

Vijayananda

In The Steps of the Yogis

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First Part

The Preparation

CHAPTER 1

PARIS 1945

June the sixth, 1944. The marvellous news spread like wildfire; the Allies had landed in Normandy; the German army was retreating in disorder. At last the seeming impossible had come to pass. Then on August 15th, 1944 came the attack on the Mediterranean coast; the country was free. At last we could breathe easily again. It was like waking out of a long nightmare.

I was a doctor, thirty years old at the time. Like everybody else I had been called up. I asked to be attached to the F.E.F.E.O. the far Eastern Expeditionary Force. The Japanese had not yet been brought to their knees, and in the Far East fierce fighting still raged.

It was not that I had any ill feeling towards* the Japanese. Far from it I had always had the highest admiration for the culture of this great people. The indomitable courage and chivalric spirit of their samurais, their delicate art, their ethics culminating in the Zen branch of Buddhism, all these had compelled the respect of the entire world.

But for me the F.E.F.E.O. Was a door to the Far East .I had been promised a post at G.H.O. and Colombo was next door to India. It was India, which drew me. India? Why India? The West can certainly take pride in material civilisation and in the miracles that its scientists have achieved, and in this field the East has almost nothing to teach us. Even on the plane of ethical values. The moral code of the Jewish and Christian religious, Roman law and the legislative systems of modern nations have achieved heights that can hardly be surpassed.

But India, despite all the changes she has undergone, remains the acknowledged centre of spiritual culture. An artist pursuing perfection in music or in painting would go to Rome or to Florence; in medicine the *ne plus ultra* of a student's aspiration would be the Faculty of medicine in Paris; chemistry would best be studied in Germany...and so it goes on. But to achieve spiritual perfection it is to India that one most go to serve one's apprenticeship. It is quite unnecessary of course to adopt the Hindu religion and customs. All that is called for is to study at the feet of a Master that wisdom which pertains not to any single race or nation but to all humankind, Whether it is called the Brahmagyan the Knowledge of the Self, the Gay Savoir or any other name is no great matter. However far back one goes into the history of India, one finds that always, even in the darkest ages, the torch of this wisdom has been kept alive. It would appear that there was always at least one wise man capable of handing it on. The West has known one Moses and one Christ lives according to their teachings. But in India every generation has had its Christs and its Moses', and some of them, perhaps, even greater than the founders of the religions of the West.

For the time being, however, I was in Paris. After a period of training at St Raphael and then in Algeria, I had been posted to the General Headquarters of the Far East Expeditionary Corps. But the atomic bomb had compelled the Japanese to surrender and so we were waiting for our demobilisation.

Paris! I have always had a special corner in my heart for this great city so misrepresented by foreigners. Certainly Paris has its dissipations and its nightlife; but so have all the world's great cities.

It is not only for the beauty of its avenues, the sheer exuberance of its architecture, the flair of its citizens and the elegance of their culture, that I love Paris. In the whole wide world there is no town to equal it. The truth is, it is not just a town, it is a world in itself. It represents the sum-total of all Western culture for centuries past. Each quiet quarter bears its own stamp, distinctive and unique. All spheres of arts, of humanity and of science are represented in Paris, in their highest form. But what is not generally known is that even to those who thirst for the spiritual life, Paris has something to offer. And it was to this field of research that I now decided to dedicate my spare time.

Among the first of my discoveries was Gurukrita, the wise man of Saint-Mandé. Strange bonds of friendship link mystics to each other. It would appear that an invisible power draws them together and creates a feeling of mutual sympathy. How else could I explain my meeting at St Raphael with Doctor M? Dr M. was a physician somewhat older than myself, a Buddhist and proud of the fact. He was more inclined to the Tibetan form of Buddhism, to "Lamaism". He knew the Tibetan and Sanskrit languages and had translated Tibetan texts into French. Additionally, he had a long and serious experience of meditation. I listened to him admiringly and asked advice of him as of an older brother. He spoke to me of his guru, his spiritual guide, a true sage able to easily guide those whom he considered able to receive his teachings". My heart leaped with joy. Ever since I had been 20 years old I had regarded the word guru as I would a magic formula. To utter it, or even merely to think it, would bring tears to my eyes. But what actually was a Guru? Did the word suggest something outside the sphere of human relations?

I was hardly four years old when my father died and I have no recollection of feeling among my childhood memories. A psychoanalyst would say that, having been deprived of paternal love, I had repressed and sublimated my longing for it into a conscious search for a Guru, and perhaps there might be a measure of truth in this. But why to attach importance to the opinions of a psychoanalyst? The science of psychoanalysis is still in its infancy and has explored a tiny portion only of the complexities of the human mind. But the mind is a whole, all levels of which operate in relation to each other, and it can be known and judged only if it is considered in its entirety.

Psychologists in the West are generally agreed that art, prayer, the love of God and so on, are all sublimations of the sexual urge. But perhaps it would be more correct to invert the terms of the relationship and to postulate that sexual love is no more than degeneration and a false interpretation of the love of the Divine. It is true that many of our actions and thoughts are symbolic expressions of our sexual life. But sex urge is not the last word. The sexual act itself is in effect, a symbolic expression of something more fundamental still. The urge to reach the "Other" is

rooted in our instinctive awareness that we are "separated" from "something", and that we long to become one with it again, to become one with the universal consciousness. And it is the "Guru" who serves as the links, which makes this union possible.

The physical Guru - I am talking of course of a true Guru - represents, in some way, the knife-edge between human love and the love of the Divine. This is only one of his functions, though not the least important. In the language of psychoanalysis, one might say that he brings about an "affective transference". The truth is however, that the true Guru is God himself or if one prefers, our luminous "I", the "Christos" of the Gnostics. He takes concrete shape in a visible form when we are spiritually mature enough for the inner quest.

My friend, Dr. M. had written to his master to introduce me, and one fine summer afternoon I took the metro to Saint-Mandé. L'avenue Victor. Hugo.....L'hospice Lenoir-Joussereau... I asked for doctor Goret... and I was led into his room. Imagine my surprise to find that it was the room of an invalid! The doctor, formerly a house physician in the Paris hospitals and holder of diploma in psychiatry, had been bed-ridden for over 30 years. With no private means he was supported by public welfare funds and lived the life of a veritable monk. It appeared that after an active life, cerebellar complications following a stroke had reduced him to this condition. An ordinary man would have given himself over to despair or might even have gone mad. But Doctor Goret, (Gurukrita, as he called himself) was no ordinary man. He was, to use his own words a "born ascetic". With his mind turned inward, he had come to understand secrets and complexities of our thinking machine. He had then made an even greater discovery, the discovery of something he called "the beyond".

One day he had chanced upon certain books about Theravada Buddhism and Vedanta and He had noticed that his own 'discovery' matched perfectly with these teachings of the great sages of India. Thus he called himself a Buddhist. However, the charge that a great master of Zen Buddhism once brought against his disciple "there is too much Buddhism in what you have said", certainly could not be brought against Gurukrita, for his teaching was very much applied to his life and ,and he used words drawn from books only to communicate more easily with his interlocutors. Words, he said, are an "indispensable intermediary". Buddhists in Paris looked at him askance, for his views in their opinion were not always orthodox and may even have been said, at times, to border on heresy.

His teaching however, transcended all religious frameworks. Called "Ascetology", it was a science which, if not new, was at least congenial and adaptable to the modern mind. "Ascetology is areligious", he said. He made important notes on this science but refused to publish them and never shows them to sceptics or disbelievers. They are reserved for his disciples, a small and select band. He talked sometimes sitting up, sometimes lying down, but was unable to leave his bed. Pencil in hand, he seemed interminably to be making notes - notes of his interlocutor's remarks and his own comments.

His serene, smiling old face was framed in a trim, grey beard. There was no sign whatever of that deep, sad resignation that so often marks the face of people suffering from incurable illness or of the inmates of old-age homes. His eyes, always upright, always alert, take fleeting notes of an interesting reaction by his interlocutors or reflect a careful awareness of his own mental

responses. The most important thing of all is never to lose one's *shanti* (one's inner serenity)", he said.

I became his disciple. Knowing that he had something to communicate and was eager to teach, he requested pupils to be sent to him. But he was fastidious in his acceptance of them. He had a preference for medical men as he felt they responded favourably to the "ascetological tests" which he made... Unknown to them. With me he began his lessons as a schoolmaster would, insisting that I take notes. Before I leave he lends me the first part of his manuscript on a number of books out of a plentiful stock to border.

For five years I studied under his guidance. It was an important stage in my spiritual progress.

Another spiritual teacher to whom my enquiries led me at the time was Monsieur Gurjjeff, the Russian "Master". What a strange person he was! "A "master" of the most unusual kind, such as one encounters only rarely. That, at least, was how one of his chief disciples spoke of him, before introducing me to the "master". Once again, it was my particular providence in this field - working through my friend Dr M. - which took me into the amazing world of Monsieur Gurdjieff. Dr M. himself was not in Paris at the time but he had given me a letter of introduction to C. at the Pasteur Institute; C. was my second link in the chain. The third was Mme de S. "the keeper of the Gate".

Madame de S. was a big Russian lady with a majestic and impressive countenance. Her large eyes, looking penetratingly into yours, gave you the feeling that she might mesmerise you if he felt so inclined.

She acted as an interpreter between Monsieur G. and his pupils, for the Master's French was somewhat elementary, even obscure and incomprehensible. It was she too, who communicated the Master's instructions and explained them; who seemed in fact, to bear almost the entire responsibility for the spiritual and practical running of the organisation. One had the impression that it was she who was the real "master", that Gurdjieff was present merely as a bantering spectator, watching the antics of human puppets, which he might well manage himself if he would.....

In her flat on the Rue N. Mme de S. received me with great cordiality. From the start she adopted a tone of affectionate familiarity as though I had already been accepted into the circle of disciples. My first contact with the "MASTER" would be an invitation to dine at his table. Regarding myself as an almost unknown initiate, I was deeply moved by this great honour.

And so on the appointed day I presented myself at the apartment on the Rue N. and found myself face to face with the celebrated Russian Guru. G. was a man of middle height inclined to corpulence. He seemed quite old, probably past sixty, almost completely bald and with a long, drooping moustache. Without pretentiousness, he gave not the slightest indication of wishing to play the great man or to make an impression. He seemed to live in a permanent state of relaxation, both

physical and mental. He spoke a rudimentary French consisting almost entirely of common nouns and adjectives, and frequently bare of verbs or articles. From time to time he addressed himself in Russian to a compatriot among his disciples who translated where necessary. He smiles almost all the time but it is an ironic smile, perhaps even slightly mocking.

I am introduced to the Master He seemed to pronounce judgment upon me in a few words the precise significance of which I did not grasp .I asked if he would undertake the responsibility of guiding me in the world of the spirit. His reply is a question:

“ Do you smoke?”

“No I don't. At least only an occasional puff at a pipe, or an exceedingly rare cigarette”

“Well, then” he said, “work out how much you have saved by not smoking, give me the money and I will undertake to guide you”

Was he joking? Or could he be talking seriously? I preferred to regard it as a joke, for I could have but a paltry respect for a “master” who was prepared to trade his wisdom for money. Years later in India, I discovered that, viewed within the framework of Hindu tradition; there was nothing offensive in such a demand. It used to be the custom in earlier times to give the Guru “Dakshina”, that is to say, a fee for his teaching. However I have never come across the like among the great sages of today whom I have met.

Gurdjieff seemed to have done the cooking himself, or at least to be concerned with the finishing touches, as I saw him ladle in hand, stirring something in a pot on the stove.

It was time to eat and we sat at the table. Besides the Master and Mme de S. there were a number of people whom I did not know. From the start G. put everyone at ease.

There was no formality, no ceremony of any kind. I felt entirely at home. There were numerous little dishes, hors-d'oeuvres and so on, most of which were delicious but quite new to me. Perhaps they were Russian, Greek, or Caucasian dishes for the Master was in fact a Caucasian Greek; or perhaps they were made from recipes that he had brought back from India, Tibet or Mongolia.

What startled me however, and even shocked me, was the drink. It was served in little glasses, rather like wine glasses in size. There was no water on the table, nor even any wine, only this highly alcoholic potion. Vodka, perhaps? In any case you might eat or not eat as you pleased, but drink you had to. There was no escape. The Master himself took care that the glasses were drained dry and immediately refilled. No recalcitrance was permitted.

I myself was a water drinker, though I did not feel it derogated in any way from my character! On very rare occasions I took a little wine, but of alcoholic drinks I had a horror; I had never been able to understand how anyone could delight in this liquid which set the mouth on fire, induced painful contraction in the oesophagus and resulted in choking and hiccups .On this occasion I tried to manoeuvre, to evade the torment but the Master was unbending. All that I managed to do was to skip an occasional round or to leave a few drops in my glass.

However, despite my alcoholic inexperience I did not get drunk. I did not even become talkative. Could it have been the influence of the Master? Or could some kind of antidote have been added to the drinks? Perhaps it was simply that I could carry alcohol better than I had imagined I could. Was this a deliberate element in the Master's technique to "alcoholize" a disciple or a newcomer, for alcohol induces a mental relaxation and loquaciousness and so makes it easier to judge the character and temperament of anyone under its influence.

At each round we drank a toast. It was no conventional banquet toast, however; it was a toast to "idiots"? Thus, for example, some one would say, "I drink to the idiot without hope." This is not as ridiculous as it sounds, as the purpose of any spiritual discipline is after all, to transcend thought and language and in the final count, to reduce the mind to silence. That is why the spiritual "idiot" stands at the opposite extreme from his worldly counterpart; for whereas the latter is at the foot of the social ladder the former has reached the peak of spiritual realisation. Again, hope is the central variable motivating our thinking. To give up all hope and all desire is to break free of the shadows that delude. It is then that the Real which is Perfect happiness, spontaneously reveals it self.

Dinner over, I took leave of the Master; but that evening there was to be a meeting of the disciples to which I was invited.

First I went to Mme de S. where we gathered for spiritual exercise and for instruction in such matters as the method of meditation. Then we went on to G. 's for the evening meeting.

I hardly know how to describe this meeting. It had absolutely no resemblance to any other meeting I have attended or heard about. It was more like a cocktail party. We stood around, walked about, talked laughed, joked... and had another drink. The glasses were smaller this time but the liquor was stronger. Despite the hubbub and confusion G. saw to it that the glasses were conscientiously drained. I took advantage of a movement when his attention was otherwise engaged to fob off a round on a neighbour who was more fond than I was of this species of liquid, but alas! The Master caught me in the act, and looked at me reprovingly. "I wanted to include you in the esoteric circle, but now you will be only in the exoteric"; he told me, or something to the same effect. And so I was demoted ... There were twenty or thirty of us in an ordinary apartment room. Almost all were young; there were hardly any older people. Most of those present were unknown to me but almost all seemed to be well-to-do. There were doctors, writers artists. Some obviously had a deep faith in their Master, but most must have found something congenial in his teaching since they came back to G. 'meeting s and attended regularly.

The master was surrounded by a number of pretty girls. One, who was particularly young (not more than eighteen) and particularly pretty seemed to be the favourite. Gossip had it that the Master's contacts with these "youthful spirits" where not limited to the mystic or even platonic spheres.

Alcohol and women? Was that what this section of Parisian high society came here to seek? Certainly not, not that. Or, at least, not "only" that. There were places in plenty in Paris where such commodities could be come by. Far be it from me to pass judgement on the Russian Master. Indeed my contacts with him were too brief to entitle me to do so, for after only a few days

I beat a retreat never to return. In matters pertaining to the spiritual life I am, alas, only a vulgar conformist. My ideal of the wise man is the classic type of the ascetic “pure as a dew drops ”, “luminous and transparent as a sapphire”. I have chosen to travel along the highroad, the road leading through the purification and refinement of the spirit until it loses itself in the Absolute.

It is true nevertheless that the Absolute transcends both good and evil and there is a road to it which takes the negative way through our mind. Schools of thought which have attempted to exploit the dynamism of sexual union in order to enable us to transcend our human limitations have existed at all times.

The Bible tell us of the horrors of the cults of Beelzebub and of Moloch, cults that the children of Israel were charged to root out in order to replace them with the cults of the El-Elyon, the supreme God. In ancient Greece the Dionysian and Apollonian paths seem to have existed side by side. In our own time too a number of different sects may be seen to be flourishing in India. The Vamachara is an offshoot of the Shakta school. “This horrible Vamachara ” as Vivekananda called it, has taken as objects of its worship all that orthodox India holds in abhorrence; sexual union, alcohol and meat. It offers devotees, not renunciation of the world as a means to Happiness and Liberation, but the Bhokti-Mukti, the joys of the world and liberation, at one and the same time. The Aghorapanths are a sect of Yogis among whom even cannibalism is not unknown; they are almost extinct today, though some are still to be met in with in the mountain country of Girnar. Another such sect the Kartabhajas, also called Sahajikas, are associated with the Vaishnava school. Among them, the disciples live together in the relationship of lover and mistress, and when the Master asks a woman disciple, “Have you found your Krishna?”, the implication is, “Have you found yourself a lover from among the disciples?”

Most members of such sects, if at all they succeed in rising above the animal instincts, do so only in order to master debased magical arts, such as the arts of seduction, or enslavement, or killing an enemy by supernatural means and so on.

All these paths are difficult and dangerous and unsuited to the Western mind. True, it cannot be disputed that a master who is himself perfect is not subject to the conventional social criteria of good and evil , or to moral and religious law; but identified as he is with the “Perfect Good” he will as a general rule, perform only actions that are beyond reproach . On this subject Ramakrishna, in his usual homely idioms had this comment to make: “A perfect dancer never puts a foot wrong ”; and indeed neither in India nor in Ceylon have I ever know a perfect sage who infringed the moral code dictated by social convention.

History and legend however, give account of Yogis who have freely exercised their right to be “ beyond good and evil”. Vimalakirti, one of the lay disciples of the Buddha had –so the *Vimalakirti Nirveda* tell us– attained such a degree of perfection that he could with impunity, frequent taverns and other scenes of debauch. He was also so skilled a dialectician that none of the Master’s great disciples could hold their own against him. Another instance is provided by Padma. Sambhava, one of the founders of Lamaism in Tibet who, we are told, committed the most abominable of forbidden acts, though always motivated by compassion for the victims. Clearly however, the mere fact of violating the established moral code does not, in itself, provide convincing evidence of perfect self-realisation. Such evidence is to be sought in the Yogi’s power

and in his recognition of the truth. This is illustrated by the following amusing anecdote (adapted from “The book of the Great Liberation” by Evan Wentz.):

One day a heruka (a naked ascetic) appeared in a little Indian town. It was, in fact Padmasambhava who had assumed this form. He went straight to a tavern and demanded wine, though for an Indian monk to drink wine was considered a very grave fault. The landlady asked how much he wanted. “As much as you can supply me with,” answered the monk. Since she had hundreds of casks in stock, the landlady asked him if he could afford to pay for them all. The heruka replied that he would do so, but only after sundown. Then he settled down to drinking and drank without a pause, until soon all the casks were empty. He thereupon sent the landlady out to look for wine in other taverns. By now the sun was about to set but the monk laid his phurba (magic dagger) on the counter, half in shade and half in sunshine and..... The sun halted its progress and stood still in the sky.

This went on for a couple of weeks. The sun never set and the monk went on drinking. The heat became insufferable, rivers and ponds dried up and the ears of corn withered in the fields. The country people complained bitterly, and, believing that their misfortune was a punishment inflicted by the gods for misconduct of the monk in the tavern, they requested the king to intervene. The king went down to the tavern in person and reprimanded the monk severely, asking why he did not leave off drinking. The heruka replied that he had promised to settle the bill after sunset and that he did not have the wherewithal to pay. On hearing this, the king paid the landlady in full, the heruka lifted his magic dagger off the counter, the sun went down and everything returned to its former state.

Another story tells of the great Shankaracharya famed for his wisdom and purity. One day, wishing to teach his disciples a lesson, he took about a dozen of them with him into a tavern, and ordered liquor. In India gurus are held in deep veneration and Shankaracharya was considered to be a Master of the very highest order, but the drinking of wine is considered a very grave fault even among the laity, and the disciples wondered whether they should follow their master’s example or not. A number of them, decided to drink but more experienced abstained. Shankaracharya made no comment, and leaving the tavern, walked on, surrounded, as always by his disciples. Then he stepped into a blacksmith’s forge and began swallowing red-hot coals. Here however, none of his disciples dared follow foot-steps!

On other occasion Shankaracharya proved indisputably that he had transcended good and evil.

In order to accomplish his mission – the reestablishment of orthodox Brahmanism in India, which was then undergoing Buddhist influence – Shankara traversed the length and breadth of the country, engaging in religious discussions with Buddhist monks and with representatives of other Hindu sects. At that time there was often much more at stake in such discussion than a simple jostling with words. Not infrequently it happened that the loser was required to drown himself in the sea.

One of these philosophical journeys took place one day with a famous Brahmin called Madan Misra. The latter was a representative of the school of Purva Mimansa which held that the

performances of the sacrificial rites prescribed by the Vedas was sufficient in itself for the attainment of the supreme goal and that there was no need whatever for the renunciation of the world which Shankaracharya preached.

The stake decided upon was as follows: if Madan Mishra was overcome, he would have to give up the world, become a monk (sanyasi) and live according to the teachings of the school of Shankara. If on the contrary, the latter was defeated, he would renounce the monastic discipline and lead a worldly life.

The oratorical battle was engaged for several days until finally Madan Misra was compelled to admit defeat. His wife however – a very clever woman – intervened and claimed that Shankaracharya's victory was not complete. A man and his wife were one, she asserted, and Shankaracharya had yet to vanquish the wife. Shankara accepted the challenge. The woman turned the discussion on to the lines of the Kama Sutra (which ruled sexual relations) and Shankara, who has always led a life of the strictest chastity, was completely ignorant on the subject. Nevertheless, he refused to admit defeat and demanded a deferment to permit him to inform himself.

Shankara could not of course, permit himself to have sexual relation; his physical body was the body of a Yogi, pure from infancy. Moreover his prestige as a reformer would have been considerably damaged. But he got around the difficulty. A neighbouring Raja had just died. Leaving his physical body in the jungle under the guard of some of his disciples, Shankara entered the body of the Raja. The surprise of the king's ministers and queens when they saw him revive at the very moment that the funeral pyre was about to be set alight, can be imagined. But it was nothing to their astonishment when they found that this king, who had been a very ordinary man, now spoke and conducted himself like a great sage. It was not long before they suspected the truth – that some Yogi had effected a spiritual transfer – and as they were willing to pay any price to hold on to so exceptional a ruler, soldiers were sent out with orders to search the countryside and, if they found a human body lying lifeless, to burn it immediately.

Meanwhile the king, Shankara, enjoyed himself with his queens, tasted the pleasures of the court and forgot completely what he had been in the past.

The disciples, when their master failed to return, sent one of their number in search of him. He succeeded in gaining entry into the palace, despite the guards and recited to the king – Shankara – a hymn that the latter himself had composed on the glory of the Atman. Hearing it, Shankara recalled his true identity and re-entered his body, which came to life again at the very moment when the king's soldiers who had found it were about to consign it to the flames.

Now, thoroughly briefed on the subject of sexual relations, Shankara returned to Madan Misra and took up the argument with his wife who was finally overcome just as her husband had been. They both took the sannyas, the monastic initiation, and came to be among the most ardent supporters of the Vedantic movement.

In exceptional circumstances, a guru may sometimes have a disciple perform or undergo a felonious act, which he considers indispensable to his progress. This is illustrated by the two following tales:

The first is about the Master Chih-Yu (From *Takakusu Tripitaka*. adapted from the English translation by Arthur Wadley).

The Master of the Law, Fa-Hui, was a Chinese Buddhist monk who had made great progress in the world of the spirit. But he had not yet achieved complete self-realisation.

One day a nun advised him very earnestly to go to Kucha in the Turfan, to the monastery of “the Golden Flower” where dwelt Chih-Yeh, a renowned Master whom she said, would teach him the Supreme Dharma (wisdom).

Fa Hui followed her advice and went to Chih-Yeh who received him very warmly. Offering him a pitcher full of wine, he invited him to drink. Fa-Hui protested vehemently that he could not bring himself to swallow such impurity; whereupon the Master Chih-Yeh took Fa-Hui by the shoulders, turned him about, and without further ceremony, showed him the door. Still holding the pitcher, Fa-Hui made his way to the cell which had been assigned to him. In this cell he reflected on this wise man, “I’ve come all this way just to seek his advice after all. It may be that there is something in his manner of setting about things that I don’t understand. I think I’d better do as he has advised me”.

Thereupon he swallowed all the wine in the pitcher at one draught. Completely drunk, sick and wretched, he finally lost consciousness.

When he had slept himself sober, he remembered that he had broken his monastic vows, and in his overwhelming shame, began beating himself with his staff. Indeed he was in such despair that he almost put an end to his life.

The final outcome to this state of despair however, was that he attained the Anagami-Phala, the final stage, but one, of spiritual realisation mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures. (The highest stage of all in the Arahant).

When he presented himself again before the Master Chi-Yueh, the latter asked,

“Have you had it?”.

“Yes I’ve had it”, answered Fa-Hui.

The second story makes the same point [1](From the *Udana-Sutra* 22 23, adapted from the English translation by I.B. Horner.) of Nanda, the cousin of the Buddha, who had assumed a monk’s robes, but performed his exercises without enthusiasm and longed to return to the worldly life. Hearing of this, the Buddha asked him if it was a fact that he wished to revert to “the lower life “ and if so what his reason might be. “Venerable One” answered Nanda, “the day I left home, a maiden from the land of the Sakyas (the kingdom ruled over by Gautama Buddha’s father) the most beautiful maiden in the country, her hair half unbound, turned round to see me go and said,” May you return soon, young master”. I think about her all the time, Venerable One. That is why I

have no interest in spiritual exercises and I am considering giving them up in order to return to the “lower life”.

Using his magical powers, the Master took Nanda by the arm and transported him to the kingdom of Sakka, another name for Indra, the king of the gods. There, five hundred Apsaras, nymphs of divine beauty, were serving the king of the gods. They were called “those with the feet of doves”. The Buddha asked Nanda if they were as beautiful as the Sakya girls. “Compared to these nymphs”, replied Nanda, “the most beautiful of the Sakyas would look like a monkey with its nose and ears cut off.” Taking Nanda back to earth, the Master then promised him that if he performed his austerities conscientiously he would win these divinely beautiful nymphs. Before long the other monks gathered that the venerable Nanda was doing his religious exercise with a view to winning the five hundred nymphs and he became an object of their derision. Sorrowful, ashamed and disgruntled, Nanda lived in solitude and put all his fervour into his spiritual exercise. Very rapidly he achieved final enlightenment, and needless to say, he forgot completely about the nymphs or the Sakya girl for, compared to the joy of enlightenment, both earthly and celestial joys are as nothing.

In the course of my exploration of the spiritual life of Paris, I also discovered the Ramakrishna Mission. Here all was clear and straightforward in the solidly based classical Vedantic tradition of India. The great sage Ramakrishna who lived in the second half of the last century had opened up a new era in relation between Hinduism and the Western world. He appeared to have been the first great Hindu teacher to have clearly and openly recognised the fundamental unity of all religions, serving as different paths to the same goal. His disciple Vivekananda tried to go even further and undertook to spread the wisdom of Indian, in the form of Vedanta over the entire globe.

Thus was born the Ramakrishna Mission, which today has centres in most of the larger countries in the world.

It was the first time in history that Hinduism, a religion which is fundamentally national and racial, had sent out missionaries to propagate its teaching. The intention was not to convert or to Hinduise. The Vedanta was propagated as a basis common to all religions, their joint esoteric foundation. Vivekananda stressed that, “the Vedanta did not require of the Christian or member of any other creed that he become a Hindu, but tried to help him to become a better Christian or whatever else he was... to understand his own religion better”.

In 1945 the centre of the mission was at saint Mandé on the rue Alphand in the apartment of Mme N. Her husband had been an ardent supporter of the Vedantic movement in France and after his death she carried on the work which he had begun.

Mme N. received me very cordially. It was she who was responsible for the practical management of the Ramakrishna Mission in Paris. In keeping with a custom practised in India she performed the function of the “mother” of the Ashram. The Swami addressed her as Mataji (“mata” means mother, and “ji is a suffix denoting respect).

The Swami responsible for the mission was a Hindu from South India, a prince of the royal family of Cochin on the Malabar Coast. His monastic name was Swami Siddeshwarananda. He was a disciple of Brahmananda, the greatest of the immediate disciples of Ramakrishna, who at the suggestion of Vivekananda and with the Master's consent, his fellow disciples had surnamed Raja (their king). Brahmananda had been the first spiritual head of the mission. He had the reputation of being very exacting in his choice of disciples and granted initiation only to the rare elect. Siddeshwarananda had been one of the elect.

A friend of mine, J.B., who worked at the national library and was a long-standing disciple of Siddeshwarananda, introduced me to the Swami, who was draped in ochre robe of the Sanyasi and wore a turban of the same colour. He was above middle height with broad shoulders. Looking at him was difficult to believe that he suffered from a heart ailment, which was to carry him off a few years later.

