

ANANDAMAYI MA

In March there arise some difficulties with her visa papers. They are not the first ones but this time she may be forced to leave India and she feels that the time for that has not come yet. Her friend Vimala invites her to her home in Rajasthan. Therefore she leaves Anandashram, meets Vimala in Udaipur and together they travel to New Delhi to make the necessary arrangements. Her visa is renewed after a long waiting period but this eliminates all difficulties for the following years.

While in Delhi, Vimala brings her to her brother's home in Dehra-Dun in the Himalayas. They stay there for a few days and learn that Anandamayi Ma is there too.

One afternoon they go to the *Ashram* and find many people in the courtyard of a big white house flooded with sunlight and heat. A multi-coloured *pandal* is spread over in the middle of the yard to provide some shade. The floor is covered with carpets and a dense multitude is crowded together and overflows beneath the verandah of the house. A man sits in a corner, under a canopy decorated by many flowers. He reads in Hindi explaining the *Bhagavata*, the life of Sri Krishna. The reading lasts seven days at the rate of approximately seven hours per day and it is considered to be very favourable for the spiritual development of those attending it. It seems that the man reads well and that his comments are full of humour, for the people are very attentive and laugh heartily from time to time. Some girls are serving cool water to the thirsty ones. People come in and sit down, others leave. Everything evolves and at the same time remains static, in great and serene peace.

She sits with Vimala in the midst of the crowd and stays until the end of the reading, tranquil and peaceful, without understanding a word of what is being said nor why the people laugh. Some time later, Anandamayi Ma

also comes to sit under the verandah where she stays until the end of the reading.

She looks at Ma while *Ramnam* chants in her sweetly. She looks at Ma and it is as if she were with Papa. There is no difference, no indeed, no difference at all. *Ramnam* chants sweetly, sweetly. She looks at Ma and then says mentally as if to herself: "Papa, Papa, Papa". At this, Ma looks in her direction and smiles. That is all.

That is all. When the reading is over she gets up with Vimala and like everyone else she goes to prostrate herself before Ma, placing some flowers at her feet and then they leave.

That is all. But it makes her come back alone in the days that follow, for Vimala cannot accompany her as she has to return to Delhi before her. Then it makes her wish to stay with Ma for some time, and since Ma leaves Dehra-Dun to spend the months of May and June at Almora, she decides to go too.

One beautiful afternoon, warm and sunny, she steps from the bus onto the Almora station together with an Indian family she has met on the way there. They too are going to "Patel Devi", Anandamayi Ma's *Ashram*. Through them she learns that May is the month of Ma's birthday celebration and that there will be many people coming from very far in India. This particular family is from Poona.

They walk briskly together the two miles from the bus station to the *Ashram*. Nepalese porters carry their luggage since there are neither taxis nor rikshaws nor any means of transportation at Almora, which is built on a ridge. There are only paths going up and down or steps to shorten the way. Everyone is happy and the walk relaxes the children after the long journey by train and bus. She is happy too. Nevertheless, she is haunted by a sort of anxiety as if she could foresee what awaits her. And yet she has done what

was necessary. Before leaving Dehra-Dun, she has asked Swami Paramananda permission to come to Almora. He is Ma's right hand, he follows her everywhere Ma decides to go and takes care of everything. He has answered yes, adding that she should inform him in advance about the date of her arrival so that he may provide lodging for her. She has written five days in advance giving the date of her arrival as was agreed. What else could she have done? She doesn't know and yet she feels that things will not be easy.

Finally they arrive at the *Ashram* that sits at the roadside. There is a beautiful deep valley on the slopes of which the *Ashram* is built on different terraced levels. A little below and close to a spring there is a small white temple with a splendid dark green tree standing next to it. All around, bare fields and pebbles. This is "Patel Devi". She follows the family and enters. A Brahmin, all dressed in white, comes toward them and warmly welcomes the Indians whom he already knows but gives her a glance of mistrust. He explains that Ma is not there since she has gone for two days higher up in the mountain where she has been invited, together with Swami Paramananda and some other people, to visit two sites. "But," he adds. "I will take you to the house where your place has been reserved." Then turning to her. "There is no room for you." It is categorical and clear. She tries to explain that Swamiji has given her permission in Dehra-Dun, and that she has written announcing her arrival today as was agreed. "Swamiji has given no orders. There is no place for you."

