

## Brahmachari Yogeshda\*

"Seek and Ye shall Find " (St. Mathew 7:7, St. Luke 11:9.)

Yogeshda's experience is truly a great example of these words of Jesus Christ. Yogeshda was in search of someone who could show him the Path and his desire to 'Seek' led him to Mataji.

In the following narrative of Yogeshda's early experiences, Mataji's Grace manifests itself. In every doubt, in every quest Her loving hand is extended imperceptibly to hold the seeker's hand and gently lead him on the Path without much difficulty.

It was about the year 1925-26. Yogeshda was working as an assistant in the Health Laboratory in Dacca on a salary of Rs. 60/- per month. Since his early days, he had been inclined towards a life of sadhu. He had taken part in the Freedom Struggle and believed in the Swadeshi Movement. Because of this he had undergone a prison term.

News went round that a lady had come to Dacca, who lived with her husband in an orchard grove of a Muslim Nawab at Shahbag. The lady observed purdah as was the custom, and performed her normal household duties, but was becoming known for her extraordinary attraction and her mystic powers.

A Government servant who was a disciple of Sri Aurobindo periodically came on administrative duties. He, too, related to Yogeshda the happenings in the grove. There was a large hall where the Nawabs had formerly held mahfils with the accompanying dancing and singing. Twice a week Mataji came to the hall and sang bhajans with the few people that happened to come there. In those days no one did pranama to Her. She touched no one and no one touched Her.

Yogeshda went for Mataji's darsana. At first he could only see Her feet because Her face was completely covered. On one occasion he happened to see Her throw something out of the house and he noticed the swift movements of Her bangled wrists and hands.

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\* Sri Yogesh Rai, one of the oldest devotees of Mataji known as " Yogeshda".

Mataji would come to the meeting with Bholanath and clap Her hands in rhythm with the singing and recite Kirtan. Once Mataji requested Bholanath to ask Yogeshda to sing a bhajan. He did so. Thereafter this became a regular performance, twice a week. By then Mataji had Her face uncovered during kirtan. Yogeshda was struck by the radiance of Her inner beauty.

He was fascinated by the sight of Her face and the light that shone on it.

At every meeting some strange things happened. Mataji would get into a trance very often. Whenever Mataji entered the hall, She would bend Her head and touch the ground in pranama and then sometimes roll in a most supple and swift manner. It looked as if She had no neck and no bones. Tears would flow from Her eyes during kirtan.

At one meeting Mataji walked around as usual, singing bhajans. Suddenly She came towards Yogeshda who was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She put one foot against his back and holding the finger of Bholanath, got onto Yogeshda's shoulders and stood there. The next moment She was flat on the ground in pranama. Yogeshda was wonderstruck. When someone asked him afterwards how much weight he had felt, Yogeshda said, "Hardly any at all". There had been no pressure on him.

At the fifth meeting a few people gathered as usual. Yogeshda sat in great awe, as always, waiting for some guidance from Mataji for his Spiritual life. Mataji came holding a garland of flowers in Her hand which She gave to Bholanath. Then clapping Her hands in tune with the music She walked around trying to do kirtan. Suddenly, She uttered, "Hari Om" and fell into a trance. Later She asked for garland, broke the string, pulled the flowers apart and threw them to the people sitting around. One flower struck Yogeshda on the forehead and fell away from him. Mataji then said, those who had received flowers could come and do Pranama.

Yogeshda did not go to do obeisance as he felt he had not received the flower since it had fallen away from him. All others pranamed. Yogeshda went home but could not help crying all the time. He did not cook his meal and lay down on his scanty bedding.

The next meeting he did not attend. A messenger came to call him later. When he arrived at Shahbagh, Mataji asked him what he was doing, if he was married, where his parents were, what was his pay, and similar questions. She enquired if he could get leave and for how long at a time, and how soon he could get leave for three months at a stretch. She asked him to go and apply for long leave and then return to Ma.

He did as he was bidden. When he came back to Mataji, She indicated to Bholanath to ask everyone to leave the room and to close the door as she had something to say in private to Yogeshda. This was the first "private" Mataji granted to anyone. After this the practice of giving private interviews started.