Swami Siddeshwarananda had the gift of putting his auditors at ease from the very first meeting. In common with many Hindu teachers, he radiated a warm friendliness, the instinctive expression of a tender feeling for all humanity, and very different from the merely conventional amiability of the well-bred westerner. The Swami had learned French very quickly. He spoke it almost fluently, made speeches, and even wrote books in the language. I wanted to ask his advice and he was kind enough to accord me a private interview. He gave me a mantra, a sacred formula, to repeat and showed me how to modulate the chant. Then he provided me with some guideline on methods of meditation. By the cannon of orthodox Hinduism our meeting was the equivalent of a diksha, a formal initiation, and had I accepted it, the Swami would have taken on himself the heavy responsibility of being my guru and I would have become his disciple. That is to say, we would have entered into a relationship that could never have been broken even by death. The Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission however, do not grant initiation in their own capacity but "in the name of Ramakrishna", just as the disciples of Christ did in days gone by.

In India a question frequently asked of a sadhaka, one following a spiritual discipline, is, "Have you received diksha (initiation)? Who is your guru?"

For thousand of years the spiritual tradition in this great country has been handed down from master to disciple, from guru to shishya. In formal terms, if the master, after the ceremonial rite, murmurs a mantra to the disciple, the relationship of guru and shishya has been established. But in actual fact, it is a much more complex matter. Real initiation is a transmission of power and the result should be either a partial or total awakening of the kundalini, the power lying dormant within each human being.

The mantra, the sacred formula is no more than a prop, a form of support, certainly useful and indeed, indispensable for a guru of middling capacity. But the simple communication of a mantra without the transmission of power is only a semblance of initiation. Besides - and this happens frequently with a great sage - the transmission of power can be accomplished without a mantra, merely by a look, a touch, indeed even from a distance.

Once awakened, the kundalini, the divine power – what does it matter what one calls it? – is the power which guides the disciple. It is the inner guru, the Christos of the Gnostics. The

human guru will no longer intervene except if the disciple has lost contact with this inner guide or if for some reason, his mind has become bogged down. In fact the role of the human guru is to establish or re-establish the connection between the spirit of the disciple and the inner guru.

I saw the Swami on a later occasion at Marseilles and again at Gretz when the Ramakrishna Mission was opened. I was in India when I heard the painful news that Swami Siddeshwarananda had succumbed to a heart attack.

And finally in the course of my spiritual quest in Paris I made the acquaintance of “Les Amis du Bouddhisme”. Once again it was Dr. M., an eminent member of this organisation who introduced me into this circle of French Buddhists; for the majority of the members are not solely “friends of Buddhism”, but profess and practise Buddhism as a religion. Here, it is the doctrines of Theravada that are followed and taught. Theravada is also called Hinayana (the lesser vehicle) or the Buddhism of the South. It is the doctrine taught in Ceylon, Burma and Thailand. The monks of this school claim to be unique in having preserved pure and intact, the original teaching of the Buddha. Other schools, the Buddhism of the North, are merely distortions or aberrations reflecting the influence of the aboriginal religions.

But the Buddhism of the North, also called the Mahayana (the greater vehicle) claim that the rival sect of Theravada has conserved only the exoteric teaching of the master and that there is a secret doctrine, which remains unknown except to a few disciples.

However it may be, the doctrine of the great master is sincerely and seriously practised, in the form taught in the Pali canon – the Ceylon school – and the “triple refuge” is repeated with faith and devotion:

Budham Sharanam Gaccami

Dhaamman Sharanam Gaccami

Shangam Sharanam Gaccami

I take refuge in the Buddha

I take refuge in the Doctrine

I take refuge in the congregation (of monks)

The organisation in Paris is affiliated to the world Association of Buddhists. The soul of the Paris centre is beyond any doubt, Miss Lounsberry, an English lady of great religious and

philosophical erudition and with a serious experience of meditation and of the spiritual life. She merits the highest esteem because she has staked not merely all her energy and her future prospect, but her health too on the creation of this organisation and the spread of the doctrines of Buddhism in France.

She has written a number of useful books particularly on the method of meditation in the South Buddhist school. Her second-in-command is Mme a Fuente, descendant of an aristocratic Spanish family whose religious and philosophical learning in no way falls short of hers. Mme La Fuente is also responsible for the Association's quarterly periodical "*La Pensée bouddhique*".

Meetings were held in the evenings at 31, rue de Seine. There were regular meditations and occasional discussions. The Buddhist festival of Waishak, commemorating the birth of the Buddha was celebrated magnificently and was generally attended by representatives from the embassies of Buddhist countries.

In this particular year the association counted one more among its member, for I had been registered as an active member of "Les Amis du Bouddhisme".

Before I end this account I must not omit to mention Mahesh; is there anyone in Paris nowadays who does not know Mahesh? Anyone that is to say, among those who are interested in Yoga or in Hinduism. I had met him around 1945 at the outset of his career. He was a Hindu from Mysore, a Hath-yogi, a big man with a marvellously proportioned physique, and himself a living example of the effect of the science he taught.

His guru, he told me, was called Mrityunjaya. It is an epithet of Shiva, a name like any other in India, but signifying 'victory over death' is and entirely appropriate for a master of Hatha-Yoga. For the object of this science is to maintain the body in a state of perfect health and equilibrium or to bring it to such a state as a necessary preparation for the higher stage of Yoga.

This is accomplished by means of a number of postures and any physical and respiratory exercise. The exercises of have nothing in common with those of western gymnastic for they are based on an anatomy and a physiology totally different from those familiar to westerners.

They start out from the knowledge of the complex network of the seven charkas, (Muladhara, Swadhistana, Manipura, Anahata, Vishuda, Ajna and Sahashara), the psychic centres of the subtle body, and of the innumerable nadis, (nervous psychic channels) of which the three principal ones are important to mention; Ida, Pingala, and the Shushumna.

The postures (or asanas) and the respiratory exercise (pranayamas) aim at storing vital force in one or more of the Charkas, and at opening or cleaning out nadis which have been obstructed or congested. A Hatha Yogi in training would not only enjoy good health but would have exceptional resistance to illness, a tendency for wounds to heal rapidly, a digestion better than the ordinary and a remarkable development of the intellectual faculties. In fact he would enjoy an intensification of all his powers.

But this intensification will be felt also in his animal instincts, and that is where moral discipline a sine-qua-non for the intensive practice of Hatha Yoga. Without it, one lays on self-open to the gravest dangers, illness, madness and even death. Certain exercises however, decided upon by an informed instructor and practised in moderation in order to maintain a state of good health may be performed without danger.

There have been, and still are, schools for which Hatha Yoga is a total Yoga, that is to say, Yoga directed towards the attainment of ultimate spiritual enlightenment. The most well-known of these is that of the eighty-four Maha-Sidhas, the “great magicians”, whose adventures and miracles recall the tales of the 1001 nights. Mahesh was the first master to teach me the asanas. In retrospect, I admire the caution and the wisdom with which he directed my first steps. Later in India, I practised the majority of the asanas like an expert.

CHAPTER II

PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE

The war was over, I was a civilian again and life slipped back into its normal rhythm. Back home I once again took up my role as a member of the medical profession.

Oh the medical profession...

The long days with hardly a moment to gulp down a meal, the bell jolting you up at two in the morning when you were hoping for a little rest after an exhausting day; the ungrateful patient who decides, after you have worn yourself out trying to help him that he wants another doctor; the overwhelming heartache of watching a baby die after all the resources of science have failed to save him. And many more experience of the same kind.

Of course, it is not all drudgery and depression. The profession has its big moments too. A mother's smile of gratitude when her child has been brought safely through a dangerous attack of bronchial pneumonia or typhoid will reward you for all the moments of anxiety and care.

Perhaps we could say that the medical man is the priest of the modern world, presiding over birth and death. Certainly, the practice of medicine is priesthood or should be so. But it is hard, dealing with thirty or forty sick people each day, to preserve a reverential attitude to human suffering. And what about the fees? Money, in return for an act of devotion? Yet one has to earn a living, somehow.

Besides, the medicine we practise is a science, which has not moved completely out of the empirical stage. Of course we know the anatomy and physiology of the human body and doctors have made amazing progress in the sphere of healing. But the fundamental laws governing the functioning of the human machine still evade us. We do not show sufficient awareness of the fact that the body, the external world and the universe - the separate parts of which interact harmoniously with each other. In trying to cure a serious illness, we generally bombard the microbe with antibiotic, and ignore the basic cause. The result is that, through the illness may be cured, the loss of equilibrium from which it stems persists, perhaps even increase, and sooner or later break out again to find expression in another illness or malfunctioning of the body. Is it purely a matter of chance that the microbe has attacked the body, and is it sufficient to destroy it for the patient to recover his health? Certainty not. The germ has succeeded in multiplying only because it has found fertile soil in which to do so. And this has come about in the wake of a disturbance in equilibrium or of disharmony in the nervous system, a disharmony not infrequently stemming from psychological roots. An illness can be properly diagnosed and understood only if the patient is

seen as a single unit, body and spirit, having his own individuality certainly, but constantly subject to external influences, social, climate, cosmic and other.

Psychosomatic medicine, a relatively recent development, has drawn the attention of medical men to the considerable influence exerted by psychological disturbances upon the functioning of the physiological organism. The mind in fact, is fundamentally nothing more than a structure set up for the functioning and the protection of the body. Upon this basic structure rise superstructures of increasing complexity and grandeur, but the living centre animating the whole is the instinct of self-preservation, the primary mental vibration, which energises the respiratory centre.

Our emotions are basically defence reactions against “micro-maladies” - if I may use the term - slight malfunctioning of the body. A touch of mild rhinitis or bronchitis, for instance, will create a state of irritability, which under certain external circumstances, may be translated into anger. Sometimes the individual may even be actively looking for such circumstances, without being conscious of the fact. “He’s trying to pick a quarrel”, people say. The surge of anger may lead to a momentary sensation of ease for it brings a flow of nervous energy and a richer vascularisation to the infected spot. But more frequently, it results in the rupture of a number of capillaries and the illness come out into the open.

As a general rule emotional excitement stimulates or brings out the micro-malady, transforming it into an illness that may be clinically diagnosed. The self-control, which eliminates the pathological emotions, such as anger, prevents the “micro-malady” from assuming major proportions so that it often disappears even before coming into the open. As a rule, the more subtle the sensations caused by the micro-malady, the more exaggerated and elaborate will be the mental build up around a minimal incident. The very subtlety of the sensations creates a vague feeling of restlessness which the subject himself cannot explain, so that often when the illness definitely comes out into the open, he experiences a sense of real relief at feeling he has discovered the reasons for his restlessness. The “micro-malady ” starts out from a nerve ganglion or nerve center before it reaches the mucous membrane.

Those who practice Yoga assiduously can be conscious of the very moment when illness touches the point of the nerve-ganglion. Such consciousness takes the form of a disagreeable sensation in this particular spot accompanied by a feeling of mental unease. There is an entire system of subjective psychology known to the Yogis. Traditional systems of medicine, Ayurvedic, Chinese, Hippocratic, seem to have had knowledge of these facts as well, but with the passage of time their principles have been distorted or misinterpreted.

Ayurvedic medicine postulates that the human body functions on the basis of three nervous currents, or to be more precise, three currents of the life force: Kapha, Pita and Vayu. Kapha is the calming element, slowing down the bodily rhythm and lowering the temperature. Pita is its reverse. It has an accelerating effect and warms the body and the organs. As for Vayu it is the dynamic current responsible for producing movement and energy. When these three forces interact harmoniously the body is said to be in a state of health. If one of them becomes dominant or is weakened, the lack of equilibrium manifests itself, to begin with, in warning signals, and then when it localises itself in some particularly vulnerable organ, the body is said to be in a state of

illness. Treatment, therefore, consists before all else, in the re-establishment of equilibrium between these forces. A cold or an attack of bronchitis, for instance, would be due to an excess of Kapha. The Vaidya (Ayurvedic doctor) would therefore prescribe a medicine to reduce the flow of Kapha or to increase that of its opposite, Pita.

In the West these principles have been ridiculed because they recall too forcibly the theories of Molière's doctor about bilious and phlegmatic temperaments. The theories, however, were parts of the heritage of Hippocratic medicine which, very likely, were related to the Ayurvedic system. Molière gave us a caricature of medicine, but the very fact of caricature implies the existence of a norm.

It would appear that in Vedic times the true physician had to be at the same time, a sage or a yogi. What is called the Nadi-Vigyan was an indispensable pre-condition of the practice of efficacious healing. Nadi-Vigyan is the science dealing with the knowledge of psychic nerves. There are seventy-two thousand of these but it is enough to know the principal ones. This anatomo-physiology can be learned only by subjective study and by personal progress through the various channels of Yoga, such as moral discipline, pranayama (breathing control), and so on.

But all this is not really important, for the fact is that these principles are inapplicable to the hectic condition of life in our great modern cities. It is enough for the doctor today to do his job conscientiously. To save a human life ... to alleviate suffering ... these are worthy aims. Even if the suffering we alleviate, is very soon replaced by fresh suffering and to save a life, is merely to grant a respite. Everything that is born must die. That is an inescapable law.

What should we do then? Should we be fatalistic and resigned? Is perfect quietude the only way? Should we seek an escape into Nirvana or like the Yogi, cut ourselves off from the world? That is what the man in the street will ask. For it is the big things that are always easiest to caricature.

Though most people know only this caricature, there does exist a path to the transcendence of human limitations, to the conquest of suffering and death. It is not the path referred to as "the opium of the people", nor that of "consolation for earthly misery in the hope of a heavenly paradise".

There are, living in our own world today, people who have sought this path and found it. I have known some of them, lived among them and I am at present under the spiritual direction of one of the greatest of them all.

Is it Vedanta, or Yoga, or Buddhism? Or perhaps Kabbalah, or Sufism, or Theosophy? All these are mere words, labels on bottles, labels, which are often false, if the bottles themselves are not empty. The solution to the problem lies in ourselves. That which is real within us cannot die. The heart, which constitutes the very centre of individual consciousness, is identical in all beings. That which is the foundation and the support of all things, which cannot be touched by suffering or death, is also the very essence of our individual being.

But does one have to go all the way to Ceylon or to India to find it? Certainly not. For myself though it may have been my destiny to go to the land of the great masters. Perhaps too, the external condition of life there, are more conducive to introspection, to a life dedicated to the inner search. My immediate objective, in any case, was to meet one of the great sages “who had succeeded” and to benefit from his counsel. My plan was to go to Ceylon first and if possible, to spend a short time in a Buddhist monastery. Then I meant to go on to India and probably remain in the South, for the three renowned sages Ramana Maharshi, Ramdas and Aurobindo all lived in South India. Moreover, the time at my disposal was limited - two or three month in all.

It is no simple matter preparing to go abroad. For a man who in principle could not afford more than a few months vacations, I seemed to be caught up in endless formalities, complications and setbacks. First I had to get a visa, or rather two, one for Ceylon and another for India; in order to get visas, I had to find financial guarantors and the guarantors demanded letters of recommendation and so on. Then there was the booking of the passage. This would be on the “Felix-Roussel” through the Suez Canal. And finally come the vaccination, bank formalities, letters of recommendation to monasteries and ashram and so on.

In the summer of 1950 I had to appear in person at the Indian Embassy, so I made a quick trip to Paris.

I took the opportunity of seeing Swami Siddeshwarananda of the Ramakrishna Mission again. The Mission had moved its quarters and was now installed in a splendid edifice at Gretz. As always the Swami was cordial and welcoming. He gave me some precious advice and a number of letters of recommendation which were no less precious in my eyes: one letter for the centres of the Ramakrishna Mission in India, one for Dilip Kumar Roy of Pondichery – “the greatest musician in India”-- said the Swami and a few lines to Kunalayananda of Lonavala, near Bombay, one of the outstanding authorities on the subject of Hatha Yoga, which he approaches from the angle of modern medical science. Finally the Swami advised me to visit Ramdas, “a veritable Jivan-Mukta”, he called him, (a living liberated soul). In the course of conversation the Swami referred to the recent death of Ramana Maharshi in April 1950 as a fact, which he assumed I knew. I had been completely ignorant of this sad news. For a few minutes I sat there open-mouthed, stunned into silence. It was as though a relative or a very dear friend had abruptly taken leave of this life, yet I had known the Maharshi through books alone.

I also took advantage of my stay in Paris to visit a number of scholars in the field of Indian studies. In this field the object is not only to explore the sacred Sanskrit texts, the religions of India and its civilisation, but also to study the customs of the inhabitants of this huge country, including even their eating habits. One of these scholars was particularly helpful and friendly and I asked him what he would like me to bring back for him from India. For I was planning to return within two or three month. For me going to India was like going into a teeming treasure cave. There were the great sages and their teachings to be received at the very source - the Yogis; the rare original manuscripts of the sacred texts; the study of all forms of Yoga in the country where they had come into being and where they had been taught for thousands of years; and innumerable more treasures of a similar kind. As a token of my gratitude I wished to bring back to my scholar friend one jewel out of this vast treasure chamber. His immediate reply was negative, “No thank you. There is nothing I need”, but on second thought he added, “Ah yes! You could, perhaps, try to find out to

what extent.....(here he gave the Latin name for a species of lentil) enters into the diet of the Hindus of the South and if possible, bring me back a little of the stuff’.

How strange human nature can be! Often, sitting in the presence of the great teachers and watching the crowds of visitors file past, I have thought of that scholar. Almost all the visitors had a wish or a petition on their lips or in their hearts, but there were few indeed who sincerely desired the divine wisdom which had incarnated itself before their very eyes. No, the vast majority preferred to ask for some paltry favour – the curing of an illness, a promotion in a job or some other such matter.

Latter I paid a brief visit to the headquarters of “Les Amis du Bouddhisme”. There I had the good fortune to meet Narada Thero, a well-known Buddhist monk from Ceylon who happened to be passing through Paris. He made me a gift – with his blessing – of a dry leaf from the Bo-Tree (*Ficus Religiosa*), the tree under which Buddha had experienced his great enlightenment. The original tree is, or rather, was at Buddha-Gaya, for the one that is pointed out to pilgrims today has grown out of a branch of the earlier tree which withered long ago. At Anuradhapura in Ceylon, there is another Bo-Tree, an offshoot of a branch brought to the island by Mahinda, brother of the celebrated emperor Ashoka and this branch had been broken off the ancient tree at Bodhgaya. The leaf which Narada-Thero gave me probably came from Anuradhapura or perhaps from Kalutra (near Galle in Ceylon) which also has a tree of its own. In Indian language the Bo-Tree is called the ashwatha or pipal. It is the *Ficus Religiosa* of the botanists, a very long-lived tree, which can attain giant proportions. What a magnificent sight it would be to contemplate one of these majestic pipals, so common on the plains of India! At times it is a parasitic growth on another tree, at times it crops out of the wall of a house or threatens some neighbouring structure with its roots. If this happens it presents a serious problem, for the tree is sacred and may not be destroyed.

Mme la Fuente provided me with letters of recommendation to monks and lay Buddhist in Ceylon. The principle purpose of my visit to Ceylon was to spend a few days at Island hermitage, the monastery of Nyanatiloka, a celebrated Buddhist monk of German origin. In theory I viewed this as a short period of probation during which I would find out whether I had it in me to be a monk – an idea about which I had grave doubts. Hearing that a certain Mr. N. had spent some time in this monastery and had just returned to France, I took his address meaning to ask him for information on a few details.

I wrote to Mr. N. The letter that came in reply was, to say the least, odd. He began with a few particulars about Island Hermitage, which did not suggest enthusiasm. It was his fear of snakes and particularly of cobras, he wrote, which had made him return to France. But it was the second part of the letter, which was by far the more interesting. He informed me that he himself was a bishop in a liberal church and that it was his mission to travel from town to town, and from house to house, in order confer initiation and to “transmit power” to those worthy of it... just as in the time of the apostles to Christ. He suggested that he might initiate me or, at least, attempt do so. It may have been curiosity on my part or the attraction of the unknown or quite simply perhaps, the medical man’s attraction to an interesting “case”. The fact is that I wrote inviting him to spend a few days with me.

I received him with all the ceremony due to a guest who happened also to be a church dignitary. Mr. N. was tall and lean with the face of a dreamer. His frequently absent gaze suggested absorption in an inner world. We spoke first about Ceylon and the Buddhist monastery, but he clearly regarded the subject as secondary. What mattered to him above all else, was his mission as an initiator. He initiated his disciples as bishops, no less, and in their turn they were empowered to initiate other. It was a kind of development in geometrical progression, so to speak.

He decided that I was worthy to receive the divine power and it was arranged that the initiation ceremony should be performed that evening after dinner. Evening came; it was almost ten o'clock. I waited for my old housekeeper to go up to her room on the first floor for, if she were to see us, I doubted very much whether she would appreciate the solemnity of the occasion.

The ceremony took place on the ground floor of the house in my dining room. Mr. N. put out the lights, lit a few candles and held one in his hand. He placed me at one end of the room and took up his position at the other. Then I saw him performed various magical passes, gestures whose significance I could not understand. He seemed to be murmuring certain formulas or spells. I watched intently, curious to see what would happen.

“That’s it”, he said after a time. “I’ve managed. But it wasn’t easy”.

I gathered that my “natal mystic centre” had offered fierce resistance to the penetration of the power. But he had noticed certain lights around my head, and had accomplished the transmission somehow. Behold me then, a bishop endowed with initiatory powers and purified of all my sins.

“And now, sin no more”, he said. And again, a little later, “The fact is, I don’t know why I’ve initiated you. You’re a better man than I am”.

I must confess that I myself had “felt” nothing, before, during, or after the ceremony. Mr. N. went back home and probably continued to perform his mission of purification... What can one say? What conclusions can one draw? Is it not the same Divinity which finds expression in all forms, in the wise and in the foolish, in the pure and the impure, in the saint and in the hypocrite?

“It is his Lila”, say the wise men of India. (*Lila: Literally, ‘a game’. A technical term used by the Vaishnava school to denote the manifestation of the Divine in the universe.*)

CHAPTER III

ON BOARD THE “FELIX-ROUSSEL”

On December 12th 1950, I sailed away from Marseilles and from France, on board the “Félix-Roussel”. A few days before my departure a brief notice in the papers had apprised me of the death of Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry. Alas. he was the second great sage to make his escape to Nirvana just before my arrival! If my preparations had not been in such an advanced stage, I might even have cancelled my trip.

On the evening of the twelfth of December, a little before sunset, the “Félix-Roussel” sailed slowly out of Marseilles port. Almost all her passengers looked backwards as if still bound by innumerable fine threads of the country they were leaving behind. One by one these threads were snapped. For a while we could see our friends on the pier waving their handkerchiefs, some smiling quietly, others calling out, perhaps a last word of farewell. Then the pier was no more than a grey line broken by a few spots of glimmering colour and finally our eyes scanned the entire graceful skyline of Marseilles port, the Corniche, the jetties, Notre-Dame de la Garde, until all faded away into the blue line of the shore. Then most of the passengers went below. For the next three weeks, while new friendship were being formed, it would be necessary to adjust to a new and different way of life; regular meal times, the daily promenade on deck, games of chess and bridge, evening parties, flirtation, unexpected ports of call, and so on. Anyone who has made a sea voyage, knows how the mind is caught up in the social whirl of life on board. Fleeting though it is, it seems to promise to last forever. Our life span compared with eternity is as fleeting. And yet we put as much effort into it as if we were building on solid rock. Some of us amass wealth; others pursue honour or worldly learning, but we all know that one-day death will come and that everything will vanish like smoke. Those who have read the Mahabharata will no doubt recall the famous question posted by the Yaksha to king Youdishtira.

The great king Youdishtira and his brothers spent fourteen years in exile in a forest. As warriors of noble birth, one of their duties was to provide the Brahmins with protection.

One day a Brahmin came to complain that he had been robbed of a faggot of sacrificial wood that he had hidden in a tree.

Youdishtira, the eldest of the band and their leader, sent his four brothers, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva out separately in quest of the thieves, while he himself set out in another direction. One by one, each of the brothers arrived at the shore of a lake of clear water. Their long wanderings through the forest had left them parched with thirst and this providential water was irresistibly tempting. But a voice spoke out of the top of a tree, "This lake is mine and whoever drinks of it without replying to my question will surely die".

It was a Yaksha, a kind of superior spirit that dwelt in these parts.

It is said that hunger has no ears, and this is even more true of thirst; for not one of the four brothers heeded the warning, and one after the other fell lifeless by the lakeside. Then Youdishtira arrived, also parched and faint, and heard the same words. But Youdishtira was not only a great king; he was a sage famous for his virtue and self-control. Accepting the challenge of the Yaksha, he answered all the questions to the spirit's entire satisfaction. Thereupon the Yaksha allowed him to drink and also returned to him the Brahmin's bundle of wood – for it was he who had stolen it. In addition he granted him a wish. Youdishtira asked to have his brothers brought back to life and this was done.

The point of my story however, is Youdishtira's answer to one of the Yaksha's questions.

"What is the most surprising thing in the world?" the Yaksha asked, and Youdishtira replied,

"The fact that through we see people die each day no one of us believes that he himself must die".

Night falls early in December... Going down to my cabin I found I had two fellow-passengers, an Indian from Bangalore and a Chinaman. The Indian was a Christian and the Chinaman was highly westernised but I like to think their presence was a good omen as through outposts of the Far East were already bidding me welcome. We got along but formed no close relationship. It was with my table companions that I struck up a firm friendship - as though we had always known each other. There were three of them, and like the three musketeers we became four. Two were colonial civil servants, one on his way to Djibouti and the other to Indo-China. The third was a Catholic missionary going out to begin a term of duty at Vishakapatnam in India. But soon after we reached Colombo this friendship, apparently so firm and well-based, vanished like bubbles into empty air.

Life on board ship revolves around meals, and landings are great events. Our first port of call was Port-Said, the gateway to the Suez Canal and to the Far East. On a map the Mediterranean seems small enough but from the deck of a ship it appears to be an illimitable expanse of water. Before Port-Said, only the flames of Stromboli, the lights of Messina and the rocks of Crete indicated that land was not very far away.

The first sign that we were nearing Port-Said was the colour of the water. The sapphire blue of the Mediterranean turned green. This was the effect of the Nile waters, so powerful that they make themselves felt far into the sea, even before land is sighted. Before the grey mass of the

African coastline became visible, a number of gulls appeared and settled on the ship's funnels. Then there was the dim line of shore, which steadily grew clearer, and we imagined our landing was imminent. But it was at least twenty-four hours before the pilot came aboard, the ship sailed into port and after going through the various health and customs procedures, we finally disembarked.

It was the third time that I was passing through Port-Said. It is hardly an attractive town; it has all the ugliness of an oriental port and very little charm.

An incident occurred there which might have been regrettable from the point of view of the shipping line but which was certainly lucky for us. The ship suffered some damage and was held up for three days for repairs. The three musketeers - my friend and myself - decided to profit by the occasion and make a trip to Cairo to see the Pyramids and the Sphinx. We did not have to return to Port-Said but could rejoin the ship at Suez at the end of the Canal.

The Egyptian authorities very kindly provided us with a free "quick trip visa", for without authorisation we could not have been able to travel through the now independent State of Egypt. From Port-Said to Cairo we took a taxi. The road ran through the vast romantic desert, nothing but an expanse of sand burning under an implacable sun. But it has inspired numbers of prophets and wise men. The very emptiness suggests the idea of the Great Void, of the Absolute. It is not irrelevant that the monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, which forbid the worship of image, were both desert born.

Along the road our taxi had a breakdown and the driver seemed unable to get it going again. On either side there was nothing but sand. What could be done? Spend the night here? By great good luck a car appeared, travelling in the direction of Cairo. It stopped and the driver kindly offered us a lift. He was an aristocratic looking Egyptian, the proprietor of a big Cairo hotel. He gave us his card. Naturally, we could stay the night at his hotel!

And this Cairo! What a contrast with Port-Said! It is a delightful city, which somehow recalls Paris. Almost everybody talks French. At least it may be said to be the language of the elite. The prestige of France has always been high here, ever since the victory of the Emperor over the Mamelukes.

We spent the night at the hotel belonging to our companion of the road. The next morning the three musketeers, who had become four, sallied forth to visit the Pyramids and the Sphinx. We took a taxi, for the site was several kilometres out of town. At last! The magnificent image of the famous Sphinx grandly carved in stone. The enormous mass of the Pyramids! Yet somehow the spectacle left me with a sense of the *déjà-vu*. I have never been much moved by the relics of dead civilisations. After all, I had set out in quest of the "Gay Savoir", and it was at its very source that I hoped to discover a wisdom that was eternally living and eternally young.

At Suez we rejoined our ship, which had managed to navigate the Canal successfully without us. Then we crossed the Red Sea - red in name only - as the Hebrews had done after their exodus from Egypt. Our faces, however, were turned to another Promised Land. To our right lay Arabia, the cradle of Islam; to our left desert where the children of Israel had perhaps, wandered

for forty years after the Exodus; beyond these desert that Promised Land now being re-discovered the desert itself, the legendary Mount Sinai. Almost 4,000 years have passed since Moses came down the arid mountain paths bearing in his powerful hands the tables of the law. Could he have thought then that more than half of the inhabitants of the earth would found their beliefs on his teaching? I could not help being moved by all these memories and thoughts.