Where can she go? She is slightly discouraged and at the same time she laughs to herself for she had expected this. "Everything that happens is for the best." Papa used to say. It is certainly true but that does not take away her worry. Where to go? Mechanically she follows the Brahmin, the family and the Nepalese porters who walk towards a house some fifteen minutes from the *Ashram* where the family will be accommodated. The house is entirely empty

and she notices that there is ample space for her too. Her new friends are ready to welcome her at least for a night. Tomorrow will take care of itself. She repeats her request to the Brahmin but he remains very hostile, insisting that he has no orders from Swamiji and that there is no place for her. And he asks her to go back to Almora where she can find a room at the Ambassadors' hotel.

Going to a hotel is not at all convenient, for she must face a new difficulty: she has only thirty rupees left in her pocket. She has recently received some money from France but it is in a bank in Udaipur where she stayed only one day. She had thought that she would be back there with Vimala for a month after finishing the arrangements in Delhi. Things having turned out differently due to Ma's presence; she wrote immediately to the bank in Udaipur to transfer the amount to Almora. But only God knows how long this will take! She could wait at the *Ashram* without worrying but what can one do in a hotel with only thirty rupees? She feels lost. Seeing the Brahmin's attitude, the Indian family, so friendly until now, also becomes suspicious and they do nothing to help her. She fully realizes that she has to go to the Ambassadors' hotel, that there is no other solution.

Again it is as if she were laughing inwardly. The *lila* is certainly very good and she can almost see Papa laughing at what is happening. She walks back the two miles with the Nepalese porter carrying her suitcase and finds a room for five rupees a night without any trouble. That is good enough. With Ma's and Swamiji's return everything will be different no doubt.

Two days pass. She goes to the *Ashram* twice a day seeking information, then she wanders around in the beautiful mountain. She takes her breakfast and afternoon tea at the hotel, coming back at about two or three in the afternoon, the inkeeper can easily think that she eats lunch at the *Ashram*. In fact she eats absolutely nothing.

It is the same at night; she stays for the *kirtan* and the fifteen minutes of silence and returns to the hotel at ten, when everything is closed and dark. No meal either. This way she can save and have the room for one or two more days. At the same time, she walks eight to ten miles per day between the hotel and the *Ashram* going back and forth twice a day, plus a walk in the forest to pass time. But all is well. The force in her, that force that guides her and tells her to stay with Ma, sustains her and prevents her from really seeing how precarious this situation is, in the midst of indifferent, even hostile strangers. She sits in the forest and chants *Ramnam*.

Ma returns two days later; but Swamiji is not to be found. She is under the impression that he avoids meeting her. Thus she must wait one more day, but that very day during her walk she meets Parvati Devi, an Indian teacher in Nainital who has come to the *Ashram* for Anandamayi Ma's birthday celebration. She has been given a room in a big house where, according to her, there is ample space and she thinks Swamiji will be able to accommodate her too there. That will be seen tomorrow. The same day she comes upon Atmananda whom she had met in Dehra-Dun. She is Austrian-born, naturalized Indian and she has been living with Ma for many long years. Atmananda explains to her the problems caused by the orthodoxy of the Hindus surrounding Ma and the consequent complications faced by the foreigners who are considered "outcasts" that is, "untouchables". This situation has been aggravated lately by the stupid attitude of a young European who refuses to accept the conditions, yet insists on coming, causing endless problems. Thus it has been decided that no foreigner will be accepted in Almora. Neither lodgings nor food is provided for them, not even separately, away from the kitchen as it had been done until now. All is clear now and it explains the reception she has had but it does not help her in any way. Atmananda herself, disciple of Ma and member of the *Ashram*, has been lodged outside, in a

private home and must do her own cooking. Foreigners are only allowed to come to the Ashram for Ma's *darshan*, when she is outside under the verandah and to the public sessions, talks, lectures and *kirtans*.

Finally the following day she crosses Swamiji in the courtyard and reminds him of his promise to lodge her. He hesitates, goes to find Ma in the room, does other things, talks with different people about other things and welcomes the newcomers. She sits calmly in the courtyard chanting *Ramnam*, waiting, listening to the reading of the *Gita* or to the *kirtan*. Time goes by. Not for a minute does she believe that she may have to leave. Finally Swamiji comes back to her and tells her that he can give her a room with Parvati Devi, but that she will have to cook her own meals since the *Ashram* cannot take care of foreigners. How wonderful! Then she can stay with Ma! She could dance with joy! But she simply answers Swamiji saying that this suits her perfectly and thanks him heartily.

