

Thoughts from the Himalayas

*Conversations With Swami Nirgunananda
Collected by Claire Landais*

Dhaulchina, Himalayas, April 2002

The following booklet consists of conversations between Swami Nirgunananda and Claire Landais. Claire, from Paris, came to Dhaulchina, Ma Anandamayi's hermitage in the Kumaon Himalayas above Almora at an altitude of 7000 feet, in April 2002 and stayed a full month here. During her long discussions with Swamiji she took down notes in French.

She then sent it to me in Dhaulchina for personal revision by Swamiji who does not know French. I translated her notes into English. As Claire noted down only what Swamiji said without mentioning the context at some points sequences were lost. However, Swami Nirgunananda tried to recollect those contexts and gave the present shape to the exchanges he had with Claire.

I hope that this booklet will be useful for English speaking devotees of Ma, be they in Europe, America or India itself. They can have access to this text through the paper version or Ma's website on Internet.

Jacques Vigne

Dhaulchina Hermitage

Q. Were you entrusted with any specific duties while with Ma?

A. From the very first day of my stay with Ma I was entrusted with writing replies to letters from her devotees. There were thousands of letters and without any exception all those letters contained questions relating to spiritual and worldly matters. I had to read the letters, make a summary, ask for the replies from Ma and write back to the respective devotees. People from different walks of life in society wrote to Ma about their problems and doubts and prayed for the solutions.

Q. Were they satisfied with her answers?

A. In my opinion, yes. My experiences are that nobody wrote back to her about the same problems. In this connection, I remember a saying of Ma, 'This body does not answer your questions. The question is yours and the answer is yours. This comes out of this body's mouth only.'

Q. What is the spiritual aim of our life?

A. The spiritual aim of our life, our duty too, is to be perpetually happy. Man's life started with a note of unhappiness. Why does a new born baby cry? Because it feels unhappy to face an unknown world around. It feels insecure. Maybe it wants back the security it enjoyed in its mother's womb. This sense of insecurity and unhappiness prevails all throughout its life.

Q. How can one make others happy?

A. Make yourself happy first. Your happiness will permeate others. You can give money to a beggar only if you have it. Only love can make others happy. They say, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.' First feel the love for yourself.

Q. Is it not a selfish attitude?

A. How can you be 'selfish' without knowing the Self? How can you love yourself without knowing the Self? Look at those rhododendrons (Dhaulchina area is full of blossoming rhododendron trees. The sight of the trees during February, March and April is magnificent.) Do you think they are in bloom for you? No, they care not for you still you

feel happy to look at them. One thing should always be remembered that your happiness should not be at the cost of anybody's pain.

Q. What is the difference between spiritual and non spiritual activity?

A. Apparently though it may appear so, in fact there is no difference. What is considered to be a spiritual activity for a particular religion may not be so in the eyes of other religions. The difference lies in the way we accomplish and look at these.

Q. Can art be considered as spiritual activity?

A. Yes, of course it is a spiritual activity. The artist by the way of painting expresses and establishes the link between the world within and outside him. He does it for his own pleasure and we enjoy it.

Q. How about the person who does not love himself or love his own image?

A. People may say that they do not love their own image or that they do not love themselves. O.K., people may not like their own image, but they love themselves. When any body does not love something or somebody at the back of his mind he has some alternatives to love. When Ma left her body, I wanted to commit suicide because Ma was no more physically with me; it was because I loved myself that I wanted Ma with me!

Q: How can I live without Ma?

A. By loving the Self. The purpose of life is to know oneself, to enter into oneself. Generally, one always wants to know more about people one loves and ignores the very Self. Someone asked Ma, "Ma, do you love us as much as we love you?" "You love me because I love you", Ma answered. "You can't imagine the love I have for you!" Ma's love starts where our imagination stops. On some other occasions, Ma said, "To love Ma means to love oneself." There is a simple fact which we always ignore that at no point of time we are without love. My memories are parts of my very existence. So long as Ma is in my memory I am never without her.