If it is true that there exist gods or angels who observe all human actions they surely have asked themselves.

“This son of the Mediterranean, what is he setting out to look for among the descendants of the Rishis? Is this worshipper of the “jealous God”, going to bow down before the images and idols of Ind? Is it not written in the tablets that Moses borne down from the mountains, ‘Thou shalt have no other god before me. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them’? And the philosophy of India is so different from that of the Mediterranean! Between the Hindu mind and that of Mediterranean man lies an entire world! Their archetypes, the impressions and attitudes buried deep in their unconscious, are surely fundamentally different?”

Perhaps those angels would be right. And yet...and yet...

An old Cabbalistic legend recounts that there exist in our world thirty–six, who have achieved perfect wisdom” that it is for their sake alone that God deigns to preserve the world and that He will continue to preserve it as long as they exist. From time to time these great sages, all of different races and creeds, gather in council. No doubt they include Hindus and Christians, Jews, Moslems and Buddhists but they never discuss dogma. None sets his faith against that of the other, for they all share a common faith, “that faith of the thirty-six”. The knowledge they hold in common, is drawn from no book, and rests on no tradition. It is born of a direct vision of the Great Reality, a vision which leaves no room whatever for doubt or uncertainty.

“If it is indeed so”, the angels may ask, “then why go to India?”

“Because the frameworks within which Western religions are enclosed are still, too rigid. Some among them claim that they alone possess the key to the gateway leading to the Supreme. In their sacred books we may indeed come across an occasional phrase to the effect that: “the righteous of other creeds will also be saved”; and perhaps too, some rare individuals may attain to a religious tolerance transcending mere condescension. But in India “the religious of the thirty-six” is preached openly and accepted whole–heartedly by most cultivated people. It is called the Vedanta. It is clearly formulated in the Upanishads and even in the Puranas, and it is codified in the works of Shankaracharya. Further still, there are wise men who live it and who have realised its supreme end.

After Suez, Djibouti, where one of my friends resumed his post, and our group was reduced to three. Then the ship held straight for Colombo, the first objective of my journey.

CHAPTER IV

CEYLON

The boat had been scheduled to arrive at Colombo on December 27th, but due to the delay at Port-Said, it turned out that we disembarked on the morning of the first January. It was the first day of the second half of the century and for me it marked the beginning of a new life.

After the usual formalities, police, customs and so on, I found myself, after nineteen days at sea, once more on *terra firma*. And the land on which I had set foot was the celebrated Lanka of the Ramayana. In modern Indian language in fact, Ceylon is still called by this name, as it was in ancient times, when Ram came here to rescue his wife, who had been abducted by the terrible demon Ravana; and the official name of the independent state of Ceylon is now Sri Lanka. Another name for the island, Tambapani, was bestowed upon it by Vijay, its first Aryan king. This dates back to about one thousand years before the Christian era. Vijay was the son of a king of Bengal, the country of Vanga as it was then known. The young man's conduct was so deplorable that his father, to punish him, as he deserved, decided to send him into exile with a thousand of his supporters. Put upon a ship, they were abandoned to the open sea and to the grace of God. Seafaring was a precarious business in those days and the skill of Vijay and his men in this field, could have been no more than rudimentary; but finally the boat came ashore. This was on the island of Ceylon and enchanted by the ravishing beauty of the country, the exiles decided to make it their home, with Vijay as their king. It happened however, that in landing, Vijay stumbled and fell, both hands stretched out before him. The Hindus, and the Bengalis in particular, attach tremendous importance to omens, and at that particular period the belief in the Subha-Ashuba (the favourable and the unfavourable) was even more deeply engraved in men's consciousness than it is today. This fall on land that it had been decided to overrun, augured ill and the band of invaders might well have been discouraged.

But Vijay kept his wits about him. Picking himself up with a smile, he pointed out that, falling as he had with his hands outstretched, was symbolic of the fact that he had taken possession of the country with both hands, and that from that moment forward it was his own. He promised to mend his ways and to be a good king and noticing that his hands were smeared with a reddish clay, he held them out to his followers and said, "Tambapani, copper-coloured hands". And with these words the island was "baptised". The would-be king and his men began moving inland, to the heart of country. But they were not called upon to fight. The ruling queen fell in love with

Vijay at first sight and they were married. And that is how the heir to the rules of the land of Vanga becomes the king of Tambapani.

Vijay's men took wives from among the native inhabitants, and the Cingalese or Singhalese, who today form the greater part of the population of Ceylon are their descendants. The physical resemblance between them and the Bengalis is indeed striking. The word Sinahlese means "the descendants of Sinha", a word derived from the Sanskrit Simha which means "lion". It is the collective name for the warrior-caste, the Kshatriya, in Bengal. Vijay full name would be Vijay-Sinha. Today the Sinha are rare in Bengal. In other parts of India, in the north especially, Sinha has become Singh, a very common name.

The occasional tribes of Veddhas that one comes across in Ceylon even today are the descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants who peopled the island at the time of the arrival of Vijay-Sinha.

I however, had come to Tambapani, not simply as a tourist, but in order to study Buddhism and to live in its ways in its most favoured land. Buddhism had been introduced into Ceylon about two centuries before the Christian era by Mahinda, the younger brother of the famous Buddhist emperor Ashoka. Mahinda was a monk. On coming to Ceylon, he lived at first, as a hermit. The king of the country, Tissa, happened one day to be hunting in the neighbourhood. He had a long conversation with Mahinda and won over by the nobility and exalted nature of the Buddha's teaching, became an ardent convert.

The very day after my arrival I made use of my first letter of recommendation, the one from Mme La Fuente to the well-known Buddhist monk Narada Thero whom I had met in Paris at the offices of the Friends of Buddhism.

The bhante (this is the term of address for a Buddhist monk) lived in the temple of Vajirama in Colombo. I took a taxi there but Narada Thero was away and would return only the following morning. I was welcomed however, by a pleasant-looking bikkhu (monk) who spoke excellent English. Our conversation naturally, was about Buddhism. My interlocutor gave a very carefully reasoned explanation of the doctrine of Thera-Vada. Learning incidentally that his monastic name was Ka, I recalled having read in France an excellent tract on Buddhism written by a writer of the same name and, imagining that he was the monk I was talking to, praised it highly. I learned later however, that the author was another Ka living in North India.

I used my free afternoon to visit the centre of the Ramakrishna Mission in Colombo.

Colombo. January 2nd 1951.¹

(The dates indicate extracts from my diary. I have added a few comments and made a few minor changes.)

A taxi drove me to the crowded native quarter of Wellawata with its rich medley of sights and sound. We turned into 44th Lane. In a walk leading off this avenue stands a pretty lodge, which is the centre of the Ramakrishna Mission. On presenting a letter of introduction to Swami Siddhatmananda from Swami Siddeshwarananda in Paris, I was asked to wait, but it was not long before the Swami himself appeared, affable and eager to oblige. He was a corpulent man with a sallow, bloated face and a very prominent belly. My instinctive reaction was to attempt a spot diagnosis. A professional weakness! We talked, among other matters of my plan ... I noticed that in the course of the conversation, the Swami hardly ever looked me directly in the eye. His head was turned slightly to one side and his glance seemed to be directed to something within himself.

Later, I came to understand this attitude. It is the mark of those who can guess, if not the thought, at least the state of mind of their interlocutor, his deepest and truest motivation, or to use the technical Indian term, his 'bhava'. The bhava may be recognised and studied in two ways. The first of these is expression on an individual's face. In most cases this is sufficient in itself, though certain people, especially on the more sophisticated social levels, have learned in some measure to control or disguise their facial expression. It is extremely difficult however, to mask our feelings entirely, for our facial expressions are decided by the movement of the life force at its very centre, and so reflect our reaction at an instinctive and physiological level beyond the control of the ordinary man. The second way to recognise a bhava is by looking into one's own being. When two individuals are in spoken or even remote communication with each other their affective reaction interrelate. One becomes briefly the complement of the other, in the same way that a dancing couple may be said to do. Thus, by calmly watching one's emotional reaction, one can recognise with almost infallible accuracy, those of one's interlocutor, even in their most delicate nuances.

The Swami wished me to visit the ashram temple and committed me to the care of a young man who served me as a guide. This was a Brahmachari (novice) whose large eyes lit up a beautiful, smiling countenance. He was a Bengali who had come from Calcutta –probably from the Belur-Math centre – in order to study Buddhism in Ceylon. There was so much warmth and friendliness in his smile that I was instinctively impelled to put out my hand and greet him in the western way. He reacted by taking my hand between both his with increased cordiality, but I sensed from his expression his regret at heaving been forced into an action that he found disagreeable. Later I understood why. In India especially in religious circle, one does not shake hands. The accepted form of greeting is to hold up both hands, palm pressed to palm, as Christians do in prayer. Besides, my young guide, as a Brahmachari, a novice, probably came from the Brahmin caste, and was bound by niyamas, by rules of purity. I had in fact been guilty of a faux pas, which I regret in retrospect. Since then I have myself adopted the Hindu manner of greeting which has a number of advantage over our own. A handshake, no matter where and no matter with whom, is clearly an unhygienic practice, involving as it does, contact with palms, which may be dirty or infected. Moreover it probably causes a transmission of the vital fluid, which is seldom advantageous.

The Brahmachari took me to the ashram temple. I slipped off my shoes. In the middle of the alter stood a portrait of Ramakrishna with one of Vivekananda on the right and another of Ramakrishna's wife, "The Mother", to the left; at opposite ends of the altar there were picture of Christ and of Zoroaster. An inscription in Singhalese and translated into English, announced that all men worshipped the same God though in different forms.

We went out onto the balcony overlooking the sea. The sun was setting and a glory streamed through the fronds of the coconut palms lining the beach. It was a classic tropical post-card scene...but very beautiful none the less.

The Swami had wished me to visit a Buddhist temple. But it was too late, especially as I wished to change my hotel that evening.

Colombo. January 3rd, 1951.

I had a morning appointment in the temple of Vajirama with Narada Thero. Once again a taxi took me to the monastery. The Thera received me most cordially, giving me a letter addressed to me care of the monastery. It was from Mme La Fuente of "Les Amis de Bouddhisme" who, not knowing my address, had directed her letter to Vajirama. Narada Thero suggested that I come and live at the monastery, but I intended to go on the following day to "Island Hermitage", the monastery of the well-known German monk, Nyana-tiloka. This monastery is situated on an island in the middle of the lagoon near the village of Dodanduwa, which lies south of Ceylon in the direction of Galle.

While we were discussing the best possible method of getting to the island, two young Singhalese drove up in their car. There were lay devotees of the monastery and prostrated themselves respectfully before the Thera who responded with the customary formula—"Sukhi" (may you be happy). It transpired that our two visitors were planning to return home by car that afternoon to their village beyond Galle and as Dodanduwa was on the way they very kindly offered to give me a lift. Was it just a coincidence? So I thought at the time, but how can anything be a coincidence when, as it is written in the Guru-Granth, (the sacred book of the Sikhs). "Not a leaf can fall from a tree unless it be His Will". Later in India, after I had met my Guru in Benares, similar coincidence, quasi-miraculous and veritably so, recurred to an almost daily rhythm. And it was then that I understood what was meant in the Guru-Granth.

My newly met friends had arranged to pick me up at four o'clock to start out on our journey and I sent a telegram to the Mahathera Nyanatiloka announcing my arrival at about eight that evening. However, we did not actually leave until six, two hours later than scheduled.

The road from Colombo to Galle runs along the Western shore of the island. It appears to be a very densely populated region, the villages following fast upon each other as we drove along. The view was magnificent, for Ceylon is an island of great beauty —coconut groves, lagoons, sea, lush vegetation and picturesque villages teeming with noisy, colourful life. Occasionally a saffron coloured robe reminded us that we were in a Buddhist land. The cows here as in India, wandered freely along the roads, so that, on more than one occasion, our car had to slow down or stop.

But night falls early in January, and the beauties of the landscape were soon swallowed up in darkness. Night travel here presents no difficulties, however. The roads are excellent and our driver was perfectly in control.

My two companions had heard that I wished to become a bikkhu (a Buddhist monk). I had taken care to state very specifically that I had come in order to find out whether I was *capable* of living the life of a monk; but it was doubtful whether they had clearly grasped the distinction. They piled me with questions, often naïve and tactless, about life in France and in Europe, and were most attentive and obliging. In one of the villages on the way the car stopped and one of my companions got out, informing me that this was his brother's house. I noticed he was holding a visiting card that looked like the one I had given him earlier in the day to enable him to find me at my hotel. It was not long before he returned and informed me, with a wide smile, that he had given his brother my name to insert in the local newspaper with the information that Dr. W. (myself) had come from France in order to become a monk. He thought this would please me but, in fact, I found it most disagreeable. First of all I had not come "to become a monk" but to see whether "I was capable of" becoming one. The difference, which seemed to have eluded my amiable companions, was considerable. Moreover, I dislike publicity. But what was the good of embarking on complicated explanations? If my name was to appear in a Singhalese paper, so much the worse for me. At Kalutara we stopped again, but this time it was on my account. Kalutara is sacred to Buddhists and my friends wanted me to visit the sanctuary.

After removing our shoes we went into the precincts of the holy place. Despite the lateness of the hour a number of devotees were chanting prayers and suttas. (*Sutta—A Pali word from the Sanskrit Sutra—the verse of a sacred text.*) The sanctuary held a Bo-tree, off-shoot of a branch of the tree under which the Buddha had had his great revelation, and a relic enclosed in a little stone structure, that resembled a stupa (*Stupa—Stonework constructions generally containing Buddhist relics*), but was too small to be one.

I sat down on the sand for a few minutes. On all sides, candles and joss-sticks were burning. There was a captivating atmosphere, almost palpable, which made a deep impression on me.

On being introduced to the bikkhu responsible for the management of the sacred place, I greeted him with pressed palms in the manner of the monks and he replied "Sukhi" but it was his companion who drew my attention. He was a young man of middling height, or rather on the small side. Judging by his beard and his plentiful black hair he was a bikkhu. He was dressed, not in the saffron robe, but in white. He was probably an upsaka at the eight sila, that is to say, a semi-layman who had taken upon himself only portion of the monastic rule. (*The ten sila are the ten vows, which an ordained monk observes. 1st. Not to kill 2nd Not to steal. 3rd. not to commit adultery. (This vow, of course, is binding only on the layman. The ordained monks observe perfect chastity.) 4th. Not to lie. 5th. To abstain from intoxicating drinks. 6th. To eat only at fixed hours (before midday). 7th. To use no garlands, unguents or perfumes. 8th. not to sit on an elevated seat. 9th. To abstain from dancing, music and public entertainments. 10th. Neither to process nor to accept gold or money.*

The upsaka at the 8 sila is bound only by the first eight rules, the layman by the first five). He had an extraordinary face, ecstatic eyes and the steady smile of an enlightened soul. If it is true that the

face is the reflection of the inner being, this man had certainly attained the sukha (the happiness) that the bikkhus speak of.

I should have been happy to stay longer in this enchanting place, but we were already late and it was time to leave. Nevertheless, we made one more stop to have a cup of tea at the “rest house” in Bentota. It was excellent tea. I wished to pay the bill but my companions, without my knowledge, had already settled it. “A future bikkhu shouldn’t pay anything”, they said.

At last, at about nine o’clock in the evening, we arrived at the village of Dodanduwa. The monastery of Nyanatiloka is situated on one of the islands in the lagoon about half-an-hour away by boat. I gathered that people from Island Hermitage had waited for me with their boat for an hour and had then gone away, probably assuming that I had postponed my visit. Believing that no boat would be available that evening and that I should have to wait until the following morning to cross the lagoon, my companions took me to one of the village notables, a corpulent merchant, seemingly rich, and with a fair knowledge of English. They suggested that I spend the night with him and take the first boat across the lagoon the following morning, but the proposed host did not seem particularly enthusiastic at the idea; nor was I, for that matter. I should have been perfectly happy to spend the night on a mat but that might have created a situation that both of us would have found uncomfortable.

A possible solution was to go back five miles to Hikkaduwa where there was a “rest-house”, but then I should have to cover the five miles again next morning.

Finally my host offered to try and find a boat to take me across the lagoon that very evening. My companions had to continue on their way home and took leave of me. I thanked them and they said they would write and then I was left alone with the corpulent gentleman. He too, was most attentive. He offered me beer and when I said I did not drink, succeeded, after some effort, in bringing to a light bottle of non-alcoholic liquid. It was a kind of ginger-lemonade with a nauseating taste but I gulped it down without wincing and assured him it was very good. Strangely enough, since arriving in India, I have acquired a taste for ginger and now find it delicious. The man who had been sent out in search of a boat returned with the sad news that it was leaking and that if we took it we risked going down to the bottom of the lagoon. Finally however, a ferryman was found who was willing to hire us a seaworthy vessel and two boatmen to ferry me to the monastery.

We set out for the shore. It was a pitch-black night and, as there appeared to be no path, I advanced with caution wielding an enormous electric torch, for I remembered the stories about cobras that I had heard from Mr. N., the bishop of the liberal church. I had even brought along a snake-ite kit-bistoury, syringe and an anti-poison serum from the Pasteur Institute.

But cobras are much rarer here than one in France imagines. I have lived in India now for more than fifteen years in villages and in isolated hermitages in the jungle, and the only cobras I have seen, are those exhibited by snake-charmers. Other kinds of snakes however, such as vipers and grass snakes are common enough.

My electric torch had three batteries one on top of the other. This apparently proved to be too much for the bulb, which flickered and went out leaving me helpless in the dark. One of my companions went back to the village and fetched me a new bulb for which he refused to accept payment.

It must have been nearly ten in the evening by now; but these nocturnal wanderings had a charm of their own; I was hardly tired and not in the least apprehensive. However, we were still far from our journey's end.

On reaching the shore of the lagoon I looked around for the boat. It was a native craft, so bizarre that at first glance, I did not even realise it was a boat. The base was a tree-trunk cut in half, lengthways, and hollowed out in the middle. It was impossible to sit inside, except on the rim with one's feet in the hollow. The contraption must inevitably have capsized were it not for the fact that three planks maintained its equilibrium; they were fixed on the left-hand side, two crosswise and one in the length. It was propelled by two paddles.

The boat was pushed out into the water and we continued our romantic night trip. But the rowers lost their way among the numerous islands in the lagoon, and it was only after one and a half hours that, by the help of light signals, they finally arrived at the one on which the monastery stood.

Received by three monks who had presumably been roused from sleep by the signals, I was led to a room in a separate little bungalow. It was lit by a kerosene lamp and the furnishings, though sparse, were adequate. I was beginning to feel tired and lay down, looking forward to a restful night. But I had not counted on the mosquitoes, which fell vigorously upon my uninitiated flesh, so that despite my fatigue, I slept a restless night.

“Island Hermitage”. January 4th 1951.

The next morning I was up at nine. Ordinarily six o'clock was waking-up time at the monastery, but I had asked not to be disturbed earlier. Starting out for the well near the water's edge in order to make my perfunctory ablution I found Nyanatiloka, the Mahathera (Superior) of the monastery, apparently waiting for me at the door of my bungalow. He welcomed me with a few friendly words and on completing my toilet, I rejoined him. It was too late for breakfast, but the Mahathera had given instruction for a coconut to be cut down from a tree to serve me instead. With deft strokes a servant removed the fibrous coating of the nut and then sliced off the top. The milk of the fruit took the place of my morning cup of tea. Then the nut was cut in two and I scooped out the pulp with a spoon improvised from a bit of the shell. It was a green coconut and this is the way green coconuts are generally eaten in India and Ceylon.

Dinner, or the mid-day meal, was served in the monastery at eleven o'clock, for the Vinaya (the monastic rule of Buddhism) prohibits monks from eating after mid-day. In the evening only

sweetened tea, without milk, is allowed. As in certain Christian monastic communities, the monks do not eat in the company of laymen, so I was served alone after the bikkhus had completed their meal.

It was very plentiful dinner, rice accompanied by a vegetable curry, then fruit, cakes and tea. The food was excellent but alas! The curry was so highly spiced that I felt I was gulping down fire. It is amazing how the human stomach can armour-plate itself to the degree necessary to enable it to survive a daily ordeal of this sort; whether in Ceylon or in South India or in the north, this kind of food is the general rule. "You will get used to it in time", they told me. Small amounts of spices may, I admit, serve as an aid to digestion in tropical climes, but surely the enormous quantities that the average man swallows everyday in India and Ceylon can only do him harm.

A brief siesta after the meal was imperative in this heat, for hot it certainly was, even though we were still in January. There is no winter in Ceylon. In the afternoon I took a walk through the island, or rather both islands; for the monastery grounds are spread over two islands joined to each other by a narrow strip of land.

The monastery proper comprises a central building, the Dana-Sila, consisting of a place of meeting and the refectory and a number of detached bungalows spread out over the two islands. Each monk has his own little bungalow, which he can live quite independently, bound only by the dinner hour and the daily meeting at six o'clock in the evening. The island is covered with lush tropical vegetation, coconut trees, palms and so on. The harmony of the colours, the transparent sky, the blue reflection in the water, the beauty of the rich vegetation, the glories of the sunset over the lagoon, all combine to make it an enchanted spot.

At this time of the year the heat is tolerable and I even found it pleasant. But the summer and the monsoon season must be troublesome.

At six in the evening I was invited to the customary meeting of the monks in the Dana-Sila. There we had a cup of tea and discussed Buddhism. The four bikkhus at the monastery were present. The fifth, the Mahathera (the Superior) did not come. The monks sat on a bench, and together with an upsaka, (a semi-lay mother of the monastery) I sat on a mat on the ground facing them. The discussion began. As a newcomer and a prospective candidate for ordination, I found all the fire directed at me. My philosophical and religious views had to be aired to know whether they were in harmony with orthodox Buddhism or in need of correction. I answered the questions as well as I could, for my English, though improving everyday, was still inadequate to convey the shades of meaning involved in such a discussion.

The bikkhu. S., who seemed to be second to the Mahathera, provided a most interesting exposition of the doctrine of the Thera-Vada (The Buddhism of the South). He particularly emphasised the fact that no single thought or action of ours should be considered insignificant and laid stress on the need to keep the consciousness constantly on the alert and to live in the present moment.

After the meeting I returned to my cottage on the other island. It was dark. Though I had no fears, I thought it wise to light up the path with my huge electric torch for I could not rid my

mind of the cobras (invisible ones) which had chased M. N., the bishop of the liberal church, away from here.

“Island Hermitage”. January 5 th, 1951.

I slept better last night. The mosquitoes were less aggressive. Waking up at six-thirty, I washed and had breakfast. It is a fairly solid meal here, but I had only tea with bread and butter, cheese and fruit, for the morning meditation would be difficult on a full stomach.

The Mahathera had asked me to visit him after breakfast. We had a very long talk. He had been expecting me to spend at last a year at the monastery and was surprised to hear that I was planning to stay only one week. When he asked me why, I told him quite frankly that I did not feel I was mature enough yet for the monastic life and that I wished, moreover, to go to India in quest of wise men and yogis. He appeared to think poorly of Hindu spirituality and tried energetically to dissuade me from my plans. “Go to Burma”, he said, speaking with enthusiasm. He had lived in Burma for some time and had excellent memories of the Buddhist centre there. Our conversation then turned to Buddhism in general and to books...

One of the last books I had read before leaving France was the *Doha-Kosha* by Kanha and Saraha. It was a French translation of ancient texts in old Bengali and in Apabrahmsa (a dialect derived from Sanskrit). The poems, which these texts comprise, are of great artistic beauty and often soar to the loftiest spiritual insights. But they are sprinkled with cryptic and symbolic terms from the tantric “jargon”, the Sandhya-Bhasa (the language of the twilight). The authors are in fact gurus of the sect of Sahajikas, a now extinct tantric Buddhist sect related to the Vajra-Yâna. I had been enthusiastic about this book because at the time I had only a vague idea of what tantrism really was. Like so many westerners I had been attracted by the aura of mystery in which the doctrine was veiled. Later when I came to understand the actual truth of tantrism I turned away in disgust.

The Sahajikas were most numerous in Bengal where, even today, a Buddhist community remains in existence. This particular sect however, has disappeared and seems to have merged with similar Vaishnava groups perhaps those of Kartabhaja (or Gospara), which are also sometimes called Shajikas.

Kanha and Sahara, the authors of the book in question were members of the famous group of eighty-four Mahasidhas (great magicians) a number of whom were Tibetan Yogis.

Nyanatiloka, though deeply versed in Buddhist lore, appeared neither to have read the book nor to be acquainted with the sect of Sahajikas or the eighty-four magicians, but in the course of my deliberately confused attempts at explanation, he came to understand that it was a question of some form of tantric Buddhism. At once it became clear to me that tantrism is held in anathema

here... The Mahathera made me inscribe my name in a register and lent me two books on orthodox Theravada Buddhism...

This long conversation was followed by meditation in my room, an obligatory bath at about ten-thirty and lunch at noon. The curry was as highly spiced as ever but I found I was getting used to it. I hoped that it would not make me dyspeptic like the Finnish captain the monks told me about. Apparently, finding the curry and the solitude equally unbearable, he had left the monastery a few months earlier.

The meals, on a base of vegetable and rice, were plentiful and varied. To my great surprise however, I found two pieces of meat that looked like bacon, mixed into the curry. I had always believed that Buddhist monks were strictly vegetarian, but in fact this is not always the case. The Vinaya, the code of regulation for monastic life laid down by the Buddha, permits the eating of meat under certain circumstances. The bikkhu generally lives by begging and has to accept whatever he is given. He is allowed to accept a meat meal if he is absolutely certain that the animal has not been slaughtered especially on his account. What matters above all, is the observation of the principle of Ahimsa (never to cause harm to any living creature). This is vastly different from the vegetarianism of the Indian Brahmins who consider meat as an impure form of nourishment in itself, regardless of its origin or quantity.

The story, which is told in the Vinaya Pitaka of the conversion of General Siha of the ancient city of Vesali, demonstrates clearly under what circumstances a Buddhist monk is authorised to eat meat.

General Siha was a Jain by religion, but won over by the loftiness and nobility of the teachings of the Buddha, he became a convert to Buddhism. After the Master had accepted him as a lay-disciple, Siha invited him, together with the community of monks, to a banquet. He sent out his servants in search of pavatta mamsa (pure meat) that is to say, the flesh of an animal that had been killed earlier and not specially for the feast. The jealous Jains spread the rumour that General Siha had had an animal slaughtered for the Buddha and his congregation, a story which Siha denied. It was on this occasion that the Buddha made the following declaration, thus fixing definitively the monastic code, on this question.

“Oh monks! It is forbidden to eat the flesh of an animal killed for your sake. Whoever does this thing will be guilty of an evil deed.

“I permit you, oh monks, to eat fish or meat only on condition that they be absolutely pure according to the three following condition; that it has neither been seen, heard, or suspected that the animal has been killed specially for the sake of a monks”. (Extract from the Vinaya Pitaka I 236–238; English translation by I. B. Horner in “Buddhist Texts” by E. D; Conze)

This was one of the points, on which Devadatta, the cousin and the inveterate enemy of the Buddha brought about a schism in the order. Devadatta had suggested that the master pronounce a total ban on the eating of fish or meat by the monks, but the Buddha had made his declaration anew.

“Fish or meat may be considered pure form of nourishment on the three following condition; that it has neither been seen, heard or suspected that the animal has been killed specially for the sake of monk”. (Extract from the Vinya Pitaka II 184—).

At about six in the evening the customary meeting of the bikkhus was held in the Dana–Sila. Once again the discussion was directed at me. The main speaker was the bikkhu S. He began by giving me some advice about Metta meditation, one of the classic exercises of Thera–Vada Buddhism. Metta is a Pali word which comes from the Sanskrit, Maitri, meaning “compassion” or “love”. The purpose of this meditation is to expand our thoughts of love and compassion to embrace all living creatures. Theravadins attach enormous importance to this, and indeed, when correctly practised, such meditation is truly efficacious. It brings about a sense of harmony with one’s surroundings and a resulting state of being which is both calm and contented, an indispensable precondition for spiritual progress.

But this was no more than a preamble, for it soon became clear that the bikkhu S. had taken upon himself the task of eradicating from my mind all sympathy for tantrism. It is very likely that the Mahathera had reported our morning conversation about the *Doha–Kosha* and the Sahajikas, for he seemed well-briefed and knew that Kanha and Saraha were included in the group of the eighty-four great magicians. Like an older brother, tempering severity with gentleness, he brought all his persuasive powers to bear in an attempt to cure me of what, in his opinion, was a dangerous heresy. He was quite unrestrained in his denigration of this “degenerate form of Buddhism”...mere sexuality...“a pure aberration”...“be better by far to get married”...and so on. I permitted the attack on my heroes without turning a hair, merely interposing an occasional comment. After all I had come here not to present and uphold my own opinions but to get to know those of others.