That same evening she is in her new room, next to Parvati Devi's. After paying the hotel, buying two small aluminium pots, a charcoal burning stove and some food, she has just ten rupees left.

An extraordinary life begins for her then. Materially speaking everything is insufficient and rudimentary. Knowing her difficulties and not being rich either, Atmananda gives her ten more rupees. She lives on these twenty rupees for almost a month. She eats little, scanty meals which take very little time to cook. And yet most of the time she forgets her hunger although her body becomes weak.

There are various incidents with Parvati Devi who is capricious and changes her attitude toward her many times. It is very cold at night and she has only one blanket, thus her sleep too is insufficient. With more and more people coming, she is gradually pushed into a small room in the

basement of the house that must have served as a bathroom, with all the contempt and arrogance that Brahmins have when talking to an untouchable. In the end she finds that she is much better off this way since the basement is less cold and she is left in peace there.

Water is very scarce. It must be bought from someone who brings it from far away. How does she manage to have a white clean sari everyday? *Ramnam* accomplishes amazing things when one is always in harmony with it.

Not once does she think of stopping this foolishness and leaving. "Everything that happens is for the best," Papa used to say. He is so present within her and *Ramnam* chants so sweetly and constantly in her that she accepts everything without criticism.

She goes to the *Ashram* at about ten in the morning. This is the time when one can hope to see Ma during the reading of the Gita and the *kirtan*. At noon, when the meal is served in the *Ashram*, she climbs the mountain to prepare her own. It is approximately a twenty minutes climb in the hot sun. After that she comes back down at four or five o'clock to stay until ten at night. Then she climbs back up again in the dark, without an electric torch, because she cannot buy new batteries, and barefoot because her sandals are ruined by such ground and she cannot buy new ones. The path is very rocky and at the end of the ascent the road passes behind the houses of "Chota Bazar", the area's market. This part of the road is also used as latrine by the people around. She walks barefoot in the middle of it unable to see anything in the dark and yet she never steps on anything dirty. How is this possible? Is there an eye on the sole of her feet? Or do they guide themselves instinctively? She accepts this too as a very normal thing and interprets it as Papa's wish to make her walk barefoot from now on. She learns that the sandals are only necessary because one thinks so.

She cannot tell the time. The crystal on her watch had come off and she had left it to be repaired in Udaipur, thinking to pick it up upon returning. But since she did not return, she does not have a watch either. She learns to use the sun. It is not perfectly exact but enough to help her arrive at the *Ashram* on time. And time itself loses importance. It, too, is important because one thinks it is. *Ramnam* guides her, what does she care about social convention and customs? She gets there on time to find Ma already sitting under the verandah or arriving immediately after her. That is all she wants; to sit there quietly in her presence. She has never talked to Ma, and does not know what she could tell her or ask her. It is exactly as with Papa. In her presence all questions disappear or seem perfectly useless. It is as if she had known from the start that whatever Ma has to teach her is far beyond words.

Nevertheless, the ego still does not let go. It is offended with the situation and she suffers. It is as if she were a dog that is chased out of the house but always comes back. She is humiliated by the people's attitude, their contempt and indifference toward her, the "Go away from this place" manner. A dog, that is exactly what it is like, a dog that goes away with his tail between the legs when the master chases him! Even Ma, after the first two days, has stopped looking at her. When she approaches to do *namaskar*, Ma immediately turns her head in another direction. Or, if she is standing, she turns her back and goes somewhere else. Everything conspires to isolate her, to humiliate her, to chase her away. She thinks in utter despair: "It's as if I didn't exist!" Thus, for many days, she suffers yet she accepts, and, like a dog, she always comes back. And the "Master" is great, greater than the rule He made. He gives her heaven, earth. "I" does not exist and the ego disappears.