When they were alone, Mataji said to Yogeshda that She was going to ask him to do some difficult work, but only for a little while. He should take long leave and adopt the life of an ascetic, subsisting on begged alms for one whole year only. He was not to tell this to anyone nor disclose what Mataji had told him nor show that he recognised Mataji and Her Party if, by chance, he happened to meet them anywhere. From the first of Phalgun (February - March) of that year he should live by begging and take his first alms from his brother.

About that time, Dacca was recovering from its first Hindu - Muslim riots. Life was very unsafe as there was frequent killing. Yogeshda would rather stay with friends than go home late at night.

When Yogeshda took long leave, Mataji told him that his salary would be kept at Shahbagh and only enough would be given to him to go and visit his mother. He was to stay there for only three days.

When he went home and knocked at the door, it was midnight. All were surprised to see him and wondered why he had come at that hour. He told them that he felt like seeing them as he had taken holidays to go to the Kumbh Mela\*. (Mataji was also going to Hardwar to attend the Kumbh). His brother was not at home. He had gone away on some

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\* The Kumbh Mela is celebrated once every twelve year. It takes place in the month of Magh (Jan. Feb), when the sun entering Capricorn coincides with the appearance of Jupiter in Aquarius. Kumbh bathing in the Ganga is regarded most meritorious by all devout Hindus.

work and had left Rs. 10/- with his wife.

On taking leave of his mother, Yogeshda touched her feet and asked for some money for the fare. At once his sister-in-law put the Rs. 10/- into his hand. Thus he received his first alms from his brother as Mataji had directed. Mataji's imperceptible hand had made this possible even though the brother was absent. This is how Mataji's all-knowing ways exert their influence in all matters concerning Her devotees.

With some salted dry food stuffs, a blanket and a lota (a round goblet-like vessel with a narrow mouth) Yogeshda left home. In obedience to Mataji's instructions, he shaved his head and beard at a place where no one could see him. Then he was not to shave again for a whole year. After buying the ticket for Hardwar, he had a few rupees left.

The train Journey passed without discomfort. He had enough food with him and did not have to beg from any passenger. He felt awkward at the thought of having to beg. He was a stranger in strange company, going on a strange mission to strange places. How would he beg? It was the Hardest thing to do. Yet he knew he could not put it off for long. He had to prepare for it mentally.

At Hardwar, he felt bitterly cold. After the warm climate of Bangla Desh such cold was a painful surprise. He did not have enough clothes. The night in the train he sat cuddled up in his blanket. As he came out into the platform there was a drizzle which made him feel even colder. Another sadhu joined him and together they made their way to the holy bathing place. A panda followed them with the usual purpose of extracting some money from them. After a while, he realised that he could get nothing and so left them.

Seeing them just arrive, a boy came up and told them to go to "Hari" or "Brahma Kundh". It was raining by now. Covering himself with his blanket, Yogeshda walked to the stored spot to have a bath in the holy Ganges. So cold was the water that after just two dips he was trembling and shivering. It had never occurred to him that it could be so cold anywhere in the world. He tried to get warm by walking about on the pavement. The rain had stopped. There were some empty seats

with large umbrellas fixed to the ground. He sat under one of them. A panda came and asked him to move away as it was his place. It again drizzled, so he went to the next seat. That also he was asked to vacate by another person. He was shivering and was wondering where to go when someone came up to him and suggested Bhola Giri Ashram.

On reaching there, Yogeshda found the venerable sadhu in meditation. He had many followers in Dacca. One rich man named Yogesh Das had built a temple in Bolagiri's name in Dacca. When the Mahatma was ready to give darsana, many people did pranama to him. For the first time Yogeshda saw devotees prostrate in Sashtang pranama (lying flat on the ground, face downwards, with folded hands stretched above the head in humble supplication). When he gave his name as Yogeshda, the Mahatma thought that he was the person who had built the temple. But when he found that this was not so, he again closed his eyes in meditation. Thereafter, Yogeshda left.