After tantric Buddhism, it was the entire school of the Mahayana that came under attack. “Only the Theravada teaches the true doctrine of the Buddha; the Mahayana is merely a late and unfortunate distortion”. Next it was the turn of India and the Hindus to be summoned to the bar: “The Bhagavad Gita is a dangerous book for it justifies murder under certain condition”... “to maintain that it is possible to kill without hate is quite absurd”...and there was more in the same vein. I beat a prudent retreat clinging, nevertheless, to my position as an impartial observer of all sects. But he sensed my resistance. “No doubt you consider me narrowminded”, he said. I protested politely but without conviction and in leaving, he told me graciously that all the subject of my present investigations, such as tantrism, were like the childhood illnesses that everyone had to go through. Years later when I had acquired more experience in the spiritual realm and a deeper knowledge of religious philosophies I often remembered him, for when westerners newcomers to India approached me for “advice on tantrism”, I discouraged them with the same vehemence.

Certainly tantrism, or rather the Vamachara (*The exact term for the sects, which make use of sexual union for religious ends, is Vamachara—literally: the path to the left (hand).*) exercises a powerful fascination over some occidentals. Its doctrine and methods have been popularised by the books of Arthur Avalon and I have heard certain swamis say that it is the path most suited to the western mind. But I believed this to be a dangerous mistake; for tantrism, as practised in India, can in no possible way be assimilated by an individual born and bred in the tradition of a western

religion. What, in fact, is the central principle of tantrism shorn of all its paraphernalia of mystery, of rites, and of magic formulas?

The ultimate end of tantrism, like that of the Jñana-Marga (the path of Knowledge) is liberation from the cycle of birth and death. But tantrism offers its initiates a graded path; that is to say it does not demand the immediate renunciation of the pleasures of the world. On the contrary, at the outset, it accepts them in their entirety. The five Makaras: (1) Mamsa (meat) (2) Matsya (fish) (3) Madya (wine) (4) Maithuna (sexual union) and (5) Mudra (corn), symbols of worldly pleasure in its totality, become cult objects. Then, through the practice of Yoga, the initiate has to attempt what, in the language of psycho-analysis is called a “sublimation of the libido”. This sublimation begins with the awakening of the Kundalini which permits the Yogi to enjoy at will the subjective aspect of sense objects, their “subtle essences”, without the actual objects being present. These “subtle essences”, the Rasa, are more intense than the pleasures produced by the objects themselves, and the attachment to such objects simply falls away. However, these “essences” have the effect of binding the initiate down powerfully into an extremely dangerous intermediary world. Moving from stage to stage in his progress he must finally discover for himself the “subject” that is experiencing the pleasure, that is to say, the Eternal Noumenon, Pure Consciousness. Here the psychological process leading the mind back from the objective to the subjective, from the objects of the sense to the Noumenon relies on the help of symbols and not, as in the path of knowledge, on self-inquiry. Those who are able to walk through the terrifying forest of the Unconscious with “open eyes”, that is to say, without symbols, are very rare indeed. Obviously, then, the prop which makes it possible to climb from stage to stage in this perilous endeavour to sublimate the libido can only be a religious system which allows a progressive affective transfer, or rather, divinisation of the sexual union. In the Shakti Path it is the goddess Kali, symbol of the feminine Divine, who helps the disciple to evade the tentacles of sensual pleasures even while partaking of them. This is no easy task and absolute faith in this religious system is a sine-qua-non of success, a faith possible only for individuals born and bred in Shakta (*Shaktas— worshippers of Shakti the feminine Divine*) families and nourished from infancy on the rites, legends, and beliefs of this creed. In a word, the unconscious mind must be penetrated through and through by this religious belief. Clearly the westerner who comes to India at a mature age, brings with him a very different mental structure. Even if he believes he bears an ardent devotion to Kali or Siva or some other Hindu deity, it can be on the conscious level alone. As he makes progress in his spiritual exercise the gates of his Unconscious will fall open (this is what happens when the Kundalini is aroused), his faith in his adopted gods will crumble, leaving him without a prop, and the result may be catastrophic.

Moreover, the methods employed by the Vamachara seem, to the western mind, immoral and repugnant. There are many paths leading to the House of the Lord. Why choose to go through the sewer? Thus I came to realise that the remonstrances of the bikkhus, which I had accepted with such poor grace were, in fact, most wise.

The bikkhu had also said the Bhagavad Gita was a dangerous book because it sanctioned murder in certain cases. It is a charge that has often been made against this Indian “Bible”, but it cannot withstand a thorough investigation. The book has to be read from cover to cover and should be studied too, and the statement must be viewed within its own proper context. The “sanctioning of murder” is not a commandment in the Gita; far from it. It is the counsel given to Arjuna, a

military leader, and it is given at a critical moment on the battlefield; it comes as the solution of a problem rooted in exceptional circumstances, and is not intended to be a directive for all men. While on the point of leading his armies into battle against those of Duryodhana, Arjuna had suddenly felt his heart fail him. A man of great heroic stature could not admit that his weakness had a physiological basis and was in fact only physical fear, so he rationalised it on moral grounds. The leader of the opposing camp was a wrong-doer, but in his ranks were many wise men and just men. Arjuna wondered whether it might not be better to sue for peace and permit the continued rule of injustice rather than massacre friends and relations on the other side.

There is no man who, in the course of his life, has not confronted – albeit on a lesser scale – a dilemma such as this, the imperative to choose between two courses of action, which are equally wrong.

But Krishna allowed his friend and disciple a way out of this impasse. The duty of a military leader, he declared, is to fight in defence of justice. Arjuna therefore, should give battle, not beat a faint-hearted retreat. Though it was his duty to kill his enemies, he should do so without hatred, anger or passion and without concern over the outcome of action performed simply in his role as an instrument of God. In this way he would bear no responsibility for a deed, which under other circumstances, would have been a sin.

This is a far call from saying that the Gita licenses any man to kill provided only that he do so without hatred in his heart. The fact is that there are no more sublime teachings than those of the Bhagavad Gita and its moral code can bear comparison with that of any religion whatever.

“Island Hermitage”. January 6 th1951

This morning I saw my first iguana. It came out of the water just as I was about to bathe. It was completely uninterested in me and stretched out lazily in the sun, not far from the shore, looking like a crocodile with a delicately marked skin. It was a water-iguana which can deal formidable blows with its tail, and might easily break a man’s leg. I saw two others and then a fourth in the course of the afternoon. The last one blocked my path along the small tongue of land that constitutes a bridge between the two islands. It was moving slowly and heavily and on observing me approach, stopped and flicked out a pointed tongue. I waited until it had crossed the path into the water of the lagoon where it moved much more easily than on land.

I have been provided with a mosquito net, which I put up this evening. To tell the truth, however, the mosquitoes hardly trouble me nowadays. The monks have assured me that there is no malaria on the island. I hope they are not wrong...

The bikkhus are certainly very reserved. They are hardly to be seen during the day. Occasionally a saffron robe may be seen flitting across a pathway. They talk little and seem to wish to be alone. I too find this solitude most congenial. Nevertheless I have decided to return to

Colombo next Wednesday and to spend a few days at the Vijarama monastery before leaving for India.

I have finally brought myself to swim in the lagoon despite the sharp-edged shells strewn over its bed.

A very kind letter has reached me from my two guides of the other evening. They are two brothers by the name of G. Shekara and they live in Habaraduwa.

At the meeting this evening, the monks were more silent than usual. After the customary recitation of the suttas two of the bikkhus talked between themselves in Sinhalese. Then bikkhu S. informed me bluntly, without any preamble, that the daily news of Ceylon had published the information that I had come from France with the intention of becoming a monk. He wished to know the source of the information. I told him about my companions on the road, who had do doubt concluded somewhat hastily that I would decide to make the monastery my permanent home.

“Island Hermitage”. Sunday, January 7 th 1951.

This morning N—L, a Sinhalese monk brought me the copy of the Daily News in which the item of information discussed yesterday had appeared. The bikkhus appear to attach a great deal of importance to this incident, which I had considered quite insignificant.

Next Wednesday I shall leave this peaceful spot for Colombo. For anybody who wishes to lead a contemplative life this place is certainly ideal. But I am not yet “ripe”. My mind is still bound by vasanas (subconscious desires) as the Hindu calls them, which I must work out of my system. In any case it seems to me that I should prefer a more complete solitude with the advantage of greater independence. Certainly the monastic rule here is not too rigid, and the monks are free to do as they please within the framework of their monastic obligations. But in whatever concerns the spiritual life, I am like an unbroken horse, intolerant of the least control. It is my firm conviction that the spiritual quest, the true Ascese, leads along a road, which one must walk alone. Obviously a social framework and conventional form of behaviour are necessary for the secular world. But the path which leads to the Supreme is ever new and different for each individual. Every seeker must follow his own particular route, and his route will resemble no other.

“Island Hermitage”. January 8 th 1951.

Today I had another long conversation with the Mahathera Nyanatiloka. I believe he is about seventy-two years old but he looks younger. He has a fighter’s head with an expression somewhat

reminiscent of Churchill's but his features are more delicate and gentle. A perpetual half-smile lights up his face. If you ask him a question he does not answer immediately. You imagine that perhaps he has not understood you, but some moments later the answer comes. At first I was inclined to explain this by a slowing down of the faculties due to age, but I recall that someone once told me – apropos of Anapanasati (a method of controlling respiration) - that Japanese children were taught never to ask a question before taking in a long slow breath and then breathing out again. Perhaps this is what he himself does.

“Island Hermitage”. January 9th 1951.

In the course of my walk today I met the bikkhu S. who kindly took me to visit his bungalow. The rooms are clean and cheerful, pleasantly furnished, with latticed windows. I was struck by the remarkable difference between the standards of living of a Buddhist monk and of a sanyasi or sadhu in India.

In Buddhist countries and in Ceylon in particular, it is believed that a monk should live in pleasant and comfortable circumstances. Free of material worries and with a mind at peace he can thus devote himself entirely to his search for Nirvana. The laity provides the bikkhu very generously with all his necessities and treats him with respect and veneration.

In India, on the contrary, the sadhu who has professed to renounce the world is expected to live in the utmost simplicity. The greater his deprivation, greater the reverence he inspires. The ideal of the perfect sanyasi has been popularised in the writings and hymns of Shankaracharya. Here for example is a description of the glorious life of the man who has renounced all worldly possessions:

The foot of a tree suffices him for a resting place,

And a plate is provided by his own two hands.

He scorns riches as he would a bundle of rags,

Those who wear the kaupina are indeed fortunate.

(Hymn of the Kaupinavata -verse 2).

The “kaupina” is the irreducible minimum of clothing - a piece of linen covering the private parts and held by a cord around the waist. “kaupinavata” which means the wearer of the kaupina is, in Vedantic literature, a synonym for “the man who has achieved complete self-denial”.

The great sage of Arunachala, Ramana Maharisi was a kaupinavata in both the literal and figurative senses of the word. It is recounted of him that one day his kaupina tore. He could quite easily have asked for another. But in a spirit of renunciation and also, no doubt, to provide an example, he mended it in the following way. While walking along the hill-side he broke off two thorns. Using one to make a needle of the other by piercing it at the base, he separated a thread from his kupina, and with this improvised needle and thread mended his only garment.

In India, however, the sadhu’s life is extremely hard for the country is poorer than Ceylon and the lay-people understandably suspicious in view of the considerable number of monks who wear the orange robe of the sadhu only in order to evade the need to earn a living.

Wednesday. January 10 th 1951.

Departure from this peaceful spot. The monastery boat took me across the lagoon to the village of Dodanduwa where I caught the train to Colombo.

It was the first time I had travelled by train in Ceylon, and I was alone in the first class carriage. The compartment was comfortable enough somewhat on the dusty side, and I was free to admire at my leisure the magnificent countryside and the colourful throngs of people in the wayside stations and villages.

In Colombo I booked into the Bristol Hotel. The noise and bustle of the city came as an unpleasant surprise with its buzzing swarm of shopkeepers, guides, moneychangers and the harassing purveyors of various services whose slimy effusiveness covers one thought alone; the urge to milk you of as many rupees as possible.

In the afternoon I paid a visit to the Vijarama temple Narada Thero very kindly suggested that I put up at the monastery, but I was already installed at the Bristol and in any case I meant to leave for India in a few days time.

Colombo. January 13 th 1951.

I have booked a seat on the plane to Madras the day after tomorrow. This afternoon Professor M. L. called to take me to a Buddhist meeting, which was being held at a village near

Kurunagala. A prominent lay-Buddhist and also an important politician, he was a man of great charm, cultured and widely travelled. He seemed to be acquainted with every corner of our globe. We drove in his car to Kurunagala. Driving is a pleasure in Ceylon for the roads are excellent and the countryside enchantingly beautiful. The meeting appeared to be most interesting. Unfortunately I did not understand Singhalese, but the gestures and attitudes, the facial expression and intonations of voice that are the elements of all human communication, enabled me to participate in some measure. The subject under discussion was the need to defend important Buddhist rights which were being eroded by relations with the Christians.

“They are going to be very excited when they know that a French Buddhist doctor is present at their meeting”, the Professor had told me on the way.

Colombo. January 14 th 1951.

This evening I was asked by Professor M. L. to his home to meet a group of Buddhist pilgrims returning from India.

For the most part they were charming, friendly people who, like so many Singhalese, have an innate warmth and politeness vastly different from the formal civility of most Europeans.

The evening led to a change in my plans. I had intended to visit only the South of India. But I think now, that if my funds hold out, I shall follow the pilgrims' route.

CHAPTER V

ARRIVAL IN INDIA

On January 15th 1951 I arrived in Madras on an Air India plane. We touched down at Tirrucirapali airport and I came into Madras by bus.

This part of India seems dry and barren. How different from the lush exuberance of the vegetation in Ceylon! The Hindus do not smile as readily as the Singhalese do. They seem more serious and reserved. But they have remained friendly and gracious, and there is no trace of the

somewhat bragging over-confidence encountered occasionally in Egypt, the mark of an unfortunate reaction to a newly-acquired independence.

So here I was at last, in India...my own "promised land".

January 14th was Makar Shankranti, the day when the sun begins to move northward, and an important feast-day in India. The six-month of the Uttar Yana, the period when the sun is in the northern hemisphere, are regarded by the Hinds as particularly auspicious for any enterprise of a religious or spiritual nature. Nevertheless, I did not feel as joyous as I should perhaps have felt. This may have been due in part, to the fatigue of the journey. But the fact was that for me India had always been synonymous with great sages; and the "Big Two" of Southern India – Ramana Maharishi and Aurobindo were no more.

But surely our joys and sorrow are nothing but a tissue of illusion? Our mental states reflect our physical being and colour the outer world in the light of our inner sensations.

If the digestive system is functioning well, and the life force beating to a cheerful rhythm, the world seems full of promise and hope. But if we happen to be going through a depressive phase, the sun-drenched days lose their radiance, beautiful landscapes seem splendour less and dreary, friends bore us to tears and every hope seems vain.

Madras. January 16th 1951.

My hotel accommodation is extremely comfortable. It is in fact a suite – three large rooms - sitting-room, bed-room, and bath. But the food, though quite good, is not plentiful. India is on the verge of famine and food rationing is in force.

This afternoon I visited the impressive General Head-quarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar. Adyar is the world centre of this wide-ranging and interesting organisation.

Since its foundation at the end of the last century by Mme Blavatsky, the society has made enormous headway. Theosophists have often been the butt of critical attacks, some justified, but the organisation has played an important role in the diffusion of Indo-Buddhist thought though the western world, and large numbers of its adherents have made and are still making sincere efforts towards spiritual perfection.

The Headquarters in Adyar is considered one of the "tourist attractions" in Madras, and draws many visitors. The main building open to visitors is a richly documented library with a reading-room attached. The spacious foyer is embellished with colonnades, and symbolic representations of the major religion in frescoes decorate the walls. Near the entrance stands a large, life size statue of Madame Blavatsky and another of Colonel Olcott. The precincts of the Adyar centre are

extensive. Surrounding the main building is an enormous park, pleasantly dotted with numerous temples in different styles.

I had hardly settled down in the reading-room to consult a few reference books when one of the librarians came up and started a conversation. He was a long, lean Madrasi who spoke English quite well and he offered me his service as a guide through the city.

I imagined at first that this was “a great Theosophical heart” looking for a chance to perform “a good deed”, but then I recalled that we were in India. How much was he going to ask? No more than three rupees a day, as it turned out. Looking back, I see now that he was a most responsible guide, constantly exercising his ingenuity in search of ways to make me economise. He certainly earned his three rupees. No more ruinous taxis! We went everywhere by bus and I was delighted with the democratic form of travel that enabled me to mingle freely with the local people. Thanks to him, I broke out of my ivory tower. We threaded our way through the most crowded streets and sat down in native cafes. My guide always ordered one of those delicious Madrasi coffees accompanied by copious helpings of idli and dosa, (*Idli and Dosa; preparations on a base of rice flour which are South Indian specialties*). And naturally I had the same. He considered himself lucky to be making three rupees a day – no small sum in such a poor country - and to be eating free into the bargain. But I was luckier still for without knowing it he had broken the shell isolating me from the ordinary Hindu.

Madras. January 17 th 1951.

This afternoon my guide took me through the more densely populated quarters of the town.

These Indian crowds are certainly strange and fascinating. What extremes of fortune! On the one hand utter wretchedness, a deprivation so outrageous as to be quite inconceivable in western terms; on the other, wealth and opulence. Sadhus are numerous here. Some go about completely naked, their bodies smeared with ashes; these are the Nagas. Other are clad in the orange robe. Many wear white or some other colour and bear on their foreheads the distinctive mark of their sect, Shaivas, Vaishnavas, and so on.

At first glance the average Westerner might conclude that Indian sects present an inextricably confused tangle.

In the West we like to have everything clearly classified, set out in order, lucid and symmetrical. Our religions have their well-established dogmas, their leaders and their clergy organised in a patterned hierarchy.

In Hinduism it is quite otherwise and that is because the Hindu and the Western minds are in many ways utterly dissimilar. The average Hindu is much closer to natural sources than is his cultured Western counterpart.

If we watch Nature in her operations, the growth of a tree, for instance, we see that the process is slow, unhurried, tentative, almost. There is no obvious symmetry in the way the branches spread out, and leaves and flowers appear in apparent disorder. Geometrical shapes, even if suggested, are always imperfect. The final effect, however, is of the majestic beauty of a mighty tree.

Like one of these great banyans, Hinduism too, has grown in a seemingly anarchical fashion so that at first sight, it might appear to be disconcertingly baffling. But a thorough study makes it clear that despite their often extreme diversities, all Hindu sects are parts of one unified whole and that Hinduism is one religion, single and complete.

It may well be asked what possible connection can exist between the dualism of Madhvacharya and the absolute monism of Shankaracharya; or between the Naga who does not even possess a garment to cover his nakedness, and the religious man who lays out a fortune in a Mahayagna. (*literally: great sacrifice. Fire offerings made in public with great ceremony over a fairly long period of time, occasionally several years. The purpose of the sacrifice is to obtain some favour, material, spiritual or religious, as assurance of paradise after death.*)

But it all becomes clear when one recalls the principle of the *adhikari bheda*, so often repeated by the wise men of India. It is difficult to translate this term literally. It indicates the distinction between the man who is ready and the man who is not. That there are differences between individuals, in intellectual and moral levels of achievement is an indisputable fact.

The same principles, the same dogmas, the same religious objectives, are not equally valid for all men. Hinduism takes these differences into account and makes room within its framework for every human type. From the illiterate peasant to the most highly evolved intellectual, all men will find within it, the rites and the teachings most suited to their needs. The man who is ready, the Adhikari, can devote himself directly to the quest for the Brahma-Gyan, the knowledge of the Self. For others, there are intermediate degrees from which they may begin to advance towards perfection, each according to his own capacity. No one, after all, would require a child at kindergarten to understand the philosophy of Spinoza; he would have to begin by learning to read and write and would then move up the school from form to form until he finally reached the stage when he would be able to undertake the study of the philosopher's works.

Western religions hold that truth is one and indivisible and that for a teacher to imply otherwise is a very serious fault, "an intellectual crime"; and if this is indeed so, why do the wise men of India teach or tolerate imperfect doctrines?

But as the unhappily celebrated Roman asked, "What is truth"? Absolute truth transcends mental categories; it can neither be explained, nor taught. But it is possible to "realise", through direct experience, that there is only one great sea of "Existence-Consciousness". The world as it appears to us is an illusion, a "prismatic chimera" which assumes its various forms only because

it is refracted upon the screen of our mental structures. The mind may be said to be a magician who brings the phenomenal world into being and conceals the Real, and it is only by reducing the mind to complete silence that Truth may be apprehended. It follows therefore, that everything that can be understood within the framework of thought and the word is, by definition, false.

If then, the Truth cannot, in any case, be grasped by the mind, the purpose of religious teaching cannot be to expound the truth. So the wise men of India hold. The purpose of religious teaching, in their view, is to make the illusory personality receptive to an attitude, which will make possible its annihilation in confrontation with the Real that transcends thought and word. And the shell within which this illusory personality is enclosed, the ego, may be broken open innumerable different ways, depending on the mental organisation of each individual.

That is why Indian sects should not be regarded as separate religious factions opposed to each other. It is quite unjustified, for instance, to draw a parallel between Shivaism and Vishnuism on the one hand and Catholicism and Protestantism on the other.

It is true that at different periods and in different parts of India some hostile rivalry seems to have existed between different religious factions. This is proved by historical events, such as the battles between sects at the Khumba Mela in Hardwar, or by the well-known account of the famous twelfth-century Vishnuist reformer Ramanuja.

At the outset of his career this saint lived and preached in Sri Rangam in South India. The ruling monarch Kerikala from the Chola dynasty was a fanatical Shivaist who decreed that all his subjects should practise the cult of Shiva. On Ramanuja's refusing to do this, the king sent to have him arrested. Ramanuja fled towards Mysore, and one of his disciples, attempting to cover his flight by appearing before the king, had his eyes put out by the cruel monarch. Reaching Mysore, Ramanuja was hospitably received by the Raja of the state, Vitala Deva who, at the time, was a Jain by religion. Ramanuja won the confidence of the king by curing his daughter who was believed to be possessed by a Brahma-Raksasha, a very powerful evil spirit. The Raja then became a convert to Vishnuism and assumed the name of Vishnu-varadhana. Twelve years later, having heard of the death of his persecutor, the Chola King, Ramanuja returned to Sri Rangam.

Today, however, religious intolerance seems to have disappeared completely in India. In cultured circles it is not infrequent for devotees to render homage to Shiva as well as to Krishna, to Rama and also to Kali. It happens in many families, that each individual if he is sincerely religious, generally chooses as his Ishta-Deva, his tutelary deity, the form, which most completely satisfies his own aspirations. It may well be, for instance, that the husband prays to Shiva, the wife to Krishna, and one of the children, perhaps, to Durga or Kali, without this becoming a cause of family friction or embarrassment. In many temples, too, – if for instance, the temple is consecrated to Shiva – the central lingam may be surrounded by images of other deities. In kirtans, the community singing of religious hymns, the names of the Gods of opposed sects are glorified impartially. Certainly there are bigots, jealous in the worship of one particular god, but even their feeling of being particular rests content with the occasional launching of an ironic shaft in the direction of rival sects.

The great teachers of India have made formidable achievements in reconciling different sects to each other. From Shankaracharya down to Ramakrishna and his disciple Vivekananda in more modern times, it has always been taught that all deities are merely different aspects of the Divine which is one and unique. In fact it may be said of the various sects today, not only that they dwell in a state of peaceful co-existence, but that they are all interpenetrated with each other within the framework of the Sanatana Dharma, “the eternal religious”, one of the names of Hinduism.

A detailed list of all the sects and faction would cater only to the idly curious. It may be said however, that, broadly speaking, Hindu religious thought flows in three main streams – Shivaism, Vishnuism and Shaktism.

Shivaism would appear to be the most ancient of these for reference to it may be found as far back as in the Ramayana of Valmiki. There the author recounts that after slaying his enemy Ravana, Rama set up a lingam to Shiva in Rameshwaram in South India. It is a curious fact, moreover, that the terrible demon Ravana was himself a fervent worshipper of Shiva. Shivaism may be said to be the sect most representative of Hindu traditionalism as encountered in orthodox circles.

Vishnuism was a later development and appears to have been born of a tendency to popularise a religion to which the Brahmins had tried to establish a monopoly. Its gods, Rama and Krishna, the Avatars of Vishnu, were both born into the caste of the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste. The cult of Bhakti, devotion, so common in India today is mainly of Vishnuist origin and was popularised by the three great Purans – the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavat Purana.

Shaktism, the cult of the Divine in its female aspect, seems to be even more recent. It may possibly have arisen out of the relics of a decadent tantric Buddhism. There is, however, a marked difference between the two principal schools of Shaktism, for the Dakshinachara (the path of the right-hand) has many similarities with the devotional cults of Vishnuism, while the Vamachara (the path of the left) employs sexual union in its rites just as the members of the Buddhist Vajrayana do.

Almost all the innumerable sects in Hinduism are connected to one or other of these three main streams.

My guide had taken it into his head to have me visit the most important temples in Madras. There was one dedicated to Ganesha, and another to Skanda (also called Sub-ramanya) the God of war, so popular in South India.

The “Gods of India”, their idols and their religious rites (puja) have often scandalised Christian missionaries and provided Westerners with material for caustic comment. But it is a serious mistake to imagine that Hindus are “idol worshippers” in the pejorative sense of the word, and to compare them to the black people of Africa, or to the “heathen” denounced in so many passages in the Bible.

The cult of images and idols appears to be a relatively recent development in Hinduism probably dating no further back than two thousand years. In the Vedas and the Upanishads there

are hardly any traces of it. The ancient Aryans certainly worshipped personifications of natural powers, such as Indra, and Varuna, but their worship was not a cult of Bhakti, devotion, but rather an enactment of magic rites to win the favourable disposition of these powers, and apart from fire they do not seem to have employed any other visible symbols.

It was probably from the aboriginal peoples – the Dravidians and other – that idol worship derived.

In one of his discourses, Ramatirtha, the great Punjab sage made an amazing statement on this subject. He attempted to prove “from external, as well as from internal evidence”, that is to say on the basis of historical facts interpreted in the light of his spiritual insight, that it was the Christians who imported idol-worship into India. Certainly it is a fact that St. Thomas the apostle landed in India, in the region of Madras and made a number of converts whose descendants exist to this day. But it seems highly doubtful that one of Christ’s first disciples, conditioned by the ideas of the Old Testament with its abomination of idol worship as a heinous sin, should himself indulge in such practices. And even if we were to admit the possibility, it is hardly likely that a handful of Christians would have been influential enough to bring about such a radical change in the great body of Hindu. However, Ramatirtha maintains that the most fervent propagator of idol worship, the great Vishnu reformer Ramanuja, had had a Thomist Christian as his teacher. I doubt that there is any historical evidence for this suggestion.

The cult of idols is inseparably bound up with the science of Bhakti, devotion. My use of the word “science” is deliberate, for devotion as practised in India in cultural circle, is far from being a mere abandoned indulgence in religious emotion. Religious emotion and its evolution, the ways in which it may be directed, purified and sustained, have been the subject of numerous careful studies particularly in Vishnuist writings, those of the Dakshinachara Tantra, and in the hymns of the Alvars in South India. I recall a day in Brindavan – the centre of Vishnuism and the devotional cult – when a well-known Vishnuist pandit, in the course of one of his kathas (religious discourses), provided a practical demonstration in this field. Even while developing the theme of his discourses, the pandit passed, one after another, through the most varied of religious emotional states; from the grief and tears that accompany the invocation to the “Dearly Beloved” to the delirious ecstasy evoked by the first vision of the Divine. The pandit would give free rein to one emotion, and then quit it at will, cut it off sharply and proceed to another. In this way he demonstrated to us that Bhakti is to acquire control over the dynamic elements in the mind, that is to say, its affective elements, and to orient them towards the Divine. The idol serves simply as an aid, a diagram serving to fix the mind on some tangible point. The educated Hindu reveres not the idol itself, the object in stone or wood, but rather that which the idol symbolises.

This is clearly illustrated by the annual festival of “Durga-Puja” which somewhere about the month of October, is celebrated with great pageantry and splendour in Bengal. The festival begins on the seventh day of the waxing moon and ends on the tenth. The idol, for this occasion, is generally ordered especially from an artistic craftsman; it is human in size, richly decorated and surrounded by lesser satellite figures, male and female. On the first day of the festival the ritual centres on, what is called Prana Pratishtha, the “insufflations of life” which is performed in public by a Brahmin priest expert in the pujas (ritual adoration). On the second day, the idol, now being deemed to have become a Jagrat Murti, an awakened idol, the regular rites of worship are enacted

according to the sacred formulas special to the Durga Puja. The third day marks the ceremony of farewell to the idol. The priest's mantras and mudras (sacred formulas and ritual action) are intended to retract the life, which was breathed into the idol on the opening day of the festival. Finally on the fourth day, the Vijaya Dashami which is the tenth day of the waxing moon, the idol, having played out its role, is immersed with great pomp and ceremony, and with great veneration too, in the Ganga or some other local river.