Then Ma's eyes are so intensely luminous when they rest on her! One day Ma answers to someone who

reproaches her for having gone out with a cold and a fever; "I have come to see God in man." Ma's glance is like a steel blade that penetrates deep in her to cut the roots of the ego. She chants *Ramnam* even in the midst of the crowded *Ashram*. But not aloud and not mentally either. It is something between the two. And one evening at the hour of relaxation before *Arati*, Ma comes very close to listen to it. And she knows that Ma can hear quite well what no one else hears. There is so much love in *Ramnam*, it is everything! Oh wonder! Ma's presence makes it so easy to repeat and there is so much, so much sweetness in it. She tells Papa within her: "Ma is so great, Papa, Ma is so great that she can make me attain the realization of God."

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And the days go by. More and more people are coming and the programme becomes increasingly crowded. Many *Mahatmas* come to give talks, always in Hindi or Bengali. She never understands anything but that does not bother her, she has no wish to know. Only from time to time, when Ma speaks in answer to questions, she asks *Atmananda* to translate right away. That is all that interests her, what Ma has to say. It is as if Papa were continuing, there is no contradiction between them.

She sits in suffocating heat in the middle of dense, at times ill-smelling crowd and she never grows impatient. Suddenly a word known to her, uttered by the lecturer like *Prema* or *Ananya Bhakti* plunges her in deep meditation. And yet she remains very conscious, very present to all her surroundings.

Every morning from nine to eleven there is a session of *Rasa Lila* directed by Hari Baba, a great devotee of Sri Krishna and Ma's follower for many years. Thus a scene from the life of Sri Krishna is represented every day in a dramatic play both spoken and chanted. It is very beautiful and harmonious and it releases great spiritual force. The actors are children and very young people

trained by Hari Baba. One day a young boy about ten to twelve years old, plays the role of the child Krishna going to school and playing tricks with other boys. The child-actor is so natural and true, the setting so poetic, that the crowd does not stir but listens intently. The crowd is made up of regular *Ashram* attendants but there are also people from villages of the surrounding mountains who come to the sessions with their children every day. There is never enough space and people are squeezed closer and closer together like sardines in a tin. Thus packed together, moving before the end of the session is out of the question. Bodies are boxed into one another, at least on the women's side, like a human conglomerate. It is shaken by spasms, by children kicking, running sweat and urine flowing on the ground, and occasional injunctions to keep quiet that are noisier than all the rest.

That day she is sitting on the edge of the verandah, squeezed between a silent woman and another one with an unbearable baby in her arms. Behind her there is another line of women squatting down Indian-fashion, with the knees pressing against or rather boxing in the back on the one in front. Suddenly she feels a warm liquid running on her back. The woman behind her has not been able to hold it any longer and cannot leave. She too cannot move from there, she turns toward the woman but does not say anything. What could she say after all? She is not angry, she is not even disgusted. All this is part of the *lila* being played, in which she is immersed.

Very often, Ma comes out in the middle of this crowd after the sessions. At such times it is like an onslaught, like a tidal wave with everyone wanting to do *namaskar* to her at the same time. Usually Ma has fruits to distribute and throws them over the people's head. Then the confusion is general and unbelievable with everyone relentlessly trying to grab Ma's *prasad*. Not being used to fight this way, she never tries to run after the fruit. But neither can she escape the crowds; thus she receives many a blow. Suddenly

Ma looks in her direction and moves quickly toward her followed by the crowd. Ma throws some prunes to her and others grab them in mid-air. She feels frustrated. Why? It is only a play after all. Ego. Ego, how you cling to us! She laughs then and returns to her indifference or to the sweetness of *Ramnam*. All the same her empty stomach tells her that she really would have enjoyed the fruits.

The *kirtan* of Hari Baba takes place in the evenings between seven and eight. The music is strange, seeming to lack harmony and Hari Baba, standing in the middle of his disciples, beats on the bottom of a copper saucepan with such a prodigious strength that the noise echoes painfully in one's head. It is a wonder how an eighty years old man usually so sweet, can accomplish such a feat for an hour, morning and evening. At first she does not like it but this does not stop her from coming. Then, after two days she understands that this amazing chanting of different *mantras* and Divine Names accompanied by the noise of cymbals and the saucepan has the capacity to still the mind, opening it to the divine power.