Q. To you, who is Ma?

A. One day during *satsang* someone asked, "Ma, who are you?" I was quite happy because it was my question as well; maybe, it was the question of everyone present there at that time. She answered, "What you think, that I am." My problem was solved. She could be Lord Krishna for one, Lord Shiva for another, or for me my mother. But people kept on asking this question. It is said that this is a normal question on the devotional path. It is the only question to have been asked of Ma more than a thousand times. She answered it for the first time when she was in her late twenties. At that time she was a housewife in the rural and conservative Bengal. The cousin who was close to her asked it. She answered: "*Purna brahma Narayan*" Again she said, "*Narayan, Narayani; Mahadev Mahadev*" People knew these answers, still she was asked again and again. It was because either they did not believe her or they were doubting.

Q. How to love Ma?

A. There is no special technique for loving. For all the activities in life we need to learn from somewhere and somebody. But loving is the only activity we are born with. I started my life by loving my mother. At that time the world was quite unknown to me. My mother was the only object of love. The objective world gradually started creeping into my life. My love for mother got diluted among other objects of love. To do something new, we need a teacher, but loving is natural. We think that Ma is special; this is why we would like to have a special technique. Or maybe our natural instinct to love has faded away with the cloud of objects with which we interacted in the past. If we can love this or that thing, then to love Ma why do I need a special method? Ma said, "Be like a child who knows nothing but its mother." Ma loves everyone in an equal manner, but we always want more. A new born baby does not make any distinction between objects it interacts with.

Everyone loves quality and simplicity. There is no particularization of simplicity. Ma is the very embodiment of simplicity. Our natural simplicity is lost in the complexities of the world processes. We have lost them or those might have been buried at the bottom of our consciousness which we cannot see. In Ma, we recognize them. Let us try to dig those out from the innermost recess of our hearts and get them back.

In Ma we find them again. Let us cultivate the feeling which will enable us to say, "Ma, I cannot do without you." By doing this, a day may come when I shall be able to get back my apparently lost Self or the lost love.

Q. Swamiji, do you follow any specific spiritual practice and if with what goal?"

.A. As for me, spiritual practices are not for any imaginary goal but to dissolve what covers the natural purity within me. This was veiling my clear vision of love. My central point around which everything revolves in my life is my love for Ma.

Q. Do you need to abandon everything for that?

A. In the words of Ma, "You need not leave anything, things will leave you." Things you do not need anymore will go away automatically. A small child loves his teddy bear. In the course of time he gives it up, passionately becomes fond of some other toys and forgets the initial ones. But remember, for the child toys are changed, not his love for the toys.

Q. How about the world around you?

A. The world very much exists for me to be experienced in my love. My experiences are embedded in my memories and became a part of me. I know I love myself and in that case I have to love the world.

Q. Why does one become sad?

A. Because he loses awareness of his uniqueness, at times, he becomes sad. He always looks for comparing his existence with others' and finds faults in himself and feels sad. Uniqueness is beyond all comparisons.

Q. How do you assess Ma's spiritual state?

A. Do I need that? She is my mother. She, to me, is a perfect human being. Ma is not any theoretical goddess for me. Of course I do not oppose others' contentions in this respect. I know that I have so many quirks in my behaviour and activities. Ma's perfection helps me see those. I try to rectify my faults by learning to behave like her in human ways. Besides, to measure anything one needs to have a unit for it.

Ma was not a goddess for me although people who say so may be right. She was my mother. She is a perfect human being; at least one can say she has been someone who did not make any mistakes in her life. As for her spiritual level, I would not be able to fathom the depth of it or ascertain its heights because, for certain, I do not have any standard unit by which to measure it. She is simply my Ma and I need her more than anything else.

Q. Ma is not a literate person. How would you explain her wisdom?

A. In the words of Ma, "Life is the greatest of all books. To one who has entered into the depth of it, your science, philosophy, dharma and scriptures do not remain unknown."

Life is a great book. Ma never studied, but she was full of wisdom. She saw life as it was. Life gives us answers. Scriptures at times are confusing.