There is another aspect of Hindu worship which the western observer finds particularly striking. This is the attitude of almost tender familiarity with which the Hindus relate to their gods and to the Divine in general. For God is above all else, and in the final analysis, the Antaryamin (the Inner Master), that which dwells in our own hearts and which is no other than essence of our own personality. On the other hand the Hindus do not hesitate, on occasion, to enjoy a joke at the expense of their gods, though it is true that the joke is generally directed at the gods of opposite sects. The following story, recounted in the Puranas, provides an illustration of this.

Shiva, in his propitious aspect, is generally regarded as the "good fellow" among the gods. His cult is of the simplest – a little water, a few leaves from the bel tree, if offered with devotion, are enough to win his favour. The slightest sign of devotion moves him and his goodness occasionally borders on the naïve. Among his ardent worshippers there are even asuras (demons).

One of these demons, or titans, by the name Basmasura had undertaken severe ascetic practices in order to obtain a darshan (vision) of Shiva. Some time passed and Shiva, touched by his perseverance, appeared to him and asked what he would like, granting him one wish. Basmasura asked for a magical power, the power to reduce to ashes anyone over whose head he chose to pass his hand. Shiva granted his wish.

Hardly able to contain his joy and intent on putting his new magic power to an immediate test, Basmasura attempted to pass his hand over the head of Shiva himself. Unable to retract the power, which he had himself conferred, the god had no choice but to take to his heels, and he set off with Basmasura in hot pursuit. Shiva's difficulties were noticed by Vishnu who decided to come to his aid. Taking on the form of a Mohini (a seductive woman) he appeared before the demon, luring him with enticing glances. Basmasura was struck blind by the darts of love. Forgetting his pursuit of Shiva he followed the Mohini instead. The "seductress" did not reject his advances but informed him that certain purificatory rites would be in order. First she made him bathe in a neighbouring pool, and then assured him that a ritual dance was required. Basmasura was to observe her carefully and to repeat her every movement with scrupulous accuracy. She began the dance and the demon, concentrating intently, imitated her action, the rhythm of her feet, and the flowing movement of her arms. Then she placed a hand on her head; Basmasura did the same...and the magic power conferred upon him by Shiva proved its efficacy for he immediately reduced himself to cinders.

The familiarity of Hindus towards their Ishta-Deva (favoured deity) is a replica in sublimated form of human relationships. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the great sixteenth century reformer of Vishnuism and one of the outstanding authorities on Bhakti (devotion), classified the relations between the worshipper and God in five categories, the five bhavas or mental attitudes; the dasya-bhava where the worshipped is as a son or as a young child – for instance the child

Krishna (Gopal) or Bala-Rama (the avatar Rama) as a little boy; the sakhya-bhava where God is worshipped as a friend or an eternal companion; the shanti-bhava where God is regarded as a haven of peace. This perhaps corresponds to the father aspect of the Divine, which curiously enough is not mentioned by the Vishnuists; and finally the madurya-bhava, which is considered the highest form of worship and where God is adored as the Supreme Dearly Beloved. The fact that the Hindus worship many idols in no way invalidates their monotheism. For the educated religious individual all these shapes are merely different aspects of the one God and he sees clearly the Unity in this multiplicity.

The temples in Madras, like most temples in India, are generally crowded. In the outer courts of some, sadhus line up on either side, expecting alms, though not asking for them. Most are, of course, very ordinary men and their religious garb hardly serves to disguise the wretchedness within, but it may well be that they include among them a few great teachers or yogis of outstanding stature. Certainly it is a belief widely held in India that great sages and yogis wander through the world, deliberately masking their identity in most disconcerting forms. The disciples of Ramakrishna relate the following story for which the Master himself was the authority: (*The Teaching of Ramakrishna*).

To the Kali temple of Rani Rasmani, the temple of Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna then lived, there came a sadhu, an inspired madman. It happened one day that he was not given his meal and, hungry though he was, did not ask for it. Instead, he went up to a dog whom he saw wolfing down the remains of a feast that had been thrown into a corner, and, putting an arm around its neck, said, "How comes it, brother, that you are eating all alone without offering me a share?" And he began eating together with the dog. Then, when he had completed his meal in this strange company, he went into the temple of Kali and prayed with such intensity and fervour that the entire temple seemed to vibrate. As he was prepared to leave after completing his prayers, Sri Ramakrishna asked his nephew Hriday to keep the man in sight, to follow him and to attempt to engage him in conversation in order to see what he had to say.

Hriday followed at a distance but turning around suddenly, the man demanded, "Why are you following me?" "Venerable sir", said Hriday "give me some instruction". The sage replied, "When the water in this pool and the glorious Ganges appear exactly the same in your eyes, when your ears distinguish no difference between the sound of this flute and the roar of the crowd, then you will have attained the state of true Knowledge". Returning, Hriday reported these words to the Master who then made the following comment: "This man has himself attained the ecstatic state of True Knowledge. The Sidhas (the Perfect Ones) wander through the world sometimes in the likeness of little children, sometimes in the likeness of impure spirits and indeed sometimes even in the likeness of madmen. Truly they wander around in many disguises".

At the entrance to one of the temples, in a row with many others, one particular sadhu drew my attention. A loving smile added even more radiance to the beauty of his countenance. His eyes were red as often happens with those who practise meditation intensively. I should have liked to exchange a few words with him, but the obstacle of language made conversation impossible. I smiled at him and he returned my smile.

From temple to temple we went, my guide and I. In one place the priest was distributing ashes among the faithful, the remains of a fire offering, and some carmine powder, which had probably served to decorate the temple idol. He looked at me and then, after a moment's hesitation, includes me in the circle of recipients. I was touched by the mark of confidence.

How intense religious life in this country can be! In the West it seems tame and spiritless by comparison. In the evening I caught the train to Pondicherry, seen off at the station by my faithful, and not entirely disinterested, guide. He insisted that I should travel second-class and not first "because it's just as comfortable and much cheaper". Before I left he succeeded in getting me to pay him one rupee more than we had agreed upon. I gave it to him most willingly, for in truth, he had saved me a much larger sum.

CHAPTER V bis

Pondicherry

PONDICHERRY: January 18th 1951.

I arrived in Pondicherry at seven in the morning after a comfortable night in my second-class couchette. First and second-class carriages in Indian trains have deep well-padded benches which double as couchettes during the night. Above the benches there is generally another couchette, which serves as a luggage rack during the day. Distances in India are vast and it is not unusual to spend a night or even two on a train.

I had slept well, though stretched out directly on the rexine covering of the couchette for I had brought no sleeping things with me. I had yet to learn that the "bedding roll" is an indispensable part of the equipment of the traveller in India. This is a kind of expanded sleeping bag containing everything one needs to make up a bed, sheets, blankets, pillow and so on. Even in hotels in fact, many Hindus prefer to use the bedding they have brought with them. The train had stopped at Villupuram for the customs formalities necessary before leaving Indian territory, but there were no visa requirements for passage from one zone to another.

So here I was again under French government. The "coolies" had become "porteurs", talking a pidgin French but demanding their "bakshish" with as much energy as their Indian counterparts.

A “rickshaw”, which here goes by the name of “pousse-pousse”, took me and my luggage in search of a hotel. There was no room in the first-grade hotels and I finally decided on a second-class one; it was not particularly comfortable, but the French speaking owner and the French style breakfast reconciled me to the place.

I had come to Pondicherry primarily to visit the famous ashram of Sri Aurobindo and had provided myself with a letter of introduction to Monsieur B, a Frenchman who lived there. Work at the ashram, I had been told, began at one thirty in the afternoon, and at one- thirty precisely I presented myself with my letter of introduction. The people in the ashram were mostly Hindus from other parts of the country and English was the language most frequently heard. I asked to see Mr. B. “He is not available”, I was told. At half past three I returned and after waiting briefly, was received by a tall, thin gentleman with piercing eyes behind tortoise-shell glasses. He held a position of major importance in the ashram and held the serious reoccupied expression of a man carrying a heavy burden of responsibility. His zeal and his faith in “Mother” were touching.

I handed him my letter of introduction and we exchanged a few general remarks about life in the ashram and the philosophy of Aurobindo. Then he committed me to the care of a member of the ashram whose business it was to receive visitors.

I was asked, first of all, what I would like to see; for the ashram was a powerful and wide-ranging organisation with numerous buildings spread over Pondicherry. It had its own bakery, printing-press medical service and so on. I, however, was interesting only in the spiritual activities, so it was arranged that I should be at the sports ground at 6.45 that evening. This was, in effect, a huge interior courtyard in one of the numerous buildings of the ashram. When I arrived about three hundred young boys and girls, grownups and even a few older folk were performing mass physical exercises. They were all uniformly clad in short-sleeved white shirts and shorts. Drawn up in orderly formation and in obedience to order they went through an exercise routine most of which was performed while marching. The movements were based on the Swedish gymnastics system and seemed thorough enough but rather fatiguing. As physical exercise they may have been excellent but they had the major drawback of taking no account of individual differences in physical capacity.

When the gymnastics were over, the lights went out and there followed ten minutes of mental concentration in conditions of absolute silence. Mother was generally present at this time and at the end of the session often handed out peanuts to the children.....and to the grown-ups as well.

In addition to the three hundred or so gymnasts manoeuvring on the field there was also a large crowd of spectators, men, women, children and old people, almost all members of the ashram. At the end of the day’s work – and practically everyone in the ashram works – this was where they come together to relax and meet each other.

Among the spectators was Sri Dilip Kumar Roy whom Swami Siddeshwarananda had praised to me as “one of the greatest musicians in India today”. Dilip Kumar Roy was indeed an outstanding composer, but he was also one of the chief disciples of Sri Aurobindo and a man with a serious personal experience of the spiritual world. His music was primarily religious in feeling and constituted an inseparable part of sadhana (spiritual discipline). He was an extremely simple

man, with no pride or pretensions and the expression on his cubby, dreamer's face was almost child-like. On his forehead he bore the mark of worshippers of Krishna.

He was to give a private recital at his home at half past eight that evening, and was kind enough to invite me. I arrived punctually. The Master sang, accompanying himself on a hand harmonium and supported by a partner who beat out the rhythm on a mridanga (a type of drum) and marked the intervals with the clash of kattals (cymbals). This is the usual instrumental accompaniment in India for kirtans, the religious hymns sung in chorus.

Hindu music is very different from what we are accustomed to in the West. Bengalis in particular – the master was a Bengali – have a folklore of religious song which can be profoundly moving. The simplicity of these songs, their perfect harmony, their deep emotional quality set them among the special delights music. In fact their beauty surpasses anything I had ever heard before.

Pondicherry January 19 th 1951.

“Be at the central ashram building punctually at half-past seven tomorrow morning”. So I had been told the previous evening in a tone suggesting that a great favour would be conferred. Half past seven was the hour when “Mother” bestowed individual blessings upon her disciples.

“Mother” was a Frenchwoman from Algeria. She came from a well-known family and her brother had been the governor of equatorial Africa. Long before she met Sri Aurobindo she had been studying and practising in the field of the occult. Her first guru, I was told, had been the teacher of Madame Blavatsky, the famous founder of the Theosophical Society. When Sri Aurobindo, who at that time was an active militant in the political struggle for Indian independence, was escaping from the British police, he had sought refuge on French territory, and it was she who had welcomed him in Pondicherry. From then on he became her real guru. He had unlimited confidence in her. She became the “Mother” in the ashram, the intermediary between the masculine Divine – Sri Aurobindo – and his disciples.

For the ashram devotees she was the incarnation of the “Divine Mother” omnipotent, and omniscient, ready with aid and succour at the slightest need. Anyone who knows the importance attached by Hindu and especially Bengalis – for a large number of the ashram members are Bengalis – to the maternal aspect of the Divine, will understand the veneration in which “Mother” is held by the disciples. Nothing could be done without her. She was consulted about the most minor details of ashram life.

I arrived at the central building slightly before the appointed hour. A long line of disciples of both sexes and of all ages was waiting for Mother to come down from her quarters. I was led into the meditation hall where those who wished to do so could collect their thoughts. I sat down cross-legged on the stone floor and waited.

Without having deliberately chosen it I had, in fact, an excellent point of vantage from which to observe the scene. "Mother" appeared, coming down the wide stairway leading to her living quarters. She was an old lady, smiling and radiating goodness. Her head was covered with a sari which hid both hair and forehead. Nothing she wore was specifically monastic but her long coloured robe was not European in style and could have been termed oriental. I found it hard however, to classify it among the regional costume of India. "Mother" took up her position, standing at a little table; to her left was an old disciple with white hair and a long beard, whose imposing and venerable looks recalled the ancient Rishis of India and beside him stood a young woman holding a basket of flowers.

One by one the disciples filed past and each received from "Mother" a freshly plucked flower drawn from the basket. There were children for whom she had a special kind word, young people, and middle-aged and older folk. Some accepted the flower in silence, others speaking in low tones, asked "Mother" a question and received a reply. Others still, paused for a few seconds gazing upon her in ecstasy and a few, half-kneeling, kissed her hands as a knight of the chanson de geste might have kissed the hand of his lady love. Some lowered their heads as if silently imploring the blessing that she conferred. Then it was my turn. Her smile for the newcomer lasted, perhaps, slightly longer than usual. I received my flower and moved on. But I must admit, it was a disappointment. Maybe I am somewhat naïve. I had come in quest of the "miraculous" and I had expected to "feel" something. But alas! It appeared that the spiritual vibrations of this ashram evoked no response in me. Perhaps it was not my destiny to linger in this place, for it was not here that I would find what I had come to India to seek.

I went to collect my thoughts at the tomb of Sri Aurobindo. Prominently placed in the very middle of the central ashram building, this was a cement vault the upper portion of which was heaped with flowers. Around the tomb some disciples prayed while others meditated. It was hardly six weeks since the great master had died and his memory was still very much alive.

While still in France I had read some of the writings of this great philosopher and sage, and I held him in high veneration. But here too, as in the presence of "Mother" I must admit frankly that I felt nothing.

Aurobindo's Yoga though based on the ancient tradition of the Veda and Upanishads, nevertheless has something new to say. The union with Brahman, that is to say the fusion of the individual consciousness with the Absolute, is the ultimate goal of most other systems of Yoga. But Aurobindo does not rest content with this. He is concerned to have the realisation penetrate in to all the lower levels, even on to the material plane, so that human society in its entirety may be regenerated and made Divine.

True, this idea is not entirely new. There are stories in plenty of yogis who succeeded in achieving a vajra-kaya, a perfect physical body, emancipated from disease and old age. As for an entire society becoming divine, the idea frequently finds expression in the writing of ancient India. The Satya-Yuga (the golden age) was a period when this concept would have been realised in some degree. The Ramayana tells us of the Ram-Rajya (the region of Rama) after Rama's return from exile and it is a period, which corresponds in every point to the ideal of a society made divine. The Biblical prophecy of the messianic age and the Judeo-Christian idea of "creating a kingdom of

heaven on earth” are beliefs of the same order. From the vedantic viewpoint however, these conceptions are unacceptable. For perfection is possible only in the Atman, the Absolute, the Formless. Anything bearing a name or a form is by definition, imperfect, mutable and transient. To attempt to divinise the physical body and the material world would be as futile as to attempt to lay hold of a shadow or of a reflection in a mirror. It is only the true image, that is to say, Absolute Consciousness, which should be sought, for it is that from which all forms emerge and it is that into which they are re-absorbed.

However it may be Aurobindo’s system of Yoga responds to the needs of an age. The ideal of the yogi who retreats into the forest far from mankind or that of the rishi who generally dwells in the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the Great Void where the universe has ceased to exist, are becoming out-dated even in India.

In the Aurobindo ashram a valiant attempt is being made to realise this divine society, even if only on a reduced scale. Indeed, this ashram resembles no other. It is a huge organisation comprising some eight hundred members, of whom all, or almost all work, and in addition, about seven hundred outside workers. But the work done in the seven or eight department of the ashram’s different activities has no profit-making end in view. It is a form of yoga, Karma-Yoga, as it is described in the Bhagavad Gita, an activity undertaken for the joy of the activity itself with no interested purpose whatever, a task performed as an instrument of the Divine and for the sake of the Divine.

The workers have no personal possessions. All their needs – clothes, food, and lodging – are satisfied by “Mother” or by her associates. They do very little – some, perhaps nothing at all – in the way of meditational exercises. They do not have the time. Their duty, I was told, is to submit themselves entirely to the Divine, to “Mother”, for the sake of the collective salvation. Almost all of them appear happy and at peace with themselves. Believing that their works has as its goal the “summum bonum” they have shed the heavy burden of personal responsibility and the anxieties it entails.

Pondicherry. January 20th 1951.

I have moved out of the hotel. I had asked for lodgings at the ashram so that so that I might be more closely involved in life as it was lived there. It was “Mother” who granted my request for nothing is decided before consulting her.

I was put up at “Golconda”. This was the name of one of the ashram building reserved for guest and for a limited number of disciples.

For the Hindus in the ashram “Golconda” was something to marvel at, proof, among many other proofs, of the omniscience of “Mother”. It was she who had had it built and who had given

the architects their directives. A huge multi-storied structure it strongly recalled the buildings of some of our "University cities".

My room is pleasant and comfortably furnished. No windows, but that is all to the good in these latitudes. The entire outer wall is, in fact, one great shutter formed by slats in reinforced concrete. The same shutter arrangement functions in the corridors, the showers, and the W. Cs. These are very clean – a rare thing in the Orient – and are built on the European system.

The meals calls for special comment. They are taken in the dining-room, which is in fact more like a refectory, at fixed hours and with the entire community. This refectory is in a large bungalow at about three hundred meters distance from "Golconda". One sits cross-legged on the floor at one's own little table. The self-service system prevails. We queued up to file past a series of "stands" each one presided over by an ashram member performing a specific task. One handed out the plates, another the glasses, a third distributed bread and another served out portions of rice and vegetables. The meals, plentiful and well-balanced from the nutritional point of view, were made up of rice, vegetables, dairy produce and fruit. Onions, garlic and chillies were forbidden.

After eating, we filed past another chain of workers responsible for taking in and washing the empty plates, each worker concerning himself only with one particular category of plate or dish.

Here, as everywhere else in the ashram, the organisation was perfect. There was no excitement, no word out of place; all was smiles and amiability. There was no trace whatever of the disorder so often encountered in the East.

Here, too, as in every single department of the ashram, the giant shadow of "Mother" fell across all. Most of the disciples are utterly convinced of her omnipresence and believe that no single act or thought of theirs can possibly escape her. The majority act and think only through her. Everything good and favourable is attributed to her occult influence and if on the other hand, things do not go well, it is the fault of the disciple who has not left himself open to the divine. This ashram, if indeed it may be called an ashram, is a remarkable attempt to set up the nucleus of a society based on what have been called divine or traditional principles. There have always been two main currents of opinion in whatever concerns the social organisation of human life and they stem from two "Weltanschauungen", world views, that are very different and perhaps, indeed directly opposed. Today we refer to them in terms of a "divine (or traditional) civilisation" and a "promethean civilisation". The first, we might say designates a society that believes in God and in religion; the second, one that is atheist and materialistic in outlook; but this would be an over-simplification, which did not take full account of the real facts. What matters above all is not the superficial tag of believer or non-believer, but the motivation of our action, on the deepest level. If this motive power impels us to understand and aspire to eternal values, the true essence of things, the nature of our own personalities and so on, then, even if we have no firm belief, either in God or in any particular religion, our attitude may be said to be "divine". If on the other hand, we act on the principle that we must eat, drink and be merry, or accumulate wealth and power, then we are expressing an attitude that is "promethean", or to employ the Indian term "asuric". This latter is unfortunately, the monk of most men, whether westerner or orientals.

Modern scientists have sometimes been compared to the Titans or Asuras in revolt against God, trying to wrest from him the power to control the natural world and their fate has been seen as similar to that of the sorcerer's apprentice, doomed finally to be overwhelmed and destroyed by his own creation. But so long as it remains disinterested in its aims, modern science may certainly find its place in a society that is "divine".

The scientist in a modern society is, in some way, the torchbearer or priest. But one seeker cannot guide another, nor can the blind lead the blind. The ideal leader, the guide of society, should be the sage who has "realised" the Truth and that precisely is the basic principle of every "divine" society. That too is what is being attempted at Pondicherry. The "Mother" represents the supreme authority but she is obeyed through love and not through fear. In principle there is no compulsion. Her orders are acted upon spontaneously, for it is understood that to act upon them is to act according to the divine within our own natures.

Pondicherry. January 21 st 1951.

Today I strolled around the town. With its Joan of Arc Square, its public gardens and municipal buildings, Pondicherry recalls any little provincial town in France. Unfortunately however, it is impossible to move even a few yards without being assailed by crowds of beggars. They are so destitute and wretched, that you long to give them something, but any weakness in this direction brings immediate retribution for, you are promptly attacked by an entire swarm, which follows noisily in your footsteps and given you no peace.

I am beginning to make friends in the ashram, but that is no difficult task for all here is sweetness and light.

The vast majority of the members of the ashram are Hindu and in particular Bengalis, but there are a few westerners too, French Canadians and Americans. One Canadian lady who "worked" at the ashram told me the following interesting story:

In April 1950 on the very day of the death of the sage of Triuvanamalai, Ramana Maharshi, she had suddenly felt an intense desire to go and see the great teacher. The news of his death had not yet been received and she requested permission from "Mother" who sent the following reply: "let her go and let her stay there". The next day however, the knowledge of Maharshi's death was made public and the journey become pointless. The Canadian lady told me that on the evening of the day he died she had seen a comet moving slowly across the sky.

Pondicherry. January 22 nd 1951.

Today I visited the physiotherapy and massage clinics of the ashram. The methods employed there are western in origin. There was an infra-red ray machine and one for vibromassage, and the organisation also had plans to acquire some diathermic apparatus. The young American lady in charge informed me that, in addition to the regular methods, she also made use of the principles of magnetism, that is to say that she transmitted a flow of energy through her hands or drew off any excess of it according to the patient's needs. It is difficult of course to verify the degree of the efficacy of such a method where the subjective factor is of prime importance.

In the afternoon I was present at a demonstration of Hatha-Yoga provided by an expert. He went through all the asanas, some of which are certainly acrobatic in the extreme. Even a professional western acrobat would find it hard to reproduce some of the manoeuvres but of course with training and perseverance everything becomes possible.

To my great surprise the Hatha-Yogi informed me that he did not do these exercises regularly because he did not feel he had sufficient mental control to be able to support the consequences. It was only occasionally, for the purposes of exhibition, that he performed them. Later, however, I came to understand and approved his prudence. To practise Hatha-Yoga without having first attained mastery of one's mental processes is like whipping the horses before making sure that one has firm hold of the reins.

The Hatha-Yogi told me too, that he did not practise any meditational exercise. Instead, he trusted himself entirely to "Mother". By this he meant that he surrendered himself totally to the divine. This is a fundamental point in the Yoga of Aurobindo, as in all Yogic system based on devotion. It is the "Atmanivedan" the total giving of the self improperly translated into English as "surrender" or "self-surrender". It is an attitude sometimes confused with indolence, not only by the caustic critic but also, alas, by those who practise it. True "surrender" is, in fact, extremely difficult to realise. To devote to the divine every action and every thought calls for the total obliteration of all egoism and for a mind constantly and intensely aware. It is only when the "Ego" has given way completely that the "Power of the other" can take over. And this "Power of the other" is in fact the true "I".

Pondicherry. January 23 rd 1951.

This evening I am to have a private interview with "Mother". The hour fixed is 6.15 p. m. in the sports building. The devotees have told me that for fifteen minutes or half an hour I shall be face to face with the incarnation of the Divine. They have also informed me that she will be able to see everything that passes through my mind as through an open window. So much the better!

I shall leave the ashram the day after tomorrow and move on towards the North, Calcutta, Benares and so on.

What I am looking for is not here.....

Well, it is over, the interview with “Mother”, but again I have been disappointed. True, the interview was cut short. Mother arrived late to begin with and after five minutes of conversation she was called away.

I found myself face to face with a very old woman – around seventy-five I should say – with a tired countenance. I had seen her every morning, smiling and radiant, and I was taken aback to be confronted with an expression that was almost severe. I felt that in some way I had displeased her.....Could it be the tie I had decided to put on for politeness’ sake? Or was it that my attitude lacked the quality of humble veneration with which a great teacher should be approached? Perhaps, quite simply, she was exhausted at the end of a long day and eager to rid herself of a dilettante questioner like myself.

“Mother” asked me a very simple question, which nevertheless caught me unprepared. She asked why I wanted to practise yoga. It was a question I had never formulated so clearly to myself. For me it had been quite simply an aspiration of my entire being, an intuitive certainty that this was the only thing worth doing. I stammered out an answer which, she no doubt found far from satisfactory.

She also asked me why I was visiting India. This time I answered clearly and without hesitation. I was looking for a Guru, I told her.

Her reply came promptly, “If so, you will certainly find one”. And eleven days later in an ashram on the bank of the Ganges, her prediction came true. Was she indeed able to read my thoughts, to sound the depths of my heart? How can I say? What was certain was that despite her advanced age this great lady had a mind that was sharp and clear. Her penetrating glance seemed to indicate at the very least an extremely acute psychological awareness.

Pondicherry. January 24 th 1951.

This afternoon while out for a walk, I met a Pondicherry Hindu with whom I struck up a conversation. He spoke excellent French with a provincial accent rather like that of our country folk at home. He told me, he had been a member of the ashram for over forty years and one of the first disciples of Sri Aurobindo and he gave me an account of some of his earliest meetings with the great teacher. He told me how, from the very first interview, Sri Aurobindo had “opened out his heart”, that is to say, had brought up to the surface the very words he needed to give expression to his deepest aspirations. Later, by the grace of the Master the “Divine had descended upon him”. This was probably a reference to the awakening of the Kundalini. I listened to his story with a certain degree of scepticism and perhaps a gleam of irony may have crossed my face. Then a very strange thing happened. I was looking him straight in the face, as I generally do, when suddenly I felt a painful, blinding sensation in the eyes. It was just like the feeling one has when moving abruptly out of darkness into a very powerful light, and it was so strong that I was forced to look away from my interlocutor. It must have lasted for a few minutes. I should make it clear that under

ordinary conditions the light and the heat in India do not trouble me at all – I go out without glasses or headgear – that the sun was no hotter than usual on that day and that, moreover, we happened to be standing in the shade. I must add too that I was not all tried and that I felt quite the same in India as in France, without the slightest sensitivity to the “electrifying” atmosphere that certain Europeans talk about.

This ashram was certainly a strange place! There must, doubtless, have been something divine there, even though I myself could not feel it. Certainly it was not for nothing that all those people had come together there. The vast majority were young or in the prime of life and they seemed really to have achieved a state of contentment, if not of happiness.....But what I was looking for was on the heights, far from the crowds, where the air is rarefied and pure.

Madras. January 25 th 1951.

So here I am again in Madras. I had planned to catch the first train to Calcutta but the couchettes are all booked up until the 28 th. I shall have to spend a few days here, somewhat against my will, for I am not particularly fond of this great city where one is constantly at the mercy of beggars and people offering their various services. But the disappointment may turn out well for I shall use the time to visit Conjiveram, the Benares of the South, and one of the seven chief sacred places in India.

CHAPTER VI

CONJIVERAM

Two days latter, in the company of a guide, I visited the celebrated “Benares of the South”. The fact is, however, that Conjiveram made little impression on me. The town and the temples seemed deserted and lifeless. It was like visiting ancient ruins.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Hindus in the South attach as much holiness to this place as to Benares. It may well be that the fault was in myself and that I was in a depressed state of mind, for it is perfectly true that one finds in objects only what one bring to them. It is the affective tonality of your mind that invests objects with value or denies it to them; and our emotions are based, before all else, on the physical functioning of our bodies. For the young man in good health, the world is full of hope and beauty and life seems well worth the efforts of living it; for his body machine is working well and the kinaesthetic feelings surfacing in his mind are for the most part euphoric. Older people, on the other hand, are not infrequently discontented, grumblers. To them nothing seems to go well, society seems to be on the verge of a catastrophe and people to be going from bad to worse. “Ah, in my day now...,” they tend to say. There are few indeed who are aware of the fact that when everything seems to go wrong, it is because their own organism, like an old worn-out machine is not functioning smoothly. The universal catastrophe, which they dread, is no more than an objectivisation of sign of the approaching death of their own bodies. If people seem to be growing worse day-by-day, it is because their own sense organs are deteriorating with age and their own capacity to enjoy the pleasures of the world is steadily weakening.

Religious life in conjiveram flowed in two streams, one in the temples consecrated to Vishnu, and other in those consecrated to Shiva. In one of the temples I came across a sadhu with a pleasing countenance. He spoke English quite well and we conversed for a while. He spoke of religion and of commonplace matters. Then he gave me a mantra – a sacred formula – and showed me how precisely to modulate it. And as a final touch, he asked me for a four-anna piece.....which I gave him with all my heart.