Again he was wondering where to go. A young boy accosted him and directed him across the Ganga where he would find many places to stay. He said the ferry-man nearby would ferry him across free to charge. The place was near the Lakshman Jhula. Due to the rush because of the Kumbh Mela, the place was dotted all over with people. Most of the kuties (small huts) were occupied. On searching he found some shelter - just a roof and walls with a mud flooring, but no door fixed to the entrance. He decided to stay there. That night he huddled up in a corner, feeling miserably cold without the warmth of a meal besides insufficient clothing. Next day he gathered some branches and twigs to make a door for protection from the strong gales. But when the leaves dried there were gaps through which the icy wind rushed in with piercing fury. Yogeshda got hold of bits of cloth and covered the gaps. This was of course only a poor protection.

Here he spent some days. The discomforts were richly compensated by the grandeur of nature's beauty. He was overjoyed at the sight of the high mountains, so close to him. They seemed to dip their feet into the holy waters of the river that flowed majestically in the centre of valley enriching every part of the land. Such scenery was not to be found in his home country.

Physical inconveniences he was learning to brave but begging was most difficult. Often he would go with out a meal. Sometimes he would follow the other sadhus when the bell rang at the 'Kshatar' ( a place where food is distributed particularly to members of a religious sect). Then he would have a good meal. Often he would be given a heap of chappaties (unleavened bread). But he was not used to eating those as his staple food had been rice. So he would sit on a rock near the Ganga and throw bits of chappaties into the river. Soon large fishes came, and it was fun seeing them scramble for the food.

Some sadhus told him he could go to Badrinath by just paying Rs. 10/- to an organisation that provided all necessities for the trip.

One day a boy showed him a kutir that had fallen vacant. He shifted into it. Here there was a raised stone with a depressing on the top at one end. He cleared it and found it most suitable to spread his food to eat with convenience. It was better than tumbling in the lota for morsels.

Time was drawing near for the Kumbh day. He knew Mataji would be coming. He said to himself, "If Mataji comes let Her find me out". The very next day, as he was sitting on a rock, he saw Mataji and Her party approaching. But he was not to show any recognition. Yet he was very eager for Mataji to see him. So he thought he would go into the Kutir and sing a bhajan loudly to attract Mataji's attention. He tried to raise his voice and sing. Alas, much to his chagrin, no sound would come. His throat felt locked. He struggled in vain to sing and felt exasperated.

This was Mataji's way of recognising him.

As the party wended their way down the path, Yogeshda rushed out to see their backs just turn the corner of the bridge. Bholanath saw him and said, "Hey Yogesh", and smilingly passed out of sight. A little later he returned, put Rs. 10/- into his hands and disappeared. Yogeshda was lost in amazement at this strange incident and this gesture of providing for the money he needed for the Badrinath trip.

Such are the countless ways in which Mataji manifests Herself, and the mysterious actions in which She shows Her benevolence and

love. Lucky and blessed are they who can come within even a shadow of Her Grace.

After the Kumbh, Yogeshda decided to proceed ahead on his travels. He had heard of Rishikesh, but did not know how to go there. Again a small boy looking very much like a sadhu came up to him and said it was 13 miles distance on the road, indicating across the river.

Yogeshda walked for some time till there was habitation around. There some sadhus directed him to a place where other sadhus lived. But it was very crowded. He was not a member of the sect. He was given food but where to spend the night? The only place he found was under the tin projection of the house. There he settled for the night. His small bundle of a few odds he placed under his head. At dusk he felt someone tugging at it. He discovered a large monkey trying to pull out the bundle. He got up and spent the night sitting huddled up to prevent another attack.

The next day he continued his walk to Rishikesh. Someone warned him not to go too far as the area was all jungle and wild animals prowled about. After halting for the night at some place, he reached Rishikesh.

