she put the make on me but if you would help me I could get out. I told her sorry, I am a Swami, no chicks. Anyway, a few days later I did drop in just to see how she was doing. She was wearing white cloth kurti, lenga. No mala, no red. I said, Hey babe, what's goin' down. She say, Main, since I tawwkt to yoo las tam, I gived it UP, Baby. Now she was reading Shivananda's books. I said, look, chickie, I read these books too, dig? She said, well you mentioned you'd been there, so I started reading. Then I said, yeah, but it doesn't come to a conclusion either. She said, well I got out of Rajneesh because of you, but you don't tell what conclusion is. I said, Baby, I don't even know myself. She said, then why can't we search together. I told her forget it. I felt bad to leave her like that. So I told her, look, I am searching, when I find, I'll contact you. She gave me her address. After that I threw it in the river.

Chapter Seventeen

NORTH

From Dehli I went to Kurukshetra. I was remembering Munishananda's telling me that I'd find what I was looking for here. But I was already losing hope. I'd become quite cynical about the whole spiritual trip. So I met some young professor who invited me to give a lecture at Kuruksetra University. (I'd told him about all my travels, and spoke philosophy, so he was impressed). He arranged a program for the next day, on Yoga. I laughed when I heard this. Yoga yoga means sleep. Realizing God through sleep, and that God is also asleep. But anyway, I don't mind. Two on the stage, 28 in the audience. I got on the stage and said, I hear you're interested in Yoga, so I don't want to say anything, I just want to make a demonstration and let you experience it yourself. Told everyone to lay down. Over the mike I am speaking instructions. Bring your minds to the tips of your fingernails and toenails. And move your minds from there up. limb by limb removing all stress. There you feel totally relaxed and peaceful. Now only stomach is left. Now only navel. Now come out of the navel and rise up, look down, see your body and the other bodies see your not the body. Then I chanted Yoga sutra verses to a slow, dreamy melody, over and over, and everyone is asleep. Then I walked out. Later I collected some donation for that lecture from the young professor from Kerala, who said "It was wonderful, Swamiji, you are so powerful. You can be what you want, another Ramakrishna!" I went on to Jyoti Sar, the tank marking the spot where Krishna spoke BG to Arjuna.

I sat before the tank and spoke to Krishna. Either make me a devotee or a demon. I never willfully meant to go wrong. In Salem it was 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 don't want to do something against your will. I chanted 11 chapter, VSN, sang bhajan, did parikrama around the tank. Nothing happened. There was a sannyasi with a stand, selling a magazine called Voice of the Land. I looked at it, and saw an article proclaiming that "Nobody Should Make Pilgrimage to Ganga, Nobody Should Seek God." I became angry and demanded to know how he could sit there dressed as a sannyasi and peddle such a magazine at Kuruksetra, where Krishna spoke Bg. He said, "But do you know who said these words? This was Vivekananda!" I said, I don't care if your grandfather said those words I don't accept them. He said, look, why are you criticizing me? If you don't like it, just walk away. I said, listen, JACK, innocent people come here and if they read that it may ruin their whole life. I just stood there and ranted on and on, blowing this dude away. I came to Kalka. From Kalka one goes Simla and the Himalaya. Hoping against hope. I was going to follow the road to Simla when I saw a small ashram near the railroad track. Saw sadhu the works (matted locks, etc.). Fire kunda in front of him.

Kali murti, black 3 eyes tongue down to chest. Bengali style. He was making a yajna, offering to fire, chanting. When he finished he asked me, do you know any prayers? So I chanted Lalita Sahashra Nama. I remembered about fifty verses of that, then I switched to a prayer by Adi Shankara to Durga. I sang this to a nice tune. He was happy and he blessed me. Then he asked, "What is your sadhana?" I made an ironic comment because I was next to the tracks, I said, "Til now, no signal. I don't know where the signalman is. I'm waiting on the outer track for his sign to begin rolling." He laughed. And said, "I am the signal man. Stay with me." I said, no I am going to Simla. He said, "What you'll get there? It is a Christian place and the Theosophical Society. It is no place for Shaktas." I told him, look, I've been through Shakta, tantra, pranayama, yoga..." "All that because no one put you on the proper track. Just stay here. Look around nobody here. This is outside the town. No disturbances. You can do your trotak, you VSN, whatever you like I'll just add certain things. He look at the Kali murti she will take you. So I thought wow, this is the first dude who's shown interest in me. He really wants me to stay with him. So I thought, lets give it a whirl. Kalka has an important Durga temple he told me to go there and get the blessings of the deity and return. While I was there I asked the pujari if I could do prashna. He gave me two flowers. I touched them. He put them on Diety. Said you sit here and wait. Red and yellow flower. If red flower falls, I