CHAPTER VII

CALCUTTA

From Madras I took the express mail train to Calcutta.

And here I was in the great city, which for so long, had been the capital of British Indian. In area Calcutta is the largest of Indian cities; in population it is surpassed by Bombay. To get into the town itself the train had to cross an enormous iron bridge, for Howrah Station – the terminus for travellers from Madras – was on the other side of the river. For the Hindus it is the sacred Ganges that flows through Calcutta and not, as our geography books inform us, the Hooghly. One day as I was driving over the bridge in a car, the great sage in whose company I was, pointed to the river and said, “Look! This is Gangaji”. “Not at all”, I replied, priding myself on my geographical knowledge, “It is the Hooghly”. At this the sage burst into laughter and said, “They may call it what they please. For us it is still ‘Gangaji’ ”.

The sea is not far from Calcutta and the Ganges flows into it through its estuary at Gaangasagar, also a spot sacred to Hindus; but the section of the river skirting Calcutta and its suburbs seems in many ways to be the sea itself. It is very wide indeed. The ocean swells and storms leave their backwash on these waters, formidable perils for the little fishing smacks. To manage a boat on the river here calls for considerable skill and care, for a calm surface may suddenly be transformed by terrifying eddies in which boats quite easily capsize. The river is affected too by the ebb and flow of the sea tides.

I drove into town in a taxi, not this time to a hotel, but to the Maha-Bodhi Society centre in College Square. The Maha-Bodhi is an organisation founded at the beginning of this century by a famous Buddhist from Ceylon named Dharmapala. The main purpose of the organisation is to protect the holy places of Buddhism in India and to propagate its doctrine.

It is difficult to believe that there was a time, after the Emperor Ashoka made Buddhism the state religion, when almost the whole of Indian was Buddhist. Today the religion of Buddha has disappeared almost entirely from the land of its birth. Apart from these in the holy places, such as Sarnath and Buddha-Gaya, which are generally maintained by Singhalese monks, the Buddhist communities in this land are few indeed. They are concentrated in east Bengal, in the provinces of Leh and Ladhak (between Tibet and Kashmir), and in the region around Darjeeling; and even here they consist for the most part of Tibetan immigrants.

I was provided with a young guide to pilot me through the capital city of Bengal. Calcutta is an attractive city, very much alive. The climate is temperate, the winters mild and the summers certainly less scorching than on the plains of Northern India. For a westerner however, the rainy season is difficult, for the intense heat and humidity make any kind of physical activity a strain, and prickly heat is an inevitable affliction.

Bengalis constitute one of the most prominent groups in the Hindu community. They are a fine looking race and individuals of outstanding physical beauty are not rare among them. Many of them, too are highly intelligent, in a degree superior to the Hindus or other provinces. All over

India they may be found in position of eminence, in politics, in business and in the liberal professions, and many are remarkably gifted artists, particularly in the sphere of music. As a group they tend to be religion and mystical, and they have given India an impressive number of sages and saints.

It is a curious fact that, though it is perfectly justified to talk of Bengalis as a coherent ethnic grouping, they comprise racial types that are most diverse in origin. Some, particularly those from the east of the province have outstanding Aryans characteristics such as are found on the north-western shores of the Mediterranean. Others are much darker skinned, some indeed are quite black and seem to descend from the Dravidian races of Southern India. A third group again, probably as a result of infiltration through Assam, has the characteristics traits of the yellow races. And of course among these three groups one comes across all sorts of intermediary types.

Westerners are not infrequently disconcerted by the psychology of the Bengali and indeed of the Hindu generally, but differences in mentality between India and the Occident have frequently been exaggerated. To go all the way with Kipling and declare "never the twain will meet" would be unjustified, for the fundamental archetypes are the same in all human beings and the differences become manifest only at certain points of friction. The "clash of races" is a myth created by those who see only the surface dissimilarities and forget the fundamental unity holding all breathing things together. Nevertheless, it remains true that between the psychological make-up of the average Hindu and of his western counterpart marked differences exist. It is beyond the scope of this book to make a study in comparative psychology, but it seems to me that if such a study were undertaken it could crystallise around three basic points from which the major divergences in mental outlook may be said to stem.

The first of these is the fact that in the West, especially since the French Revolution, the value ascribed to the human being as an individual has been of prime importance. A man's worth is judged on the basis of his "personality"—the authority he exercises over his fellow-men, his intelligence, his ability to command, to decide, to organise, and so on. The individual aspires to be a centre of energy and power and - it is these qualities, which exalt and affirm personal value that are especially admired and encouraged qualities such as courage pride and resolution. In India however, the sense of individuality is considerably less emphatic. Among the masses certainly the reason for this may lie in their primitive mode of life and their gregariousness. But among the elite, and a civilisation is always judged by its elite, it goes deeper. It lies in the teaching of the Rishis of India, of the sages of the past and of the great sages of today and for thousands of year this teaching has been impregnating the mental make-up of the Hindu. These sages teach that what we refer to as our personality or our individuality is in fact a false self, a kind of usurper standing in the way of our true happiness. Our true self, they tell us, is the impersonal consciousness that exists in all living beings. It necessarily follows then, that the qualities to be encouraged and admired are those, which reflect the effacement of the personality.

Thus for instance, humility is a quality that is very highly regarded in India and a politician in the public eye is more likely to win the sympathy of the masses if he is humble and self-effacing. It is not rare to meet people who are "proud of being humble". In the west by contrast, humility is not highly valued, outside Christian monasteries, for it seems to suggest an inferiority complex or a lack of manliness. The western newcomer to India, with his head held high, proud glance, firm

gait and decided speech, profoundly shocks the sensitivities of the Hindu who sees in all these traits the expression of an exaggerated egotism. At the same time the humble manner of the Hindu, his lowered head and quiet speech, evoke from his western counterpart a superior, perhaps even contemptuous smile. The westerner brands as servile and timid the very qualities, which for the Hindu are expression of a great civilisation.

It is interesting too, to compare the different reactions to anger. Let us take the example of two individuals having an argument. In the West an insult shouted by one party at the other is immediately flung back with interest, “you’re one too.....”; and the emotional temperature rises rapidly until, not infrequently, the disputants come to blows. It is not surprising that the average Hindu reaction in a similar situation can be most disconcerting to the Western mind. A hard or angry word flung at a Hindu does not immediately provoke a reprisal. Rather he tends to beat a retreat, to smile – a somewhat embarrassed smile perhaps – as if assuming that the insult was intended as a joke, to enter into apologetic explanations and to try and appease his angry interlocutor in every possible way. Such behaviour is judged very severely by a westerner who sees it as cowardly and lacking in dignity. And perhaps in certain cases it would indeed be so. But it is behaviour that is firmly based on the accepted Hindu concepts of right and wrong, of good and bad. The Hindu believes that an angry man harms himself rather than others; it is as though he were to pick up burning coals in his bare hands in order to fling them at his opponent. Anger is one of the primal manifestations of the Ego and that is why it is the wiser course to appease an angry man; above all, it is essential to guard against contagion from this vice which – with lust and greed – is one of the “three gates to Hell”.

The psychological difference between East and West may also be said to crystallise around a second point. In the west the evolution of material progress has the effect of shutting us up ever more closely within a framework of artificial conditions, severing our contact with natural influences. The result is that the western outlook emphasises conscious and logical thought processes, and the role permitted to instinct and to its more highly developed aspect, intuition, tends to grow steadily smaller. The educated westerner, in fact, tends to regard any insights from these sources with distrust and even suspicion, and often ignores them entirely. Thus his links with his unconscious gradually wither away.

The average Hindu, by contrast, particularly if he comes from the villages or the smaller towns, lives much closer to nature and in conditions that constantly remind him of his integration in the natural scheme of things. His religious rites, for instance, are very closely bound up with natural phenomena. Every morning he greets the rising sun and his evening prayers are said towards the sunset. The month begins with the new moon and a festival marks the full moon and so it goes on. There have, of course, been enormous changes since Vedic times when every religious act was a communion with the “Great Whole” and every natural phenomenon was presided over by a Deva (spirit). But the modern Hindu has, nevertheless, conserved, deep down in the subconscious levels of his mind, the habit of seeing nature as a living thing, conscious and animated by gods and spirits; a sphere in which everything that exists is the expression of one great conscious energy.

To put it in other terms, if we wish to use the modern language of psychoanalysis we may say that the Hindu remain linked by his umbilical cord to the influences of the Unconscious. That

is why his ideational structure, and his mental rhythm, are sometimes so disconcerting to the westerner. Hindu reaction comes in response to suggestions from the instinctive and intuitive levels. Clear, logical thinking is subordinate to emotive impulses or inspiration surging up from the Unconscious. As a result, the line of thought, may appear confused and vague to the western mind, recalling the “pre-logical thinking” of primitive man. The Hindu, on the other hand, would certainly attack our precise and rational thinking as a kind of desiccated intellectualism.

Finally, a major element conditioning the psychology of the Hindu is his fundamentally mystical and religious temperament. For most westerners religion, when it is not completely ignored, plays only a peripheral role in their lives. The Hindu, in marked contrast, is steeped in religion down to the marrow of his bones. Even those who profess to be atheists conserve these characteristics deep in their subconscious. For the religious Hindu, religious rites and social life are intricately bound up with each other, and his thoughts, his conversation and his action are all expressions of this religio-mystical temperament. If, for instance he is looking at magnificent scenery or a beautiful landscape, he will instinctively think that it is a perfect spot for a temple to be built on; a westerner in the same place would tend to think of a casino or a hotel. Again, for many Hindus, feminine beauty has association with religious ideas, for having been surrounded from infancy with images of Durga, Kali Sita and Radha, they have learned to venerate women as expressions of the Divine. It is true that particularly in the larger towns of India westernisation is growing. But, equally certainly, the Collective Unconscious of the people, the racial Hindu archetypes, are almost the same as they were in Vedic times.

An additional fact is that the religious psychology of the Hindu is in many ways different from that of his counterpart in the west. In religions of Semitic origin God and the worshipper are two completely separate entities and devotion is always ringed around with some degree of respect and fear. From the cultivated Hindu the Divine is the essence of all existing things and may be found first and foremost in his own heart; thus the act of adoration is marked by an attitude of familiarity and tenderness.

It is a fact too, that the ordinary Hindu finds it easy to “divinise” any object or individual while at the same time never losing sight of its place in everyday life. Thus a visiting wayfarer is regarded as holy; he is Narayana, an aspect of the Divine. Before serving him the head of the family will sometimes do puja (a religious rite) like that which he performs before the idol to whom he addresses his daily devotions. But once the seva (service) is over, the guest, Narayana, again becomes for his host the destitute wretch that he, in fact, is. In the same way, the cow is scared, but that does not prevent the cowherd from striking it violently when it strays too far from pasture. The religious Hindu is expected to look upon his wife as the incarnation of Lakshmi (an aspect of the Divine Mother), and for the wife, the husband should be God himself. Their son should be brought up in the spirit of seva (service) to Gopla (the child Krishna); and so it goes on.

This attitude to social life and its obligations are entirely unknown to the religious westerner. That is why there is so often a failure to communicate and innumerable misunderstandings stem from the fact that words used have different connotations for the two participants in the dialogue.

In the large cities like Calcutta, however, the educated classes are drawing ever closer in their mental outlook to the west.

CHAPTER VIII

DAKSHINESHWAR

Calcutta holds out many treasures to the tourist, but I had not come as a tourist. After a quick visit to the Ashutosh Museum and the temple of Kalighat – one of the rare temples where animal sacrifices are still offered – it was the famous temple of Dakshineswar to which I was drawn.

Dakshineswar is a little village situated on the Ganges on the outskirts of Calcutta. Towards the middle of the last century a great Bengali lady by the name of Rani Rasmani, had a temple built, dedicated to the service of Kali, to whom she was deeply devoted. But Rani Rasmani, though she was held in great honour and lived the life of a queen (Rani means “queen”), had been born into the Sudra caste, the lowest of the four Hindu castes. Caste prejudice was very deeply rooted in Bengali life at that time and it proved extremely difficult to find a priest – who would of necessity, have to be a Brahmin – to perform the daily religious services of puja to the idol.

The first priest to undertake to serve in the temple was the Brahmin, Ram Kumar Bhattacharya. Later he committed the charge to his younger brother Gadadhar, soon to become the famous Ramakrishna Paramahansa. One of the greatest sages of modern India.

Though Ramakrishna came of a Vaishnava family, the idol of Kali, worshipped by the Shaktas, exerted a powerful fascination upon him. Very soon this stone image became for him a living thing, a tangible reality and the symbol of the omnipresent Divine Mother who imbues all existing things with life.

The intensity of his devotion breathed into the idol a Prana-Pratishta, an actual insufflation of life, the influence of which may be felt to this day. Those who have read the life of Ramakrishna know how inextricably the temple of Kali is bound up with the life of this great teacher of such outstanding spiritual stature. To me, Ramakrishna, his disciples and his teaching, meant a very

great deal. I had read widely on the subject and had maintained contacts with the Ramakrishna Mission in Paris. And the temple of Dakshineswar, the radiant image of Kali, the Panchavati, the chamber of the Master, the sacred Ganges flowing by as an eternal witness – all these had become fixed in my mind as a series of familiar pictures around which my imagination had created a miracle world of holiness and mystery.

And now this world lay before me in its concrete reality! True, Ramakrishna himself was no longer here, nor for that matter his immediate disciples. The temple too, no longer belonged to the Ramakrishna Mission, which had set up its headquarters at Belur, on the opposite bank of the river. But the temple stands there still with its alter and the image of Kali decked out, no doubt, just as it used to be when the young priest, Ramakrishna performed his puja with such impassioned devotion. Day after day, ever since then, probably without any interruption at all, the puja has been performed. Visitors pour in from all over India and often from Europe and America too. The Master's room to which they are shown appears just as it was the day the Master left it, with his wooden bed, his bolster, his little table.....The Panchavati alone perhaps, has changed. It had been built according to the instructions laid down in the scriptures, a central platform of cement surrounded by five sacred trees: the Ashwata (or Pipal) resembling its famous brother which was witness to the Buddha's great revelation at Buddha-Gaya; the Bell which is a tree sacred to Shiva, the Amalaki whose fruit the famous myrobolan has miraculous, medicinal properties, the Bat (or Banyan) which, with its constantly multiplying roots, attains in very little time, a gigantic height and spread, and finally the Ashoka. The five trees are still there but they have grown to such giant dimensions and their boughs are so entangled with one another that the Panchavati seems to have become part of the virgin forest.

Here the Master often came to meditate and here he would send his disciples after he had given them precise spiritual guidance.

The gates of the temple of Kali are opened to visitors only briefly twice a day, morning and evening, at the hours of the pujas. But the Divine Mother apparently extended a special welcome to me for, without my having planned it so, I arrived just when the service was beginning, and the gates stood open wide.

But why did I find myself choked with such intense emotion and why did I have trouble holding back my tears? Though my mind, in panoramic procession, passed all the spiritual and religious yearning, which had brought me to this land, and a prayer took wing form my heart. "May my voyage to India be not entirely vain". Did Kali still hearken to prayers as in the days of Ramakrishna? Did the idol still conserve the life that her illustrious worshipper had breathed into her? Or was it simply that a sincere and heartfelt prayer never goes unanswered? "No matter where you call upon My name I will come to you and bless you".

However it may be, the fact remains that three days letter my prayer was granted a thousand fold, beyond my most daring aspirations. It happened in Benares...on the bank of the Ganges.....But that is not a matter for this book.

CHAPTER IX

BUDDHA-GAYA

On January 31st, I left Calcutta for Benares. The train went through Gaya, a centre of pilgrimage to which every practising Hindu is drawn to perform the annual rite of propitiation to his ancestors. I stopped off, not to visit the town, but to see the famous Buddha-Gaya a few miles away. A friendly Chinese, a teacher at the school in Shanti Niketan accompanied me. We had met on the train and had discovered that our two immediate objectives – Buddha-Gaya and Benares – were the same. From the station we took a rickshaw. The road was really only a rough track and we were fairly jolted about.

Perhaps it was along this self-same road that the Maha-karunika had walked two thousand five hundred years ago.. (*Maha-karunika – the greatly compassionate one; one of the epithets of the Buddha.*) If so, he would have appeared to be a perfectly ordinary monk like so many other who then wandered along the roads in India; and like them too, he probably stooped from time before a village doorway to utter his usual formula: “Biksham dehi”, (Alms, alms!), holding out his bowl or perhaps, quite simply, his hands. At night, doubtless, he slept under a tree, fearless of the tigers, which roamed these plains. After all, what could he possibly fear after having lived so many years in the forest of Uruvela, full, as he tells us, of hair-raising horrors for anyone who was not a Samyami (one who has attained complete self-mastery). For six years in this forest he had taken upon himself the most painful austerities; but at last in a flash of illumination he had understood that it was a mistake to mortify the flesh, deliberately to afflict one’s self. Enlightenment would be reached no sooner along such a path than along that of indulgence in wordly pleasures.

His mind was ripe now and no doubt he knew intuitively that with one supreme effort he could attain Samyak–Sambodha–Supreme Illumination.

And so he started out in search of a suitable spot, a solitary place with beneficent influence, where he could give himself up entirely to his meditations.

A wandering monk, begging for his food, seeking a Tapasya-Sthan (a favourable place for spiritual discipline) – it was a commonplace thing at the time and indeed is still so, in India today. Nevertheless the physical beauty of this giant Nepali, the son of a King, with his athletic carriage and his countenance so noble and so pure, must surely have drawn attention. Perhaps they came to him with offering, prostrating themselves before him and asking his blessing.

It must have been the people of Gaya, already a centre of pilgrimage at the time, who told him about the solitary spot, not far out of the town, towards which he took his way. Other ascetics, no doubt, had also found a dwelling place there..... there was shade and water and a village not far away.....“The people are simple, pure and charitable to monks”.

It was only rarely that the monk Gautama tarried in human habitations. His favourite dwelling-place was the foot of a tree-one of those grand giants so often seen in India. It was at the foot of a tree that he had been born, it was there that he had his great revelation, and it was there too, that at the end of his life, he left his physical body and entered into Paranirvana.

Buddha-Gaya, at that time must have been a tiny little village, perhaps only a few isolated farmsteads surrounded by fields. It is scorching hot in summer on the Indian plains. A tree with luxuriant branches providing ample shade from the rays of the implacable sun became the monk's dwelling place. It was an Ashwata (ficus religiosa), a sacred tree. Perhaps even, the Deva (spirit) of the tree had welcomed the noble ascetic and had entreated him to come and to shelter in its shade.

One day in the month of Vaishak (around May) a young woman by the name of Sujata came to prostrate her-self before the monk and, with great devotion, laid an offering before him. It was no ordinary offering, but an offering of payasam made only to gods and under special circumstances. From rice of the very best quality; every grains had been handpicked and then boiled for some hours in cow's milk until all the liquid had evaporated. Then the mixture had been sweetened, perhaps with honey; spices, almonds, pistachios and raisins had been added to make an offering fit for the gods. Gautama asked the young woman the reason for this unexpected gift. Sujata was married, rich and fortunate, but there was one thing lacking to her perfect happiness. She had a desperate desire to have a son.

It is not proper for monks to converse with women, especially with women who are young and beautiful. Nevertheless, Sidhartha seems to have prolonged this conversation for in the course of it he made a strange discovery. He had always believed that the world was a scene of universal misery, and that all living creatures groaned under the intolerable burden of the “three kinds of suffering”. (*The three kinds of suffering: (1) Adhibhautika: suffering caused caused living creatures (wild animals, men etc.) (2) Adhidavika: suffering caused by natural phenomena (earthquakes, floods etc.) (3) Adhyatmika: suffering growing out of our bodies or minds (illness, worry etc.)*).

Yet here before him was a young woman who was happy, who wished both to live and to give life. It was strange indeed.

The Buddhist scriptures tell us that this meal of rice boiled in milk had a most extraordinary affect on the man who was later to become the Buddha (the Enlightened One). It was as if an intense flame was lit within him, permeating all his being and granting him no respite. One longing alone possessed him entirely, the longing to achieve the great Enlightenment, immediately, without further delay. Sitting under the tree he pronounced the words now become famous:

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“My skin, my sinews and my bones may wither; my flesh and
my blood may dry up within me; but I shall not quit my seat in
this spot until I have achieved perfect Enlightenment”.

(Mahanidesa p. 476–English translation by
the Pali Texts Society).

That is what the Buddhist scriptures tell us. But what was it exactly that happened? How could this perfectly simple food have had such an extraordinary effect?

The Hindu sages teach that not only does the food we eat have a powerful effect on our minds, but that the mental structure is in fact, constituted of the most rarified part of the nourishment we ingest. “As your food is, so is your mind”, is a popular Hindu saying. Now, the payasam offered by Sujata, being a form of nourishment that was highly satvika (Pure), the mental reaction it provoked was correspondingly so.

But this is hardly a satisfying explanation. Perhaps one should try to explore in this episode from the life of the Buddha, the psychological mechanism of Enlightenment.

Before he saw the rise of the sun of Enlightenment, the monk Gautama had to fight a terrible psychological battle with “Mara” the “tempter” whose attack he triumphantly repulsed. Now this temptation by the “powers of evil” seems to be a frequent, if not a constant phenomenon in the lives of the great mystics.

Enlightenment is, in the final analysis, dissolution of the individual consciousness, of what we call our “self”, our “ego”. Before complete and final enlightenment this “ego”, even in the greatest of saints like the Bodhisattva Gautama, is always present. The “ego” is no simple thing. Schematically one might say that it is formed by the tension between two opposed forces, one urging in the direction of distraction delights, the other exercising a curb on this tendency and seeking to master it. In the popular language of India, the two forces are the Bhogi (the pleasure-seeker) and the Yogi (he who controls the pleasure-seeker). In the average man, these two drives are in a state of equilibrium, more or less stable. In the debauchee the Bhogi holds the reins and

the Yogi is relegated to a corner; and in the ascetic the contrary holds true, the Yogi reigns supreme and the Bhogi is forced back, pushed into one of the recesses of the subconscious. Those who know the mind of a true ascetic know that for him the dread of impurity is greater than the dread of death itself.

The fact is, however, that it is the contemptible Bhogi who holds in his unclean hands the key to enlightenment. Perfect enlightenment can be possible only if the mind has known perfect happiness. Now, whatever happiness the ego knows is held in the hands of the Bhogi and to tear it out of them is no easy matter. But real happiness is a self-contained thing and has to be experienced in its essence, stripped of all traces of mental structures, of names or forms.

When the ascetic, after long training, has succeeded in inducing silence in his purified mind, when it is "Pure Consciousness" alone which upholds him, then the Real surges up like an ocean of happiness, overwhelming the individual consciousness. But this happiness has surprising links with the pleasures of the world and one of its first effects is to intensify a hundredfold the memories of all pleasures ever tasted or repressed. It is as though some mysterious hand has thrown open the gates of the unconscious.

It is this that constitutes "the temptation of Mara" and it is this that leads to the awakening of the Kundalini. Woe to him who, when this happens, retains within himself the least trace of weakness. Often, perhaps always, when the mind of the ascetic has reached the extreme peak of maturity, the sight of a pleasure object may act as a spark to gun-power and release the dreaded Kundalini. This, perhaps, is what happened before the enlightenment of the Buddha. Sujata, this fortunate young woman desirous of a son, the food she brought, fit for the gods, were not all these the combined essence of all the pleasures which the young prince had abandoned: his beloved wife, his son Rahula and all the luxuries of life in the palace of a King?

It was under this tree in Buddha-Gaya, under the Ashwata, that this grand psychological drama worked itself out, a drama which result in the appearance of a man and a doctrine which transformed the face of the world. The tree today is gigantic in stature and seems very old indeed. Nevertheless, it is not the same tree which saw the illumination of the Tathagata (he who pursued the same path as earlier Buddha had done) but only a descendant, born of a branch of the original tree. A stone platform has been built around it and there the stones have been forced apart by the trust of the powerful roots breaking through. The temple of Buddha-Gaya is not far off.

I sat down on the platform at the foot of the tree to meditate for ten minutes or so. My companion, the Chinese professor, did not appear to think much of this kind of meditation. "They fall asleep", he had told me when, on our way to Buddha-Gaya, we had been discussing meditants and their meditational exercise. Nevertheless, sitting at the foot of this tree, I felt a solemn peace well up within me and fill my mind.

Some years later, after a life of more intense spiritual practice, I came back to Buddha-Gaya, and the renewed sight of this majestic tree was the occasion of an extraordinary spiritual experience. It was as though my entire being was caught up in a sense of exultant joy. The leaves of the trees stirred by the breeze seemed like so many bells ringing out a glade carillon of victory. It was no doubt, only a pale reflection of the joy of Jina (the Victorious one, an epithet of the

Buddha) when, after his final victory over the armies of Mara – anger, egotism, luxury and so on – he emerged,

“Gluhend wie eine Sonne die aus den Bergen steigt”

(Radiant as the sun rising over the mountaintops)

Zarathustraby Nietzsche

And pronounced – so the Buddhist scriptures tell us – the following words:

“Innumerable are the births through which I have wandered, seeking but never finding, the builder of this house (the Ego).

Painful are the repeated births.

Now you have been seen, O Builder of this house.

No more will you build another house (i.e. another birth)

Your rafters have been broken down, your ridge-pole is demolished.

My mind has been liberated from Samskaras (subconscious latent desires)

The extinction of desire has been achieved.”

(Dhammapada153–54).

How long my experience lasted in its full intensity I cannot say. But during the first three days of my sojourn at Bodhgaya I continued to feel its effects. To what should I attribute it? The devout Buddhist will doubtless say that it was the spirit of the Buddha, especially present in this place, or perhaps the Deva charged with guarding the sacred spot, which chose to welcome me in this way.

The modern psychologist will perhaps see the experience simply as an instance of experience surging up from the unconscious. He would say that the sight of the tree had served to catalyse all the feelings generated in my past by reading, conversation and in other ways, on the subject of the life of the Buddha. However it may be, I can affirm on the basis of my own experience over nearly sixteen years that every holy place has its own special atmosphere and that this atmosphere manifests itself, in sympathetic or receptive subjects, in the form of a religious feeling, the tonality of which is unique to that particular spot.

The interpretations of this may be manifold. What is certain is that a thought wave charged with feeling (and it always is so charged to a greater or lesser degree) does not fade away into nothingness leaving no traces whatever. The ardent faith of innumerable pilgrims converging on a holy place over hundreds, even thousands of years, cannot fail to impregnate, even to saturate, the atmosphere of that place with religious feeling. Again, it is an indisputable fact provable by

experience that thought waves may be transmitted from one person to another; and the burning faith and highly charged emotions of the large numbers of people visiting holy places cannot fail to leave their mark on any sensitive individual. Finally – and this perhaps is a point which will not meet with the approval of a western intellectual – every place of pilgrimage acquires its significance from some special manifestation of the Divine; the appearance of the holy virgin at Lourdes, the life of Krishna at Brindavan, the enlightenment of Buddha at Buddha-Gaya, are all examples of this; and for the pilgrim, the believer, it is to the “Presence” of the Divine that we must attribute the special atmosphere of the spot.

At the time of my first visit to Buddha-Gaya, the temple and the management to the place were entrusted to Hindu priests, and the Pandas (priests acting as guide to the pilgrims) showed visitors not only the Bo-tree but also a stone bearing imprints of the feet of Vishnu. The daily puja (religious service) was performed to the temple idol, which had a hybrid aspect recalling both Hindu deities and the statues of the Buddha. This situation made for abuse and it was very fortunate that some years latter the Indian government entrusted the administration of the spot to Buddhists represented by the Maha-Bodhi Society.

My first visit to Buddha-Gaya lasted only a few hours. That same afternoon my companion and I took the train to Benares. But on my second visit some years later, I stayed several days. At that time there was a Tibetan monastery at Buddha-Gaya under the direction of a Rinpoche, a special emissary of the Dalai Lama. It was November and large numbers of pilgrims from Tibet were camping out under the tree. Every evening I would meditate at the foot of the Bo-tree at the hour when the monks at the monastery assembled in the same spot for the religious service so that I would be surrounded on all sides by lamas and by Tibetan lay people. The religious service was composed of chants to the accompaniment of Tibetan musical instruments, the trumpet and the drum, among other.

The music of Tibet has strange resonances and resembles nothing that we hear in the West. In harmony it certainly cannot compare with Bengali music. But certain passages have a strange beauty, and it is an indisputable fact that the music has psychic resonances and seems to suggest the magical and the supernatural.

The monks, growing accustomed to seeing me at the foot of the Bo-tree, came to consider me almost as one of themselves. They would smile at me and talk to me in familiar terms and at the conclusion of the ceremony they would include me in the distribution of the sacred food.

This was at the time when the Maha-Bodhi Society had already undertaken the management of the holy place.

CHAPTER X

ARRIVAL IN BENARES

Night had already fallen when we arrived – the Chinese professor and I – at Benares. It was quite cold and this first taste of winter in India took me by surprise. Winter is more bracing on the Indian plains than in Bengal but even here the temperature never falls to zero. We got off the train at Benares Cantonment Station. It was some miles away from the town centre, but the big hotels were all nearby. The usual scene greeted our eyes, the usual bustle of porters, people offering various services, taxis, rickshaws and so on.