Again a small boy directed him to go to the Kali Kamli Math. It was meal distribution time. There were many sadhus going to get their food and he was asked to join them. Sadhus usually had a piece of cloth tied around their necks, the ends of which were held out, spread wide, to hold the alms. Yogeshda had no such cloth, nor did he have a begging bowl for dal. He had to put everything into his lota, and it was hard to dish out the food through the narrow opening. However he managed somehow. His manners and ways were so unlike those of sadhus. One person, while serving him, asked how long he had been a sadhu. He felt shy and embarrassed, it was too obvious that he was a beginner. He could not accept uncooked food as he had nothing to cook in, nor a place to stay. In order to live at the Kshatar he had to become a member of the sect. This he could not do.

He was unable to go to Badrinath as the trip did not materialise.

He remembered that he had a friend who worked at the Forest Department at Dehradun. He sent a note to him and the next day he got

a reply. His friend, Rameshwar Banerji, would be happy to see him on all sides frightened him.

Soon he found himself at Doiwala with government servants saluting all officers and also him. Later he went to Dehradun with his friend. This was his first visit to the Doon valley, where some years later he was to spend many years.

His friend was going on leave to Kashmir. He invited Yogeshda to join him. But Yogeshda had to go on foot, so they planned to meet at Srinagar. It took a month for him to reach there.

As he trekked on the road to Srinagar, cars would pass by. When they hooted driving up the meandering path he could judge the direction of the route and he often took shortcuts to the point from where the horn sounded. In this way the journey was considerably shortened. An English man seeing him trudge along, asked where he was going. Srinagar, was the reply and he was asked to jump into the car.

At Srinagar Yogeshda thanked his kind host and proceeded on his way.

A kuli rushed up and asked where he wished to go. He said "Ashram". He was led to a wooden building. Naga sadhus lived there. A few were busy mixing bhang in a large utensil. He was permitted to stay but was directed to the other part of the ashram for meals. He was given dry ingredients and was asked to cook for himself. This he could not do. So the task allotted to him was to distribute food to sadhus. About eight or ten would come to eat at every meal.

One day he distributed the rice as usual. He did not know that the head sadhu would be coming. When he came, there was not enough rice for him. The other sadhus all put the blame on Yogeshda, accusing him of having eaten the food himself as he was in charge of it. After this Yogeshda left the place.

He proceeded to Pahalgam. From the bus stop, kulis took him to another ashram. At night the sadhus would come to eat at his kshatar. Among them was a Bengali sadhu, who recognised him as one from his homeland. They would go for long walks together and sing bhajans. Impressed by his melodious voice, the sadhu went and told one Swami



Sivananda about Yogeshda. He was invited to the Swami's ashram garden where other sadhus also lived and was asked to sing a bhajan. He sang a verse by Swami Vivekanda in praise of Lord Siva. The sweet voice and the moving melody expressed the deep devotional feeling of the singer. The Swami was charmed beyond words. The pleasant meetings were then often repeated.

As Babaji Yogeshda narrated this event to me, I sat spell-bound. When remembering each incident, each moment, all the feelings of a past long thrust into the back of his mind, were revived. When he sang the verse again, his cracking voice was suddenly soft and melodious and his face brightened as perhaps past memories emerged. His eyes sparkled with a favour of devotion, strong and vigorous inspite of old age, and he gazed with a firm and unshaken gleam of faith that often removes the doubt of disbelievers. I looked at his face, listening intently and trying to discern the meaning of some spluttering words. He would stop and repeat those words and explain their meaning. He was visibly moved.

Yogeshda stayed a few days at Pahalgam, when plans were made to go to the fair at Kheer Bhawani, at the holy lake site, visited annually by many devotees. It was a few days journey by ponies and all arrangements were made for food, conveyance and their stay there. Just as they were leaving a messenger from his friend the forest officer came running, "Ah, we have found you at last". They had looked for him in all the ashrams but could not find him. His friend was waiting for him, but Yogeshda could not go to him as he had committed himself to visit Kheer Bhawani, and did not like to change his mind.

After attending the fair he joined his friend and together they went to the Amarnath cave. Darsana is usually during Sravan Purnima (Full Moon of August) day. But they had to make the trip a month ahead as his friend's leave was expiring.