Q. Why people do go on pilgrimage?

A. Why do we love going on pilgrimage? Our life in itself is a pilgrimage towards joy. We are all pilgrims, whether we are believers or not. If I do not believe in God, I believe at least in something I am in love with. We go to a holy place to see it, to sense its vibrations and to love it. We have this love inside, but are unable to feel it.

Q. Do you feel good to share your pain and pleasure?

A. All our emotions want expression outside. It is inherent in human nature to share love and grief with others. He or she can not live alone. Though I am happy in Dhaulchina all alone, but if some one comes I am happier to share my joy with him. As for pain, I bear it alone. I don't want to infect others with my pain.

Q. Swamiji, do you follow the path of Bhakti?

A. Yes, I do. Can you tell me a name from the total history of religions of the world that did not follow the path of devotion in his spiritual journey? Of course, you can name the persons who followed, advocated and propounded the path of discrimination or knowledge. But if I ask you, why did they follow this very path? The answer will be as simple as that 'because they loved this path.' The basic platform is love. May it be love for the goal or love for the path. Those who follow *bhakti*, the devotional path, first try to establish a human relationship, between them and their beloved face or idea of God or ultimate Reality and then purify and elevate it. I start from the human side because I know it, and by practice I can sublimate it to the divine level. Once I have established this relationship between me and my beloved and at the same time I ask the question "Who are you?" I no longer would be able to taste the essence of the relationship which was established. By this way, I am distancing my beloved from me rather than drawing him near me. I am cutting the relationship before elevating or sublimating it.

Q. What is Sadhana?

A. Different world teachers, masters, saints and wise ones defined *sadhana* or spiritual practice in different ways. But the simplest definition I have found so far is from Ma's lips. She said, "*swadhan praptir upay holo sadhana*", i.e., 'the way to get back your own treasure is called *sadhana*'. In Sanskrit, *swa*- means *one's own* and *dhan* means riches or treasure. So, it can well be said in the language of Ma that *sadhana* is to rediscover one's own inner riches.

Q. Did Ma advocate any particular or exclusive way of sadhana?

A. Ma's way, of course, if she had any in particular, was all inclusive without any frame or dogma. One lady spiritual Christian aspirant came and asked Ma for spiritual guidance. Ma asked her about the spiritual doctrine she followed. The lady answered that she was a Christian. Ma said, "I am also a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu." Ma would always ask the aspirants to follow their own path and their scriptures.

Q. Can you talk about any spiritual practice prescribed by Ma irrespective of any particular spiritual doctrine?

A. Here is an anecdote which I repeat very often. Once, Ma was travelling in a train with one of her lady companions. There were other co-passengers in the same compartment. At that time, she was not very well known in the Indian spiritual domain. A few young men also boarded the same compartment. Ma's was a magnetic attractive personality. They wanted to talk to her. When Ma joined in the conversations they were listening to her with rapt attention. Even not knowing her, they realized that she was a spiritual person. When they had to alight from the train, Ma asked, "Would you not give me anything?" (In India, tradition has it to give something to the vagrant monks). People started to reach for their purse. She said, "No, no, I just ask you to give some time to God every day. Just five minutes a day,"

Ma very often asked people to devote 5, 10 or 15 minutes at a fixed time every day. This is the best of practices. No other practice is necessary once you get habituated to it. But in fact, it is very difficult. Even for a hermit this is difficult. Offering 5 minutes to Ma is offering 5 minutes of oneself. This offering should be without any expectation of acknowledgement, gain and result. This is not an investment for the fulfilment of future expectations. Maybe just expect that it will please God and Ma. You should all the time be alert for that.

Here is a story: There was a zamindar (landlord) in Dehra-Dun who was a habitual drinker. He was fond of hunting tigers. He loved Ma very much. One day, she asked him whether he would agree to give her five minutes a day for his whole life. He answered "Ma, you never asked me for anything, so I agree". One night, he went out for hunting leopards, he had set a trap and suddenly the beast came. He raised the rifle targeting

the animal and was about to shoot. Suddenly, his look fell on his wrist watch. It was the very moment he had given away to Ma. The man dropped his gun, closed his eyes and for five minutes thought of Ma. By the time he opened his eyes the leopard had gone. One should keep up his commitment like this.