Then Ma appears under the verandah in front of her room. Sometimes she sits, sometimes she remains standing and seems so great, so luminous! Now Hari Baba speaks with a soft and tranquil voice. What does he say? He speaks in Hindi. Then follows the fifteen minutes' silence which is observed simultaneously in all of Ma's *Ashrams*. The sound of a gong is heard, the lights go out and the din ceases. Ma stands under the verandah, the multitude meditates sitting on the ground. There is a deep silence. From time to time one can hear Sri Krishna's flute, far away on the road. It only plays a few pure, clear notes. Again the gong is sounded, the lights come back on, a young woman intones a sweet pure chant. Ma is still there standing. Finally when Ma re-enters her room and they begin to serve the evening meal in the Ashram, she leaves slowly, regretfully, almost always alone. But, more and more often

it happens that she remains sitting in a corner outside, near Ma's room, chanting *Ramnam* sweetly, sweetly before she goes to her room.

The activities increase. One night there is a women's *kirtan* during which no one is supposed to sleep. At three in the morning Ma comes in and tests the patience of a woman by making her re-arrange the greater part of the photos which decorate the walls of the hall where they are gathered.

Afterward the devotees organize a fifteen-day, twenty-four hours a day continuous *japa* on behalf of Ma's health. Those who sign up do it for an hour or more, at their choice, regularly each successive day in order to avoid any interruption. Each one can repeat the *Mantra* with which he has been initiated. All Divine Names are equally good and Ma does not favour any one as opposed to another. It depends on each one.

Another time the men undertake the reading of the *Ramayana*¹ during a twenty-four hours period. This ends at six in the morning in the presence of Ma and with a distribution of *prasad*.

Finally the day of Ma's birthday arrives. The celebration takes place at three in the morning, the hour of her birth. A great *puja* is prepared. Many people decide not to sleep at all or else to simply lay down on the ground under the verandah or in the hall. She, too, thinks that it is not worthwhile to climb up at ten only to return at two in the morning. She stays sitting on a carpet in a corner of the verandah and begins to chant *Ramnam*.

She has not eaten anything, not even taken her usual glass of milk but she does not need it. On the other side of the courtyard she can see and hear people eating their

1. The *Ramayana*: The story of the life of King Sri Rama, a divine incarnation. It is one of the oldest Indian epics.

meal. She has no desires. Some of them come to talk to her in a friendly manner when they have finished. But gradually everything becomes silent, only the preparations for the *puja* continue in the middle of the courtyard. She will be able to attend since it will be held outside, at the far end of the courtyard where a bed for Ma has been installed under a shelter.

Long before the hour everyone starts to move seeking a good place in the centre. Very quickly, on the women's side, they are squeezed together like sardines. Legs and back hurt and it is impossible to move. The night is cold and in spite of the carpet the stones upon which they sit are neither warm nor soft for the aching bodies. It does not matter.

Finally Ma comes to lay down on the bed and almost immediately falls into a state of total immobility from which she will only come out three hours later at the end of the *puja*. People say that she is in *samadhi*. The *kirtan* begins and then the *puja* is celebrated with all the prescribed rites by a specially authorized priest. When he has finished, everyone rises, goes to place flowers at Ma's feet and bow down low in front of her. Her body is rigid and makes her think of Papa's body after his *mahasamadhi*. The difference between life and death is so small! Yet the "presence" has been prodigious during these three hours. What has happened? Who will ever know? She was sitting there in the middle of the crowd, looking at Ma and pain, cold, hunger, everything had disappeared. And now she is there in front of Ma, bare and empty, without a worry, almost without thought, receiving, like everyone, the *prasad* of fruits and sweets wrapped in a knotted handkerchief. It is as if everything had been erased or everything had been opened. There are no more problems, no more difficulties, just an extraordinary peaceful tranquillity.

She notices her *Guru Bhai*, Navnit Parekh, faithful devotee of Swami Ramdas who has a property in the mountain fourteen miles from Almora and has also come for Ma's birthday. She goes to greet him and chats with him a little. And then, as naturally as anything, without even thinking, she explains to him that her money is at a standstill in Udaipur and asks him to lend her fifty rupees in the meantime. He is happy to be able to help her and gives them to her immediately. How simple it is! There is no problem and money in reality has no meaning. And yet even yesterday, she would have preferred to die of hunger rather than ask. Now it seems as if it were not even her asking. An action of asking and answering came spontaneously. Oh! Papa! *Jai Jai Ram!*

She leaves him to climb back to her room, meets Atmananda, exchanges a word with her and during that time, one of Ma's *Brahmachari* girls¹ arrives carrying some fruits and sweets to give to her. Another wonder! Why this gift for the "untouchable"? The young girl smiles and a joy rises and grows, grows, a joy... The joy of the unity of everything.