The climb was in three stages. The third stop was a tent pitched in a cave covered with snow. Above 10,000 ft. there were no trees, only some scraggy growth and snow. Higher up there was just snow. In the tent they cooked their 'kitchuri' (rice and dal boiled in one dish) and

went to have a bath. On returning, the kitchuri had become a solid block and had to be heated again. Yogeshda was surprised to see water trickling down into a stream near the tent. It was the Panch tarni, one of the five rivers of this region. Curious to find out the source of the water in a snow-bound area, he traced the flow to a flat ground behind the cave. It was a frozen lake. The surface was ice, but underneath there was water that flowed out.

At another spot while trekking up the mountains, there was a large protruding rock, almost overhanging the path. It was the only bare piece amidst a snow-covered region. They posed for a snap. Just as the camera was focussed, two wild snow ponies came and stood on the rock above and got snapped with them.

The guides were pandas. Yogeshda was keen to go to the cave before anyone could reach there, just to make sure that no one was tampering with the Linga. One could often hear the people say that Pandas usually went ahead and formed the Linga. When Yogeshda entered the cave, he saw the well-formed snow Linga, beautifully carved as it were in a most perfect shape. After darsana they had to return immediately to their camp. One cannot stay long enough in the cave as it is too cold and there is no place to camp nearby.

They then returned to Pahalgam and from there to Srinagar. The forest officer left for Dehradun, while Yogeshda decided to stay on for a few days longer.

The trip back to Jammu took him a month, it was about 202 miles. His whole sojourn in Kashmir had lasted for about three months.

At Jammu railway station, Yogeshda found that he had fever. He lay down on the platform. The train came and the passengers left. He heard someone calling him. He looked up and was told that the guard who was sitting in a tea stall, was calling him. He asked Yogeshda from where he had come and where he wished to go. He gave him some tablets for fever ordered for milk to be given to him every day, all paid by the guard in advance. After two days he returned and inquired how Yogeshda was. By then the patient had developed diarrhoea. He took only a few of the tablets that were given to him and threw the rest away. The guard let him travel in the train as far as he was on duty

on the route. After that he got him a ticket to Saharanpur.

There a kuli ran up to him and took him to a waiting bus bound for Dehradun. When the passengers were complete, the bus started. On the way there was a puncture. It was repaired but a little later there was another puncture in a lonely place where no help was available. The driver got some grass to fill the tyre. With great difficulty he managed to take the vehicle up to the ghats. There again another puncture occurred and the bus could go no further. The passengers were asked to walk. This was hard for Yogeshda as he was weak and tired. Someone accompanied him carrying his belongings. At the Dehradun bus stand he had a lemonade and felt refreshed.

He traced his way to a friend's house in Karranpur. He was examined by a doctor who diagnosed his illness as malaria and gave a few quinine tablets which Yogeshda did not take. A few days later he was quite well.

The year was coming to an end and he soon had to be in Shahbagh to see Mataji as directed by her. His friend told him to visit Rajshahi town and meet Atal Bhattacharjee. Yogeshda did not know that Atal was the person who had been asked to keep his salary in his absence. Yogeshda asked for a loan. Atal realised that Yogeshda was the man of whose money he was the custodian. Yogeshda took the rail fare and returned to Shahbagh.

When he arrived, Bholanath at once recognised him. Mataji was in a trance and so did not see him. He was directed to have his hair cut. His first dish after returning from his pilgrimage was to be choru. It is rice and milk with a little ghee, cooked over havan fire. Then he resumed his official duty.

Soon after, Mataji decided to go on a tour and Yogeshda went to meet his friends and relatives.

Just then, the government had taken over all the property of the Nawab. Shahbagh was the personal property of the Begum Pyari Banu. As she had then to stay there everyone was asked to vacate the place. The Kali Murti and the belongings of Bholanath were removed and kept in a friend's house. There was no temple then, only the murti was

kept and Puja performed regularly.

And so ended the one year of the Bikshu period of Yogeshda. A most spectacular beginning of a lifelong devotion to the Holy Mother, yet only a peep into the thoughts and feelings of a man who has spent over fifty years with Mataji. What may be the depth of the inner revelations of Mataji to him only Yogeshda knows.

By courtesy of Sri R. Rattan Singh