shouldn't stay. Red flower fell. I shouldn't stay. But then I was thinking, well why shouldn't I stay. Anyway, let me stay and check the prashna, if there was some truth there. I came back and was there 2 days, 3rd day. He just told me to chant prayers with him. He wasn't being guru, though. In the morning I did my trotak, then did more pranayams. Did some work brought wood for him. Forth day was amavasya. 6 minutes walk from his place was a hill, and there was a red sindhur covered rock on the side which was a durga deity. He went there thrice daily to make offering.

Durga story he said there a drop of blood fell, but people don't know the potency of that place. Morning fourth day, he did his offering, I cleaned ashram, he went to town to pick up special ingredients for puja. Tonight there is special puja at midnight he told me when he returned. You do chanting all night. I was fired up, something hebbnin. Offerings were raw mixtures muri, fruit, sugar candy, flat rice, etc. 18 preps. Whole day fasting. Sunset time he makes an offering. He gave me the offering and told me to go. I noticed also he'd kept a big knife in the fire. Chopper. He'd taken that out of a trunk. I asked him, what's that, he said this is the knife we worship tonight. I thought, oh far out. Bathed, kunkum. I went up, it was drizzling a little, I felt like passing water. From up there another footpath went down to the tracks. I went down, pissed. The signal man was walking down the track. He said Kon hai thum who are you. I told him I am with the babaji. We're having special puja up on the hill tonight. Any water around for me to wash with. He looked at me and said, "Escape right now. Quickly go! I asked, but water. He said, it's down the track on the other side look this man is going to kill you so move. I moved. I remembered flower, knife. See there was a train parked there. Signal man said, this trains going to roll, so cross now. Just after I crossed, the train started tadaktadaktadak. I washed and kept running to the town. I ended up in the railway station. One man was dressed as train official. So I caught hold of him, and said I think someone wants to kill me. He said, what are you saying? Who? The babaji down the track... Then a whole thing exploded, police were brought, I was taken for an interview, but I talked my way out. I said there's no evidence of this. Make complaint they said, but what complaint, the the police left. Baba is into making 1000 human sacrifices and will gain control over all the material elements. I think he's done 12 or 13. This train man was his main enemy. I stayed at his place overnight. Then next day I went to Simla with his daughter, who took me to her uncle's place, who was a member of the Theosophical Society. Dharamshalla: Some monks chanting OM MANI PADME HUM and others playing badminton. I talked with a few young unordained monks I want to speak to Dali Lama. "He is Buddha. You can't see him." I wanted to see the place, I was taken to an ordained monk who checked me out. Old guy spoke Hindi, others spoke English. He took me around. First thing I saw was big deity of Lord Buddha, with 4 hands & Vishnu symbols. There were other murtis also all 3 times my size, whole Tibetan scene. I asked what is this, he said different levels of consciousness of Buddha. Very tantric influence. You can watch the prayer. All Buddhists came in, to a big chant fest. Far out impression created. Dalai Lama came with ringing of bells, lamps after half an hour. Then everyone left except for 6 people. Different ceremonies, he was touching some people with letter mantras, and then mixing different substances in cups, looked like a mind exercise. I went to sleep, leaning up against a column.

Then everyone left except Dalai Lama and one servant. Dalai Lama sent him, he caught me as if I did wrong. I tried to speak but he only talked in Tibetan. I did obeisances. He DL asked what are you doing, I said was looking for a chance to see you. I told him some of my stories. He asked about my education, languages, typing, then he asked what do you know about Buddhism. I said not much, the monks I met couldn't tell me so much. He said you cn stay here and study Buddhism. He called four 5 South Indian (Kerala 2, 2Ceylon, one Tamil). I was given a room. Dalai Lama spoke about Tibet freedom, 3rd world war, and so on. I gave up all my sadhana except VSN. Studied books. After 12 days I looked out the window and saw the monks playing badminton. I wrote him a thank you note and left. Came back to Simla. Stopped by policemen after Simla, Chillum he, Chinda he, Trisul he, rubbed hand for ganga I said no How are you a sadhu? I said sadhus don't