Now she has wings on her feet to climb quickly up the hill. She eats a fruit. Hunger returns and when she reaches the top she has eaten almost everything. But the joy, the joy is there, joy and love. Oh wonder!

The following month is totally different. Apparently nothing has changed. The conditions of life in the *Ashram* are the same, the orthodox rules are the same, people have the same faces and the *Ashram* is still where it was. Nevertheless everything is different because her vision has been opened, transformed. Now it transcends the physical sight and she sees everything equally. One day she discovers that the inside has become like the outside, that there is a state

1. *Brahmachari* girls: Girls who have made the vow of celibacy, have dedicated themselves to a spiritual life and follow wherever she goes.

beyond happiness and sorrow, a state in which to have or not to have money, to eat or not to eat, to be humiliated or accepted with open arms, to be here or there, all that no longer has meaning. In such a state everything that is must be, is good and a source of great bliss. This is surely *Ananda*, the state of absolute felicity, the divine state. Thus, it has been necessary that she feels like a chased dog, despised in an *Ashram* of orthodox Hindus, for her to know that there are no rules — *Ramnam* is her only rule — for her to know that there are no temples, *Ramnam* is everywhere. All the temples, all the churches and the whole world are *Ramnam's* home! Wonderful, wonderful joy! Happiness and love without limit!

She laughs. It is an amazing freedom and all her conflicts fall away. All things happen by themselves.

Then, everything falls into place. Her living conditions are better and one day her money arrives from Udaipur when she no longer expected it. That day she buys a kilo of a kind of sweet, Almora's speciality, to give to Ma. When she arrives at the *Ashram* that afternoon, there is a large crowd; yet Ma is nowhere to be seen; she is in the room receiving the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission behind closed doors. Everyone waits more or less calmly and everybody is talking. Ma appears at the door twice but only for a second. Just two or three people are able to approach and give her their offering or say a few words. She, too, tries each time, carrying her package of sweets but the crowd is too dense and Ma re-enters the room. Finally the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission leave. Ma walks with them under the verandah. The crowd does not move this time. Miracle! Ma is all alone very close to her. The crowd seems to have faded away. She gives Ma her parcel and bows down at her feet. Ma opens it quickly, almost feverishly, with the joy of a child who has been given candy. She exclaims joyously and starts talking volubly, almost dancing with joy while she distributes the

contents of the box among those around her. Someone translates to her that Ma is very happy for she had nothing to give to the Swamis and she has guessed exactly what kind of sweets Ma wanted. Then Ma sends Atmananda running after the Swamis to give them what is left in the box. Ma continues to talk copiously, then comes toward her, gives her a slap on the shoulder and laughs while she dances with joy. As for her, she understands nothing. She is stupefied watching Ma act and lets things happen. The people around her do not understand any better and are dumb with surprise or else they translate contradictory things. But Ma's joy is so contagious that nothing can resist it and it is a very sweet bliss. Now she feels in complete and total union.

Afterward, each time she goes to the bazaar she buys a kilo of fruits, usually mangoes, to give to Ma. From then on, no matter how great the crowd, she has no difficulty. Ma sees her from very far and comes to her or else she is able to approach her very easily. Ma does not take the package offered to her. Rather she takes one fruit and gives it to her first, then, fruit by fruit, she distributes them around until the package, she has been allowed to hold all this time, is empty. It is like a game and she laughs with Ma, who moves to and fro making one happy, disappointing another. It is like a game that they play together. Oh joy! oh! mysterious union... so sweet!

As the days go by the devotees gradually depart and the crowd is less dense. Also the activities are fewer and the *Mahatma's* talks cease altogether. Nothing is left but the ordinary day's programme: the reading of the Gita, the kirtan and the evening silence. And one day Ma too leaves for another town.

The amazing experience has ended. She never thinks of following Ma. It is as if Ma were telling her that this is not necessary. She has a deep feeling of plenitude and *Ananda* stays with her.