There was something sinister about my first contact with Benares.

Hindus muffed up in innumerable wrappings looked like so many ghosts.

Our porters took us to the Clark Hotel, the best in town, with rooms that seemed especially comfortable and pleasant after the relative discomfort of days passed in trains.

The following morning I paid my first visit to the town and the unhappy impression of the previous evening was completely erased. The fact is that the Cantonment is not the real Benares. The real Benares is some distances away. A taxi took me right into the town centre, and at last I was in the most sacred of all cities. For surely Benares is the spiritual centre of the world? I felt that after long wanderings I had at last come home; it was a feeling I had never had anywhere else in India. My itinerary allowed Benares only a few days but I felt that I had reached journey's end; that I wanted never to leave this town again, that it was here that I would wish to live and die. Yet the fact remained, that it was February 2nd, 1951, and I was booked on the "Marseillaise" which was scheduled to sail from Colombo on February 21st.

Premonitions? Recollections of some pre-existence? Was I fated to live out my days in this town? Or could it be that some Divine Power wished to hold me there?

A psychologist, no doubt, would coldly analyse the meanderings of my mind and find a much simpler explanation. He would say that after the tropical temperatures of Ceylon and South India, the invigorating air of Benares, the comforts of the Clark Hotel, the little alleyways recalling those of the town where I had passed my childhood, all these impressions breaking in together on a euphoric mental phase combined to create my feeling that I was "home" once more in my native land. How can I tell?

What I do know is that the few days I had anticipated spending in Benares stretched out into eight years; that the "Marseillaise" sailed away without me, and that I have been living in India ever since. For on the evening of that day, on the second of February, something happened which changed the shape of my entire life. What was it? A meeting with a Guru? No! A meeting with *the* Guru.

Few people, even in India, know what a *real* Guru is. A Guru is not only a teacher and a guide, nor is he simply a friend or someone very dear. His tenderness is deeper than a mother's and a father's love can be only a feeble reflection of his own. The bonds holding the Guru and his disciple together are like no other bonds, for they include the entire range of feeling that any human being can know in the sphere of affection, all the nuances of love and adoration and respect.

The bonds of the world tend to create new bonds and the love of the flesh tends to lead always to sorrow and disillusionment. But, the love of the Guru is like a flawless mirror which reflects our own highest self. It purifies the mind, bringing it clarity and joy, and it leads us to the discovery of the eternal source of love and joy that lies within ourselves.

Everything I have written about in this book is no more than a pale preface; for the life I have been living after encountering my Guru has been rich in splendour and miracle.

But for reasons which I cannot reveal I shall not mention in this book even the name of his "Great Being" to whom I am indebted for more even than my existence.

One day perhaps, if God grants me life and strength, I shall write a testament of the veneration and gratitude I bear towards the Being who awakened me to a new life.

PART II

SOME ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS INDIA

PREFACE

I have travelled in India through the length and breadth of the country, from the Himalayas in the north to Madurai in the south, from Kalimpong to Simla and from Bombay to Calcutta.

For more than fifteen years I have lived among orthodox Hindus or, at infrequent intervals, among Buddhists. Most of my time has been spent in ashrams or, though less frequently, dharmashalas (hostels for pilgrims) and sometimes in solitary hermitages in the jungle.

Among the many places I have lived, some have struck me as particularly representative of some special aspect of religious India and I have thought that my impressions might be of interest to a western reader.

First in the list, naturally, comes Benares, the religious capital of India, the bastion of orthodoxy and the centre of Shivaism.

Then in contrast with Benares we have on the one hand, Sarnath, in its close neighbourhood, one of the last strongholds of Buddhism on Indian territory and on the other, Brindavan, the centre of Vishnuism and the rival of Benares.

Then a novel facet of religious India; a typical hermitage among the Himalayan forest where I spent many years and where I am present completing this book.

And finally, at the other extreme from his mountain solitude, the immense crowd, throbbing with religious fervour of a Kumbha-Mela at Allahabad.

CHAPTER I

BENARES

For a long time my favourite spot in India was Benares – now named Varanasi. There I lived for eight years in an ashram on the shores of the Ganges. (*Benares – For most of the historical and touristic facts mentioned in this chapter and that on Sarnath I am indebted to the Murray Guide for Travellers in India, Pakistan and Burma*).

Benares is a city rich in natural beauty. The splendour of the river banks, colourful and picturesque, make it a painter's paradise. The attractive galis – little labyrinthine alleyways – may well conceal sages known and unknown, pundits of vast erudition, possessors of rare old manuscripts, antiquaries who from some dusty room behind the shop may quite possibly produce a masterpiece of sculpture or an ancient painting. It is in the picturesque world of these narrow little lanes and byways that the engravers on copper and on brass display their minor works of Art. An indifferent visitor, it is true, might well imagine that Benares was wrapped in a cloak of rags, and for many people to get to know the true city would take a great deal of time, for Benares is very, very old and like all old towns it has its ugly aspects.

The beginnings of the city are lost in the mists of antiquity. It is already mentioned in the earliest writing in India such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and even in certain Upanishads. After his enlightenment, the Buddha, five centuries before the birth of Christ, came to Benares and delivered his first sermon at Sarnath a few miles out of the already flourishing town.

From earliest antiquity Benares was always a centre of learning, a seed-bed for writers, philosophers and grammarians. In 1194, the town was captured by the Moslems, and despite his large army the Rajah of Benares, Jaichand, was conquered and put to death by Quth-ud-Din Ghorri and by Ala-ud-Din Kalji, the King of Delhi. Many temples were destroyed and replaced by mosques and it was not until the time of Akbar, the most tolerant of the Moghul emperors who reigned from 1556 to 1605, that the Hindu temples were rebuilt.

The town is now again called by its ancient name of Varanasi derived from the names of the two rivers marking its limits: the Varuna (actually Barna) to the north-west and the Assi to the south. The latter is, in fact, no more than a little stream but it may, indeed, have been a river in earlier times.

Nearly a million pilgrims visit Benares every year, among them many who wish to end their days in the sacred city; for it is believed that whosoever dies in Benares, regardless of his race or religion, and even of the magnitude of his sins, will be granted liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. The Hindu scriptures make it clear, however, that this liberation will be the Krama-Mukti, – a progressive liberation achieved after a sojourn in the most elevated paradises – and not the Kaivalya Mukti, an immediate liberation achieved after the death of the body; for the latter, the Kaivalya Mukti, can be achieved only through the knowledge which is the reward of personal striving.

Benares or Kashi as the Hindus call it, is sacred to Shiva who represents the Divine as destroyer – the destroyer of sin and suffering for those still attached to the things of this world and for ascetics, the destroyer of that ignorance and confusion and the sense of the Ego which bar the way to knowledge and liberation. Hindus believed that Shiva is ever-present in Benares and that at the moment of death it is he who receives the consciousness of the dying man and teaches him the Taraka Mantra, the sacred formula, which enables him to cross over to the “opposite shore”. The soul will go first to the Shiva-Loka (the supreme of Shiva) and then to the Brahma-Loka (the supreme paradise) and here it will; by degrees, achieve the knowledge that liberates.

Benares is built on the left bank of the Ganges which forms a crescent around the town. The river, flowing through the Himalayas to Calcutta in an easterly direction, makes a north to south loop at this point. The same deviation occurs at Uttar-Kashi, the Benares of the north in the western Himalayas. The Hindu attaches great importance to direction in relation to the points of the compass. Thus, for example, a Brahmin says his morning prayer at sunrise, turning towards the east, and in the evening he prays, facing westwards, in the direction of the setting sun. Those who have renounced the world face northwards when they meditate. It is quite probable that the loop made by the river at this point was one of the reasons why the town was built just here by the Aryan people of Vedic times. Moreover the Ganges at this spot is very wide and, in the rainy season, appears to be an inlet of the sea. Even when the weather is at its hottest and the river is considerably lower at other points in its course, its flow here remains high.

It's a strange river, the Ganges! Like a living creature it has its moods. Sometimes it is calm and impassive like a sea of oil, the waters flowing with a hardly perceptible movement; on other days a torrential current whirls away the boats on its surface, and the river may be swept by fierce winds blowing against the current so that one feels one is borne along on the ocean's surge.

On several occasions and from several spots along the shore I have seen a sudden violent current appear, as it were, out of nowhere, to be followed a few minutes later by another current flowing in the opposite direction. "Gangaji is breathing", say the local folk, at times like these.

It is particularly in the season of the rains that the river seems to be alive with all sorts of strange movements and eddies, each productive of a sound of its own, so that one might almost say it was a human creature expressing excitement or calm, anger or pain. In this season it heaves with muddy waves but at other times of the year, the coloured reflections of the water are exceedingly beautiful. Marine blue during the day, it becomes towards evening a palette rich in a thing of surpassing splendour.

From time to time a boat laden with pilgrims goes by and a religious chant rises to the heavens. "Jai Mahadev Shambho Kashi Vishwanath Gange" (Hymn to Shiva. "Jai" means "Victory to". The other words apart from "Gange" are epithets of Shiva.) Or perhaps it is a fishing boat or a sailing vessel enhancing the beauty of the scene with its contrasting colours. Sometimes a swordfish lifts its back above the waters or leaps into the air to remind us that there is life in the depths, or a water-snake, about to come ashore, will make a quick retreat as it senses a human presence.

The great veneration of the Indians for the Ganges recalls in some ways that of the Egyptians for the Nile. They address their prayers to it and write hymns in its praise. Ganga is feminine in the language of India. It is "the Mother" – Ma Ganga, one of the aspects of the Divine. One bathe in the waters of the Ganges is sufficient to cleanse away all a man's sins. Merely to touch the water or to contemplate it will purify. Here as in so many other fields, the traditional beliefs of India have reference to things more particularly in their subtle aspect. The efficacy of a purificatory bathe depends in a large measure on the faith of the devotee, and in our day scepticism, even in Benares, has taken great strides forward. Students at B. H. U. (Benares Hindu University) say sarcastically that the Ganges is so pure a river that when they go for a bathe their sins, too terrified to take the plunge, perch on the trees along the bank, waiting to attach themselves again to their owners as soon as they emerge.

The following story, told among Hindus, illustrates this ebbing of faith:

"One day Shiva's wife Parvati asked him the following question: "If a bathe in the Ganges has such purificatory effects, how is it that Shiva's paradise (Shiva-Loka) is not over-populated?" "That" replied Shiva, "is because people do not have enough faith in the purificatory effect". Parvati remaining unconvinced, Shiva then offered to provide her with a demonstration of this fact. Assuming human form they went down together to Benares to one of the ghats (stairs going down to the river). Here Shiva lay on the ground simulating death, and Parvati, standing beside him, burst into noisy lamentations which soon drew a crowd of onlookers. They attempted to console her, asking what had happened and in what way they could help. "My husband has just died", wept Parvati, "and alas I am too poor to buy the wood for his cremation". Many of the bystanders hastened to reassure her. "You have nothing to worry about", they said. "We will be happy to provide you with all the wood you need." Parvati dried her tears, smiled sadly and answered, "I accept your offer most gratefully, but on one condition only". "Anything! Anything!" cried the good-hearted souls. "only let us know". "My husband", said Parvati, "expressed a very

special desire that the wood for his funeral pyre should be accepted only from hands completely pure of sin. Anyone who gives me wood and who is not absolutely pure will be risking the gravest consequences”.

At this the spectators were silent. Not one dared affirm that he was spiritual beyond reproach and slowly the crowd melted away.

All day long Parvati waited by her husband’s dead body. Countless passers-by asked her the same question and received the same answer. But none dared claim that he was perfectly pure.

Towards evening a rowdy man came staggering by. He was a notorious drunkard reputed to have all the vices, but good-hearted none the less. The sorrow of the young widow moved him to pity and asking her its cause, he received the oft-repeated reply. “There’s no problem whatever”, he said, and removing his dhoti (garment), stepped into the Ganges and immediately brought Parvati a number of branches of dry wood.

“Here is what you need Mataji”, (Mata – mother; ji – a suffix expressing respect) he said, “now you can pay your last duties to your husband”.

“But..... but.....”, said Parvati, “are you quite certain you are pure of all sin?”

“How can you doubt it?” rejoined the drunkard. “Haven’t I only just bathed in the Ganges?”

There is a legend too, that tells of a celestial Ganges, the sources of the river which washes the Indian plains. It comes down to earth, thanks to the entreaties of a king and sage named Bhagiratha who, in order to be granted his plea, underwent, over a period of years, such severe ascetic discipline that he is often quoted as an example of tenacity and perseverance. But when the river finally did come down it was with such torrential force that it threatened to shake the entire world. Thereupon Shiva bound his long hair up into a knot and the waters, breaking their impact against (this, slackened their impetuous speed).

The symbolism underlying these legends is transparent. The mental processes of the Hindu are, in many ways, different from those of a westerner. A modern scientist observes and studies the world as a complex of forces governed by clearly defined laws, but he certainly does not postulate a conscious power, which animates and directs this complex. Mechanical laws are, in his view, entirely adequate to explain the workings of the visible world. But in India and in the Far East it is generally widely accepted that natural forces are governed by conscious powers, each with its own particular character, and all organised into a hierarchy under the control of a Master of the Universe. In India such powers are called Devas, gods resembling those of ancient Greece. The Ganges, for example, is ruled by a goddess whose physical body may be said to be the river flowing through the Indian plains. The sun has its Deva, and so has the rain; even big trees often have their deities which take physical form in these forest giants.

To a western mind such beliefs may appear to be primitive and childish. Nevertheless, not only are they common all over the Far East but they were also held by the ancient Greeks

whose civilisation in many ways resembles our own, and even surpasses it in a number of ways. The Chinese are known for their pragmatism and for their highly developed culture, and yet they too believe in the existence of “Dragons”. Moreover, the wise men of the orient and some western spiritualists too, affirm that certain specially gifted individuals are capable of “seeing” these spirits.

The ancient belief of alchemists, that man is a microcosm, a reproduction in miniature of the structure of the Universe, is held in India too. The corollary of this doctrine would be that all the universal forces together with the deities controlling them may be found within the human body. The right eye, for instance, corresponds to the sun and the spirit dwelling in it, is a miniature of the Deva ruling the sun and all the other devas too are represented in the small-scale universe which is the human body. This is not only a popular belief; it is a doctrine set out time and again in the Vedas and even in certain Upanishads. In fact the whole of the Karma-Kanda (the ritual section of the Vedas) is based upon this doctrine. An entire system of ceremonial magic, the basic principle of which is the successful synchronisation of one or more of the energies in the human body with the corresponding cosmic energies, stems from it.

The sacred rivers and centres of pilgrimage also have their correspondences in the human body. The Ganges and the Yamuna are represented by the two channels of nervous and psychic energy, the Ida and the Pingala. An under-ground river, the Saraswati (hypothetical) is matched by the centre nerve, the Shusumna. The Ganges, the Yamuna and—one assumes—the Saraswati, come together at prayaga (Allahabad) at a spot called the Triveni. In the human body this corresponds to the Ajna Chakra (the centre of psychic energy located between the eyebrows). The waters of the river flowing into Benares are already mixed with those of the Yamuna. In esoteric terms therefore, to bathe in the Ganges at Benares signifies that the individual consciousness immerses itself above the point of the Ajna Chakra, that is to say it reaches the point of spiritual enlightenment.

All along the Ganges stretch the famous ghats. These are structures of great stone stairways generally going right down into the river and serving for ritual baths. Often they are surmounted by temples or by the solid stone edifices of castles or by ashram. The base of these edifices is generally high and massive suggesting powerful fortresses or, at certain points, even cliffs, for during the rainy season the waves on the Ganges can be as dreadful as those at sea and it is not rare for a structure to be undermined the force of the water.

An intense religious life pulses along the ghats. From early morning, before sunrise – even in the winter – many people say their prayers after having performed their ritual ablutions. Large numbers of sanyasi and sadhu’s (monks and hermits) live and practise their austerities on the banks of the sacred river, some in large solidly built ashrams, other in abandoned half-ruined structures, or destitute huts, others even in boats anchored on the river.

Each ghat has its name and its own individuality. Each has its regular habitués, its life, its history, its traditions and memories, often going back thousands of years. To describe them all in detail would need an entire book, so I shall mention only the most important.

The first beginning from the southern end of the town is the Assi Ghat. This ghat derives its name and its sanctity from the little river, almost a stream, called Assi which marks the southern

limits of the city and which flings itself into the Ganges at this point The Assi Ghat is one of the Panchatiratha, the five holy places at which the pilgrim must successively perform his ablutions in the course of a single day. (*The other four are Dassashwamedha, Manikarnika, Panchaganga and Barnasangam.*) From the architectural point of view it is certainly not the most beautiful of the ghats but it has a picturesque quality that is peculiarly its own. The stairs are somewhat far from the river but after the rainy season additional stairs are cut into the riverbank. A large area of built-up earth is set-aside for the pilgrims who on certain festive days, especially at the eclipses of the sun and moon, come in large numbers. This area and the surroundings of the ghat are kept remarkably clean. Many sanyassis have chosen to live in the immediate neighbourhood. A boat moored along the bank was once transformed into an ashram, the ashram of Hari Har Baba.

Hari Har Baba had just died when I arrived at Benares in 1951. He was a sage who had had his moment fame and who was credited with working a number of spectacular miracles. One day, for instance, as he was working along the opposite bank of the river his legs were scratched by a species of bramble very common in that spot. In the irritation of the moment he burst out, "If only all these brambles would disappear!" And the strange thing was, that a few days later, they had indeed disappeared completely. When I was at Benares from 1951 to 1959 the boat was occupied by one of his disciples. Since then the boat-ashram has vanished from the shore and an ashram in stone has been built in the name of Hari Har Baba.

On the opposite bank of the river, facing the Assi Ghat but further south, is the little town of Ramnagar where the Rajah of Benares has his abode. His palace, looking out over the Ganges, may be seen from far away. From a little further down the riverbank the entire semi-circle of the town and its ghats comes into view, skirted by the gables of the residence of the Maharajah of Rewa. It is a splendid scene, like a painting by some great master. And looming up immediately before us is the Tulsi Ghat, where large partly ruined structures overlook a cement platform along the riverside. This ghat is especially favoured by the devotees of Ram and owes its name to Gosain Tulsidas, famous all over India as the author of the Rama—Cariya-Manasa, the Hindi version of India's great epic poem, the Ramayana. This work, written in ancient Hindi – it was composed in 1574 –is very popular among Hindus who hold it in veneration as a sacred book. Tulsidas was a great devotee of Ram and a remarkable saint. He probably dwelt in the northern section of the buildings on this ghat and it was there that he would have written the greater portion of the Ramayana in Hindi, and another work, the Rama-Dataka, a poem that he composed in a single night. He died at Benares in 1623. The story of his conversion is remarkable. A Punjab Brahmin from the clan of the Gossains, Tulsidas was married and to begin with, led the life of any ordinary man. His physical passion for his wife was however, extreme.

It happened that his wife went to spend a few days in her father's home on the opposite bank of the river and Tulsidas was unable to accompany her. One evening, burning with desire and possessed by a sort of frenzy, he decided, come what may, to set out to join her. Night had already fallen when he came to the river. It was in flood at that season, and there was no one to ferry him across, so in his frenzy, he seized upon what appeared to be a tree trunk and, using it as a support, swam to the opposite bank. The trunk however, was a human corpse. It was dark when Tulsidas reached his father-in-law's house. Not wishing to rouse the household, he decided to climb up the wall leading to his wife's window. To his surprise he saw something like a rope dangling down. His heart leapt with joy for he thought that his wife had let it down and thanks to

this providential help he succeeded in getting into the room. The rope, however, was in fact a snake.....or so history recounts.....or the legend.

Tulsidas however, met with an icy reception that effectively tempered his ardour. His wife was far from pleased to see him. A wise and religious woman, she put him to shame for having given way so completely to his carnal passions. If he could divert only a tiny portion of this love to the Divine, she told him, he might become the greatest of saints. Her words shocked the mind of Tulsidas into understanding. From that day forwards his behaviour changed completely and he became the famous saint and poet that India so reveres.

Moving on quickly and leaving the water-tower and other ghats behind, we find ourselves at the Shivala Ghat. Architecturally this is one of the most beautiful with its great fort, the scene of an historic feat of arms commemorated by an inscription in marble. This is the story: In 775 Benares was ceded to the English by the Nawab Vizir of Oudh, but the Rajah of Benares, Chait Singh, continued to administer the town. In 1780 the Governor-General of British India, Warren Hastings, on the pretext of trouble with the Mahrattas, asked for a contingent of cavalry. When Chait-Singh refused, Hastings arrived in Benares and imprisoned the Rajah in the fortress prison of Shivala. But Chait-Singh's supporters planned an attack to help him escape. Two companies of sepoy and three officers were massacred while the Rajah escaped by plunging into the river from of the castle.

Not far from here is the Harishchandra Ghat. This is one of the cremation sites in Benares. Here the living and the dead rub shoulders. Every day corpses shrouded in white or coloured sheets, their feet lapped by the Ganges, may be seen awaiting their turn. The funeral pyre is built up of layers upon layers of dry branches with the body laid out on top. Funeral processions too, are very simple without any of the ceremony customary in the west. I have never noticed tears or lamentations. The dead man is borne on a stretcher made of branches. All along the route the stretcher-bearers chant aloud the sacred formula in Hindi "ram nam Satya he" – "Only the name of God is Truth". Ram here is a symbol of the Divine. Sometimes the deceased is accompanied by symbols and dances, for death here has none of the tragic significance attached to it in the west.

"The wise man afflicts himself neither for the living nor for the dead", says the Bhagavad Gita (II, 11).

"That Unborn, Permanent, Eternal and Ancient, That is not destroyed when the body is destroyed" (II 20)

"Just as a man casts off his old garments in order to clothe himself in new, so *That* abandons the worn out bodies in order to take on new". (II, 22).

The purpose of cremation which result in the immediate and absolute destruction of the body is to cut the ties between the dead man's consciousness and the earthly scheme of things. For saints or sages however, who have achieved this detachment while yet alive, cremation is not considered necessary and the body is simply immersed in the Ganges.

This ghat owes its name to the Rajah Harischandra, one of India's popular romantic heroes. In a spirit of renunciation this king abandoned his kingdom, sold his wife and child into slavery and himself became for one year the slave of a chandala, an untouchable, who was custodian for cremation on this ghat. In an alley above the ghat stands the ashram of Shankari Ma where I stayed for several days in 1952. At that time it was run by Swami Paramananda a disciple of Shankari Ma. She herself had died a few years earlier in her hundred-and-twentieth year. She was a yogini and her body despite its great old age, had remained relatively young. She was a disciple of the celebrated Trilinga Swami, the great sage and magician who lived in Benares until the age of two hundred and eighty.

Trilinga Swami was renowned for his miracles, his wisdom and his eccentricities. It is said of him, that one day he took the sword of the Governor of the city and flung it into the Ganges. On the Governor's demanding that the badge of his office be restored to him, Trilinga Swami summoned up two absolutely identical swords out of the river and asked the perplexed Governor to choose the one that belonged to him. Occasionally the sage would spend a night in the holiest of Benares' sacred places, the temple of Vishwanath where he would sleep with his feet resting on the sacrosanct lingam of Shiva. Perfect wisdom transcends all social or religious conventions.

After the Harischandra Ghat comes the Kedar Ghat surmounted by a temple dedicated to Shiva. Kedar Nath is one of the names of Shiva and means "the Lord of Kedar": Kedar is a famous centre of pilgrimage in the Himalayas. Between the stairways of the Ghat a basin has been hollowed out, holding waters that have curative properties. This is the Gauri Kund, the pool of Gauri. Gauri, "the golden and luminous one", is the name of the spouse of Shiva, in one of her aspects. She symbolises the light of divine knowledge. The temple is frequented mainly by Bengalis who are very numerous in Benares and who dwell in the quarter behind the ghat.

Moving rapidly on past the Mansarowar ghat with its many *ex votos*, the Chauki Ghat, the Someshwar, the Narada, the Raja, the Chaussati, the Rana, the Munshi, the Ahlya, we finally arrive at one of the most important of all, the Dasashwamedh Ghat. The name means "the ten sacrifices of the horse". (Das – ten, ashwa – horse, and Medha – sacrifice). According to the legend, Indra the King of the gods performed here, on ten separate occasions, the "horse sacrifice", the most meritorious of all the sacrificial rites in ancient India. This sacrifice was not so simple as it might appear to be. In fact none but a powerful monarch could perform it, for it had to be done in the following way.

The chosen animal, it goes without saying, had to be a pure thoroughbred without blemish. For one year he was left free to roam at will followed, always at a distance by a troop of armed men. A gold plaque fixed on his forehead indicated that he was destined for the Ashwamedha (the sacrifice). All territory that the horse trampled on was considered as conquered.....or to be conquered by his owner, the king. It was in effect a "throwing down of the gauntlet" to all the rulers in the neighbourhood, confronting them with a choice between submitting or giving battle. If, at the year's end, the troop of armed men returned victorious with the horse, the sacrifice could begin.

Its ritual and symbolism were very complicated and are explained in detail in the chapter of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. As a consequence of these ten sacrifices performed by Indra the sanctity of the ghat was considerably increased and came to equal that of Prayaga (Allahabad).

The Dasashwamedha Ghat is one of the Panchatirthas, that is to say, one of the five sacred places at which the pilgrim must successively perform his ritual ablutions in the course of a single day. It is always very crowded and throbs with an intense religious life. It covers a wide area. Here and there groups of people listen attentively to a sanyasi or a pandit discoursing on some religious subject or commenting on a sacred text. Wooden platforms covered with awnings are provided for those wishing to pray or meditate. Many chapels and *ex votos* line the centre of the town. A carriage road leads to the centre of town.

We must not leave the banks of the river before visiting the Manikarnika Ghat, which is considered to be the most sacred place in Benares. It owes its name to a little pool of water into which, according to the legend, one of Shiva's earrings had fallen (Mani –jewel, karna – ear). A dip in this pool is supposed to wash away all sins. This ghat is the chief cremation site in Benares. The same funeral spectacle that we saw at Harishchandra Ghat greets our eyes here. Cremations proceed almost uninterruptedly at several spots on the ghat and often go on into the night.

Close to the Manikarnika pool is the Charanpaduka, the imprint of Vishnu's feet in marble. A little further on again stands a little temple of Ganesha, the god with the elephant head symbolising wisdom. Thus the deities of different sects maintain a peaceful coexistence for they are only different aspects of the one God approached by each individual according to his personal predispositions.

But the sun is setting and it will soon be night, so let us leave the riverbank. Brahmins and ascetics are performing their ritual evening ablutions and offering their Sandhya (evening prayer). All along the bank the temple gongs and cymbals fill the air with their din. Night falls rapidly and silence descends. From the ashram where I lived I used to see every evening, spread out in the distance, the yellow lights of the town. In the midst of the twinkling display one red light stands out. It is the light of the funereal pile at Manikarnika, reminding us in this eternal city that the things of this world must pass away.

CHAPTER II

SARNATH

Sarnath is next door to Benares, about ten kilometres distant from the centre of the town; almost, one might say, a suburb. Yet the two are worlds apart. On the one hand Benares – citadel of orthodox Hinduism with its life of intense religious devotion, its castes, rites and ceremonies, its streets teeming with high-strung, noisy life, its magnificent ghats flanking the river where the representatives of Hinduism's innumerable sects rub shoulders with each other, the most varied types, ranging from the naked Naga at one extreme to the dignified sanyasi from the Ramakrishna Mission at the other, his ears covered with a bonnet and his orange gown impeccably clean and neat. And there, right beside Benares, Sarnath, one of the last bastions on Indian soil of that Buddhism which once was all powerful; – Sarnath, enfolding you in her peace and her silence, offering you an immediate release of tension after the "electric" atmosphere of the other town.

Today Sarnath is only a little village but in the long distance past it was one of the great centres of Buddhism with numerous monasteries and buildings, housing thousands of monks and lay people... It was here, two thousand, five hundred years ago, that the Buddha delivered his first sermon and "set in motion the Wheel of the True Doctrine" which was to have so profound an influence on the thought and civilisation of Asia.

At that time Sarnath, which was called Rishipatana (in the Pali language, Isapatana), was a forest where Rishis (wise men) came to live the life of recluse.

Stone inscriptions dating from the reign of the Emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C. refer to the place by the name Sadharmackrapravartana Vihara – that is to say, the monastery where the wheel of the True Doctrine was set in motion.

The modern name, Sarnath, is a derivation of Saranath, "the lord of the king of the deer", and was inspired by one of the Jatakas of Buddha. The Jatakas of which there are several hundred in existence, are tales told by the Buddha himself about his previous lives; for like most great sages, he recalled all the existences, human and prehuman, that he had lived through. The Jataka of the king of the Deer tells the following story:

In a far distant epoch there lived, in a forest in the neighbourhood of Sarnath, a large herd of wild deer and gazelles. These forest-dwellers were governed by a very wise king, none other than he who would one day be reborn in the body of the Buddha, Gautama. The King of Benares frequently went hunting in this forest and killed large numbers of the deer, for both their flesh and their skins were highly valued at the time. In order to put an end to the blind slaughter of his subjects the King of the deer sought out his counterpart in Benares and suggested a bargain. Every day one member of the herd would appear at the place in Benares and voluntarily offer himself as a sacrifice. In return the rajah would place a ban on all the hunting of deer. The rajah agreed and the bargain was struck.

The deer people scrupulously adhered to the agreement and each day one deer would be chosen and would set out voluntarily along the road to Benares to be sacrificed. One day, however, the lot fell on a gazelle who refusing to give herself up at Benares, asked for an audience with the deer king. The king, despite his compassion for the victim, tried to make her realise that she could not evade her fate, for the rules had been decided upon and her turn had come. The gazelle however, pleaded that by the terms of the agreement the King of Benares was entitled to only one

deer a day. She explained that she was pregnant and that meant that, in effect, two victims would be sacrificed instead of one.

The deer king, who already bore within him the heart of Bodhisattva, was deeply moved. Reflecting on the matter, he decided there was only one solution. He himself would have to go to Benares and offer himself up as a sacrifice in place of the gazelle.

Accordingly he set out. The King of the holy city asked to what he owed the honour of the visit, and the deer-king explained why he himself was to be the victim for that day.

The rajah was overwhelmed by such magnanimity of soul. Henceforth he promised, the rights of the deer would be respected and they would not be required to make any further sacrifices.

After achieving his great Enlightenment on the day of the full moon in the month of Vaisak at Buddha Gaya, the Buddha spent six weeks absorbed in the joy of samadhi. Then, returning to empirical consciousness, he considered whether it might be his duty to divulge the doctrine he had discovered. He said to himself;

“Why should I attempt to convey to others

What has cost me so much pain to understand?

Those who are eaten up with lust and hatred

Will never be able to grasp this truth.”

(Vinaya Mahavagga I 3–5).

However, so the legend tells us, Brahma and other gods appeared to him and entreated him to take it upon himself to guide humanity along the road to salvation. The Buddha’s first problem was to decide who might be capable of understanding so subtle a doctrine; for those who would certainly have been able to assimilate it, Adara, Kalama and Udraka Ramaputta, the teachers of the Buddha, were no longer alive.

Pondering the matter, he remembered the five companions who had abandoned him. Before his enlightenment the Buddha, in the company of five monks, had gone through a long period of asceticism, marked by painful macerations and fasts. By the end of this time he had become mere skin and bone, his eyes started out of their sockets and he appeared to be a walking corpse.

Then suddenly, it came to him in a flash of understanding that the mortification of the flesh could constitute as serious an obstacle to enlightenment as the pursuit of pleasure. And he began to nourish his body again and to live a normal life.

His five companions, convinced that he had “fallen from yoga”, gave him up in despair. And it was of these five companions that the Buddha now bethought himself as receivers of the

doctrine that he had discovered and whom he set out to seek. It was at Sarnath that he came upon them. To-day the spot where they met is called Chaukandi and lies on the road between Benares and Sarnath about half a mile from the centre of the Buddhist holy place. It is marked by a hillock on which stands the ruin of an octagonal tower, the remains of a stupa that was erected later to commemorate the event. The five companions had meanwhile been fruitlessly continuing the practice of their terrible austerities. Seeing the approach of their old comrade who, they believed, had taken the broad, downhill path of easy living, they decided at first to remain silent and ignore him. But such were the radiance and nobility of his countenance that they instinctively rose at his arrival and respectfully offered him a seat.

It was then that he preached his famous “first sermon” and “set in motion the Wheel of the doctrine”, (Dharma Chakrapravartana) of which the following is a summary:

“Oh Brother Monks! He who has renounced the world must avoid both extremes. And what are the two extremes?

On the one hand whatever is connected with luxury by the delights of the sense, whatever is low, obscene, vulgar, contemptible and without benefit.

And on the other hand, whatever is connected with the mortification of the flesh, whatever is painful and contemptible and without profit.

And now, O Monks, here is the high truth of suffering –

Birth is suffering

Old Age is suffering

Sickness is suffering

Death is suffering.

And here, O Monks is the high truth of the cause of suffering: i

It is desire (Pali: tanha; literally “thirst”), which leads to rebirths in which a man is drawn to pleasures and to luxury; seeking his delights now here, now there. The desire to be and the desire not to be.

And here, O Monks, is the high truth of the cessation of suffering:

It is complete cessation of desire leaving not the slightest residue behind. It is abandonment, renunciation, liberation and non-attachment.

And now, O Monks, here is the high truth of the road leading to the extinction of suffering:

It is the eightfold path, which consists of:

True belief (I. e. intellectual understanding).

True resolution.

True word.

True action.

A true way of life.

True effort.

True consciousness.

True consciousness.

(Vinaya--Mahavagga I 10--23)

2500 years of Buddhism ed. P. Bapat.

Convinced now that the Buddha had realised the Truth, the five companions became his first disciples.

The spot where the first Sermon was delivered is in the very centre of the place of pilgrimage in the South-east. It is marked by a stupa, the famous Dhamekh Stupa, a massive brick structure, about forty metres high, circular and semi-ovoid. Hiuen Tsang the well-known Chinese pilgrim who travelled in India from 629 A. D. to 645 A. D. describes it in his memories under the name of the Ashoka-Stupa. It was probably built about the 3rd century B. C. by the Emperor Ashoka, "the Constantine of Buddhism".

Formerly there was another stupa too called Dharmarajika and popularly referred to as the Jagat Singh Stupa after Jagat Singh, the Diwan (Prime Minister) of the Rajah of Benares, Chaity Singh. The Rajah had it demolished in 1794 and the relics found in a little box, which it contained were thrown into the Ganges.

The faces of the Dhamekh Stupa date from different historical periods suggesting that it was restored on numerous occasions. It stands in the midst of important ruins of ancient temples and monasteries, the remains of a once flourishing religious centre.

During the reign of Emperor Ashoka, Sarnath became a famous Buddhist centre providing shelter for thousands of Monks. Among the many monuments that Ashoka built here, one of the famous columns bearing edicts remains standing to this day. It is a Sangha Bedhika, that is to say an edict threatening monks and nuns attempting to bring about a schism in their order with excommunication. Sarnath, at the height of its glory is described in detail in the memories of two well-known Chinese pilgrims: Fa-Hien (5 th century A. D.) and Hiuen-Tsang (7 th century A. D.). Until the twelfth century the town kept growing in importance and renown and numerous buildings and temples were constructed. One of the latest to be built was the “Temple of the Wheel of the Doctrine” which was constructed by order of Kumaradevi, one of the queens of the King Govinda Chandra of Kanauj (first half of the twelfth century). This we learn from an inscription discovered among the ruins of Sarnath, the work of a contemporary poet who sings the glories of the queen Kumaradevi—her piety, her beauty and so on. Among the many hyperbolic compliments the poet pays her is the following: “Her walk is as graceful as the elephant’s. I doubt very much whether our Parisian ladies would appreciate such praise!

Of all the glory of ancient Sarnath only the ruins remain today. The Damekh Stupa and Ashoka’s column alone stand almost intact. The top of the column has broken off and the fragment, a remarkable piece of sculpture, is now the central exhibit in the Sarnath Archaeological Museum. It is the famous seal of Ashoka, the emblem of India today – a chakra (the symbolic wheel) surmounted by four lions back to back.

After the twelfth century Hinduism once again became the dominant religion in India and Buddhism disappeared almost entirely from its native land. Sarnath sank into oblivion and its monuments crumbled away.

Then in 1891, an enthusiastic young Singhalese, Anagarika Dharmapala, founded the Maha-Bodhi Society in Colombo with the aim of working for the revival of Buddhism in its native land and restoring its holy places. Since then the society has grown into a powerful organisation with its centre in Calcutta and numerous branches all over India.

When Dharmapala came to Sarnath for the first time, it was a tiny village surrounded by a boar-infested jungle. Throwing himself wholeheartedly into the task of restoring this spot so sacred to the Buddhists, he got work started on the building of a temple which was not finally completed until 1931. This temple – the Mulaghadakuti Vihara is an elegant structure with a certain architectural beauty. The alter contains relics which were discovered at Taxila, in the North-west and at Nagarjunakonda and Mirpur-Khas, both in the south? Inside, the hall is decorated with beautiful painted murals, the work of a Japanese artist, representing scenes from the life of the Buddha.

By adding other buildings to this temple the Maha Bodhi Society has breathed new life into Sarnath. The town now possesses a religious school, a library, a free medical dispensary, a primary school, a college of education, and a large and comfortable Dharmashala (pilgrims’ hostel) has been built by the well-known Hindu philanthropist, Mr. Birla. The temple is surrounded by a very extensive park, in an enclosure of which a herd of deer roam free. Thus Sarnath continues to live up to its ancient name.

Today the town is inhabited by a group of monks – almost all Singhalese – under a superior who serves at the same time as the secretary of the Maha-Bodhi Society and is responsible for the maintenance of the holy place.

During the years when I lived in Benares, I frequently spent a few days in Sarnath. The monks would extend me a most cordial welcome, almost as though I were one of them and the superior, a man of great charm who I regard as a good friend, would exercise his ingenuity to find ways of making my stay as comfortable as possible.

CHAPTER III

BRINDAVAN

Brindavan: January 10, 1966.

Here I am again in this town regarded as holy above all other by the worshippers of Krishna.

It is a tiny little town with nothing of the imposing quality of Benares; nevertheless, from each of numerous visits, I have taken away with me something of the atmosphere of gentleness and love so characteristic of Brindavan.

For the Hindu the name alone evokes an aura of romance. The very dust of Brindavan is holy – like the water of the Ganges – for it has been trodden on by the God who came down to play a game with mankind, a game whose object was Divine Love.

More than five thousand years have passed since Krishna was born at Mathura, not far from Brindavan. At that time Mathura was a powerful kingdom governed by a cruel and tyrannical usurper by the name of Kamsa.

Motivated by political consideration he had given his sister Devaki in marriage to Vasudeva a prince of the legitimate royal line. After the marriage however, a sage had prophesied

that a son born of this union would kill his uncle and Kamsa, trembling for his life, had his sister cast into prison with the strictest orders that any son of hers should be put to death immediately. One by one a pitiless hand destroyed the sons of Devaki. But when a little boy of exceptional beauty – Krishna – was born, his father, Vasudeva, succeeded by a clever ruse, in having carried away in a basket of rushes to the neighbouring village of Brindavan. He replaced Krishna with a baby girl, who had just been born to a shepherd couple in Brindavan, Nanda and Yashoda and this couple accepted the little Krishna as their son.

All Krishna's infancy and some of his youth were spent in Brindavan. His miracles, his adventures, his radiant love, all these are related in detail in the Mahabharata where they fill thousands of pages. Vishnuists believe that, in a subtle form, Krishna continues to be present in Brindavan, playing his mysterious games with the shepherds and shepherdesses.

The first time I came to Brindavan – around 1951 – I was overflowing with the enthusiasm that one finds only in neophytes. Everything I saw was coloured by my imagination and interpreted in the light of the garden legends I had read and heard. Today age has restrained my romantic flights and experience has taught me that there is more joy in valuing things as they actually are than in clothing them in imaginary dreams which must sooner or later burst like bubbles and fade into nothingness.

The sacred dust of Brindavan now leaves me indifferent...except when the wind whips it up into suffocating clouds. The gardens of Brindavan, the banks of the Yamuna, the peacocks spreading their tails out in a fan, the beautiful dreamy countenances of the children which set you dreaming of Gopal (the child Krishna), the devotees with their languorous looks – all these certainly have their charm. But it is an exotic charm merely. It is impossible to adopt the mythology of a religion when one has not been born and brought up in it, which one has not absorbed into the marrow of one's bones. Any attempt at approximation is a mistake doomed to failure and must necessarily end, sooner or later, in religious bankruptcy. True, the personality of Krishna, especially as revealed in the Bhagavad Gita is fascinating, even to a western mind, and his teachings transcend the framework of races and religions; but they have to be understood and a man must know how to use them and absorb them into his own being.

This year, I had come to Brindavan neither as a pilgrim nor as a tourist, but simply to spend the three winter months between my spells in the Himalayas.

The ashram where I am staying is a magnificent spot. It is a great park, covered with thick, green bushes from which emerge a few of the giant trees that grow on this plain, such as margousiers and tamarinds. There are flowers everywhere because, for the orthodox Hindu, offerings of flowers and garlands are an important and indispensable part of the daily pujas (religious services). Various buildings are scattered over the park, little cottages hidden in the greenery and intended for sadhus (I am living in one of these) and more imposing constructions such as a building for visitors, the Satsangha Mandap (the hall where religious gatherings are held), temples dedicated to Chaitanya, Radha-Krishna, Rama and even to Shiva, kitchens and so on.

My cottage is the last one at the southern end of the garden, close by the enclosing wall. It is certainly the quietest spot in the ashram, which is quiet enough anyway. Sitting on the

verandha, even though less than five hundred meters away from the buzz and hum of a town, I feel I am out in the wilds, in a world of thick vegetation teeming with its own rich and—apart from an extremely rare cobra or scorpion – quite harmless animal life. Sometimes at sunset a hare may frolic before me. The peacocks, though free, live in the park with all the familiarity of courtyard creatures. From time to time the hen walks serenely down the path followed by her brood. Her plumage is on the dull side but the male is splendid: great almond eyes, a dainty hoop surmounting the little head, and plumage! What can one say about such exquisite colouring! And when he fans out his tail.....But that is something everybody knows. Unfortunately his voice is not in keeping with his plumage and his raucous cry jars even on a non-musical ear. I must confess, however, that he seems well versed in the rules of etiquette; for, in the evenings, when I am sitting on the verandha for the Sandhya (the evening meditation) and he happens to pass along the little path before the cottage, he will often climb with great dignity up the four or five steps leading to the verandah, pause before me, incline his head most charmingly, and then go off, majestic and serene. In Brindavan the peacock is considered sacred. Krishna is often depicted with a peacock feather in his hair.

But there are disturbers of the peace too –the monkeys swinging around on all sorts of expeditions. One day I happened to leave the door open while I was making my tea. A monkey shot past me like an arrow. Intrepid as a lancer of the light Brigade, he seized a bunch of bananas that I had left on a shelf and was out again in a flash before I had even time to react. Most of the Monkeys are chimpanzees. There is also a species called Maki, but these only very rarely approach human habitations. The chimpanzees live in a social group under a leader, a vigorous male who is generally the most daring of the band. Sometimes – but this is infrequent – they attack humans and their bite can be extremely serious. But the sight of stick or even, quite simply, of a resolute demeanour, is generally sufficient to send the bravest packing. The windows of all the houses in the ashram are barred to keep the monkeys out, but they pass their hands in through the bars, and pilfer anything within reach.

Bars however, though they may provide protection against monkeys, are quite ineffective against squirrels and sparrows. These little creatures have become my daily companions, charming but not very clean, and I have to sweep away their droppings every day.

The squirrels are like those in France, though smaller and marked by three white strips down the length of their backs which distinguish them from their French cousins. The origin of this peculiarity is related in a legend in the Ramayana. In order to mount an attack on his enemy, Ravana, had to set foot in Lanka (Ceylon). Rama had an immense bridge constructed from the Indian shore at Rameshwaram to the island. Not only did all the vast army of Rama – monkeys, bears and other animals – set themselves valiantly to the task, but other creatures too, both large and small, made their enthusiastic contribution. For Rama was beloved not only by men and gods, but by animals too. Among the ardent labourers were the squirrels. Their task was very simple; they rolled in the dust and then shook it off to fill the interstices between the stones of the bridge. But Hanuman, the great hero and worshipper of Rama set little value on this task, which he considered quite negligible and one of the squirrels received rough treatment at his hands. The squirrel came to Rama to complain and demanded that Hanuman should be punished. Recognising the justice of the cause of this humble devotee, the God incarnate gave order to console the squirrel, caressed him along the back with three fingers. The sacred touch of the avatar of Vishnu left three

white lines down the squirrel's back and these were transmitted like a badge of nobility to all his descendants.

India – in its village and little towns – has conserved much of that intimacy with the world of nature that characterises all primitive traditional societies. Gods, men and animal are not kept apart in watertight compartments. One aspect of this attitude is the worship of sacred animals so frequently misinterpreted by the west. It is a generally known fact that the cow is considered holy in India, but it is particularly so at Brindavan where vast structures called goshala have been specially fitted out for the accommodation of these creatures with all the consideration due to their elevated status. Not only in Brindavan, but in other Indian towns as well, there exist several organisations with no purpose other than the protection of the cow (gorakshas). Both sadhus and laymen are active propagandists in this field. In India the mere mention of the cow is still capable of rising passions to fever pitch, and a successful electoral campaign can be mounted on the platform of the need to save cows from slaughter; for to kill a cow is an act as horrible as matricide, and to save it from death is meritorious in an equal degree. A Hindu, even if he is neither a believer nor a vegetarian, will not eat the meat of the cow except under the most special circumstances, so that, if there is a need to protect these scared creatures it is chiefly from the sacrilegious hand of the Moslem for whom cows are included in the category of those “pure” animals, that he is permitted to eat.

I was once told the following story the authenticity of which I have every reason to believe. Its hero is a “good” sadhu, known and respected in his community, who devotes all his activity to propaganda for the protection of the cow. One day he came upon a Moslem leading some old cows along to the road to the slaughterhouse. As can be imagined, the sadhu's heart bled for these “mothers” in distress. “Can I leave these cows to be slaughtered without doing anything to help? What a dreadful crime! Dear God, what can I do? Ah! An idea!” And our sadhu hurried off to the nearest police station and there, in cold blood, brought a charge against the Moslem for having stolen his cows and run away with them. To disbelieve the word of a sadhu who, after all, is supposed to avoid even the littlest lie and to evince love for all creatures including Moslems would be unthinkable. And so the Moslem went to prison and the cows went free.....temporarily, at least, for I do not know the end of the story.

Of such incidents are our dreams woven.....

If you ask a Hindu why cows are held in such veneration he is likely to reply: “Because it is so written in our holy books.....because the sages affirm that it should be so.....” Or something else to the same effect. The fact is that, strange as it may seem to a western mind, this belief appears perfectly natural to the average Hindu. And this is, despite the fact that the sacredness of the cow is hardly mentioned in the Vedas and in the Upanishads, not at all. It would appear to be a popular belief of considerable antiquity for mention of it may be found in writings as early as the Ramayana of Valmiki. This epic poem tells of one of the ruses employed by a general of Ravana in his fight against the redoubtable armies of Rama. Quite simply, he surrounded his men in their advance by heard of cows. In this way Rama's army was completely paralysed for none dared shoot an arrow for fear of killing one of these sacred animal. Fortunately, however, Rama had in his possession a magic weapon which enabled him to have the herds of cattle swept away by the wind.

At a later epoch, about the eleventh century, the Moslem invaders of Mahmud Gaznavi used the same stratagem. This time, however, the Hindus had no Rama and no magic weapon and for the sake of the cow the battle was lost.

It may be that this belief in the holiness of the cow is a popular distortion of the legend of Kamadhenu. In the beginning of creation, we are told there emerged – among other creatures – from “the churning of the sea of milk” the cow Kamadhenu. Whoever possessed her and knew how to milk her could realise all his desires. In all probability Kamadhenu was intended to symbolise esoteric knowledge the attainment of which would confer omnipotence; to kill the sacred cow signified, perhaps the cutting of the line of transmission of esoteric tradition, a very grave fault.

But as so frequently happens, the thing symbolised has come to be confused with its concrete representation, and it is the cow of flesh and blood which has appropriated the sanctity of Kamadhenu, Divine Knowledge.

Certainly there are cows in plenty at Brindavan, for in addition to their sacred character; they play an important part in the Lila (divine play) of Krishna who passed his entire youth among cowherds. The odd thing is however, that it is very difficult indeed to obtain any cow’s milk in this same Brindavan. Here, as everywhere else in India, the milk generally consumed is buffalo milk. The buffalo, which seems less susceptible to tuberculosis than the cow, provides much larger quantities of milk and the milk itself is richer in protein and fat than cow’s milk. The disadvantage, however, is that it is not so easy to digest and is poor in vitamin A. Moreover, from the religious point of view it falls into the category of “tamasic” foods, that is to say foods that induce mental lethargy and indolence. It is excluded, on principle, from dishes prepared for religious services and offered to the gods, and those exercising spiritual discipline of any kind are also advised to exclude it from their diet.

As I included myself in this category, I undertook, on first arriving at Brindavan, the Herculean labour of obtaining half a litre of unadulterated cow’s milk for myself each day. It was indeed a Herculean labour; for the vast majority of Hindus have doubtless never even tasted pure cows’ milk. It is generally accepted that among the fraternity of Indian milkmen, adulteration is a tool of the trade. Most people in the towns are satisfied if they can obtain buffalo milk diluted in equal parts with water, for there are many other materials used in the adulteration of dairy products which are not quite as harmless.

And it was in the knowledge of all these facts that I embarked on my search for that pearl of great price – an honest milkman.

My first was Bhagavat Prasad, a little urchin of about ten with so angelic a countenance that you would have “granted him absolution without confession”. But already he had his business as a milkman at his fingertips. On the extra half-measures remarking in the most tender of tones: “To give a little extra to a sadhu is a meritorious deed. I don’t give so much even to the Rani”. (This was the queen of a little Himalayan state who happened to be a temporary guest at the ashram).

The strange thing was, however, that, transferred to my pot, the milk hardly reached the half-litre level. Naturally too, he had sworn to me that it was pure cow's milk I was getting but, unfortunately for him, I had become an expert in these matters. So the following morning I told him, quite gently, "Your milk, my friend, is ordinary buffalo milk half diluted with water, and it was 'real' cow's milk that I asked for".

He was not in the least put out however, by so minor a matter and calmly replied, "very well, in that case it will be fourteen annas the litre". But even at this higher price his "real" cow's milk did not turn out any better.

It was only after changing milkmen three or four times that I finally lighted upon my "pearl of great price", that rarest of creatures, not only in Brindavan but all over India, a milkman who provided me with absolutely real, undiluted, cow's milk.

For all this, Brindavan is the centre of Vishnuism, the religion of purity and of love, and men who are upright, honest and pure are certainly to be found. Brindavanis have a reputation loving fraud, not only because of the profit to be derived from it, but for the love of the art.....of defrauding! But I must say that, my dealings with milkmen apart, I have found hardly any evidence of this. When I go to market I find the trades people friendly, helpful and reasonable, and the prices they ask are not exaggerated.

Brindavan, January 30 th 1966.

For the first time in my numerous visits to Brindavan I have had a darshan with Yamunji; or, to put it in clearer language, I have been for a walk along the banks of the Yamuna, the most sacred river in India, after the Ganges.

The river banks are at a distance of about one kilometre from the centre of the town. Now, water is scarce in Brindavan. The town's people use well-water, which has a high salt content and is suitable only for washing. Very few wells contain sweet drinking water. The water of the Yamuna, on the other hand, is excellent, and one wonders why the town and its temples were not constructed on the river itself, especially as the river is the locale of so many of the exploits recounted in the legends of Krishna. This apparent anomaly may be explained by a local tradition that in the passage of time the Yamuna has deviated considerably from its original course. Another tradition – or legend – has it that the spot on the river banks where Krishna and his friends pastured their herds is the precise spot upon which our ashram has been built on the road to Mathura. This tradition was corroborated by the vision of a great sage. An annual fair, it appears, used to be held on this same spot before the construction of the ashram.

The river bed is very wide but the water runs in a relatively narrow channel. The Yamuna does not have the majesty of the Ganges at Benares, but its graceful meanderings, the vast plain on the opposite bank stretching out to the horizon, and the almost permanently blue sky all combine

to create a delightful feeling of peace and gentleness. Ghats (stairways descending to the river) have been built along the bank on which Brindavan is situated. There are a number of little temples and also rooms – cells rather, for they have neither doors nor windows – in which sadhus make their dwelling.

The temples at Brindavan are numerous. The temple of Govindaji (one of the names of Krishna) stands on the road leading to the river. For a long time it was the most important of the temples. But today this position is held by the temple of Banki–Bihari (another of Krishna’s names) that has won the favour of devotees and pilgrims. The temple of Govindaji is a reconstruction, for the first temple was destroyed, among many other, during the fifteenth century by Aurangzeb, the bigoted and iconoclastic Moghul emperor. At the time Aurangzeb had his capital at Agra, about fifty kilometres from Brindavan. The lofty towers of the ancient temple dominated the plain and every evening Aurangzeb saw its lights. Enraged by this symbol of Hinduism which seemed to mock him, he sent out a special expedition with orders to erase the temple to the ground. In addition to these two main temples there are several others, all bearing one of the names of Krishna.

I must say that I have consistently refrained from entering the Hindu temples or even from visiting them. This is due to no aversion or hostility on my part towards the gods of India and their rituals. Far from it. I have considerable admiration for the quasi –scientific manner in which the Hindus have elaborated their cult of idols. Nor is it due to fear that I may find myself in a situation analogous to that of the devil who fell into a font of holy water. True, the sacred precincts of most temples are forbidden to the non-Hindu, but compromises with Heaven are always possible, and in my sadhu’s robe I could easily have gained admittance had I so wished. Moreover, the law in modern India compels most temples to permit free entry. The reason for my restraint is quite otherwise. The fact is that the orthodox Hindu, even if not quite consciously, feels that his sanctuary is polluted by the presence of a westerner and to violate religious feeling of any kind whatever is something which I strongly disapprove.

It may be remarkable too, that the Brahmin belief that the presence of a stranger creates a disturbance of some sort in the atmosphere of their temples, is not entirely mistaken. Like so many other mental attitudes of the Hindu this is difficult for a westerner to understand, for such understanding requires knowledge of a psychological texture fundamentally different from our own.

As I have already pointed out, the Hindu is much closer to natural sources than we are. The “umbilical cord” connecting his thought to the Collective Unconscious has not been cut, as it has in the case of most western minds.

The western mind is centred in a powerful intellect, a clear, logical consciousness bent on shaping the world around it in its own image. By contrast, primitive man in a traditional civilisation, does not seek to dominate nature or to wrest her secrets from her. For him the highest art lies in making his own life vibrate in harmony with the whole complex of the cosmic life, like the movement of a wave forming an organic part of the great regular movement of the ocean. On the lower levels such an attitude can produce herdmen, “dumb driven cattle”; but on the higher echelons of development the wave becomes a centre of consciousness open to cosmic forces and to intuitive perceptions, which transcend logical thinking. When the ordinary Hindu goes into a

temple he “feels” something as a direct perception which he cannot formulate in words because the discursive aspect of his mind is not very highly developed. This “something” is a combination of inner peace, and of the joy of the harmony which is experienced (in degrees varying with the individual) when contact is made, even if only for a split seconds, with the cosmic life. The mechanism through which this contact is achieved is complex. The believing Hindu comes to his temple in a receptive state of mind. This is spontaneous and required no conscious effort for, ever since childhood, his mind has been seeped in ideas and beliefs about the idol before which he has come to prostrate himself. The temple too is generally very old, or has been constructed on an ancient site and is generally surrounded by an aura of legend and miracle. This atmosphere of sanctity going back to the time of its construction is kept alive by the daily puja (religious service), which in most cases has been performed uninterruptedly over centuries. The puja is an act of ceremonial magic, which must be performed by a qualified Brahmin. Then again the religious fervour of numerous worshippers serves to increase even further the sense of sanctity, so that it is hardly surprising that in certain temples the powerful religious atmosphere is almost palpable. The Hindu who comes to visit adds his own little drop to this sea of religious feeling for the temple is part of an entire natural pattern into which he integrates harmoniously. The westerner however, even though he may have strong sympathies for Hinduism, will automatically bring a note of discord into the pattern. Everything he hears and sees will rouse within him associations and ideas very different from those of the Hindu. Thus, for instance, the deafening clang of the gongs and cymbals of the arati (the conclusion of the religious service) which, for the Hindu marks the climactic moment of religious fervour will, to the westerner, be only an aggravating din. The sight of the idol will be irrelevant to what the image is supposed to represent. And there will be many other disturbing factors, too, stemming from the confrontation between two basically different cultures.

All this, the average Hindu instinctively knows. Moreover, no matter how uncultured he may be, he accepts as self-evident truth that it is not the surface level of our minds that counts, that we are in fact worth what our Samskaras are worth. The Samskaras are the impressions of experiences, action, beliefs and so on, that lie latent in our Unconscious like innumerable seeds, ready to germinate and bear fruit immediately, when favourable circumstances arise.. These impressions derive not only from our life since birth, but also from the numerous, previous lives, which we have lived.

“You do not have the Samskaras which would enable you to harmonise with Hindu ritual”. This is the simple explanation which would be given by a cultivated Hindu.

With the coming of March it begins to be hot in Brindavan. The festival of Holi, which resembles our carnival in some ways, is celebrated with special splendour here. So much the worse for me that I shall miss the occasion. But the invigorating air of the Himalayan peaks exerts a stronger pull.

CHAPTER IV

AN IDEAL HERMITAGE