Q. Are there any rejections in Ma's life?

A. Ma never rejected anything or anybody for she saw God in everything and in everybody.

Q. How one can ascertain the right spiritual practice for himself?

A. Finding the right spiritual practice for oneself is a long endeavour. One should strictly follow the instructions given by the Guru. It is the Guru who knows the appropriate path for his disciple. For long eleven years I had to search for it after the departure of Ma. I practised different paths and methods on my own. Of course, apparent results were there but not the satisfaction. Then it dawned in my mind to search for the specific instruction given by Ma. I started my journey backward down the paths of my memory trying to recapture the interactions I had with Ma to pin- point the specific way she prescribed for me.

Q. Is Ma your Guru?

A. Do I need a different definition for Ma? Yes, I learnt a lot from her.

Q. How about your initiation?

A. Of course, I am initiated but Ma is not my Guru. The first *Mantra* I got was from Ma not from my guru. My *mantras* of initiation are different from the *mantra* I received from Ma. While giving the *mantra* to me she said, "This is not your initiation and this body is not your Guru." She also said, "This body never asks anyone to take *diksha* and never refuses when anyone asks for it". As for me, I needed a *mantra* and I got it before the formal initiation.

Q. Then why had you gone for diksha?

A. Ma asked me to take it.

Q. Is not Ma contradicting herself here?

A. Apparently it may seem so. In fact I was also shocked when Ma asked me to take *diksha*. But afterwards my doubt was clarified. It so happened that one evening she called me and said, "Your initiation is fixed at dawn tomorrow." I was quite shocked to hear her saying so. I never thought of having *diksha*. It pained me to think that Ma was going against what she said previously. I had an emotional upset and started weeping. She asked for the cause of my pitiable condition I said "Ma, as you said that *diksha* is given to one only when he asks for it. As for me, I am quite content with the *mantra* I received from your lips and I never wanted *diksha* from you. It upset me to see you going against what you said to me in the past." She said, "Do you know exactly what is there hidden in the depth of your mind?" Ma explained to me that I wanted this initiation in my heart of hearts but I did not know that.

Q. Does any practice go in vain?

A. Everything we do bears fruit. Nothing goes in vain. Sometimes results are not up to the expectations. There is no time frame in spirituality. Spiritual transformations are slow and deep, apparently unrecognizable.

Q. What should be the mainstay in the path of devotion?

A. To try to merge the individual will with the Will of God. There goes a story like this. A ferry boat was carrying a passenger across a large river. In the middle of the crossing a severe storm broke out. Big waves were breaking in the boat. The boat was almost filled with water and about to sink. A sadhu (ascetic) who was on board started pouring more water into the boat with his water pot. All other passengers were furious and scared lest the boat sank in the river. However, the storm calmed suddenly, the boat was saved and reached near the bank. The sadhu now started pouring water out of the boat. People were astonished to see this peculiar behaviour of his and asked the reason for this. He said that when the storm came he thought that it was the will of God to sink the boat and he was adding his will with that of God. Now the storm disappeared and that too was the will of God and by pouring water out of the boat he was making it easier for the passengers to get out of the boat. That should be the attitude of an aspirant.

Q. What was the main attraction in Ma?

A. Her unconditional love for all.

Q. *What is meant by unconditional love?*

A. Love without any expectation of reciprocation.

Q. *How can we learn about unconditional love?*

A. Almost all our actions mental or physical we need to learn from somewhere. The only thing for which we don't need a teacher is love. We are born with it. It is within us all the time. Our desires prompt us for action and for action we need to apply our intelligence. Only action which needs no intelligence is love. We started loving even before the development of our intelligence. With time the love that I was born with became clouded with the encroachment of the objective world in my mental domain. We lost our childhood along with our innocent love. Mind you, one might have lost his physical childhood but the impressions of childhood are still there within him. Let us try to go within and find love there.

Q. *Tell me something about meditation.*

A. Let us consider first what we mean by meditation. People in general take the Sanskrit word *dhyana* as synonymous with meditation. In the scriptures it is said *dhyana nirvishayah manah* i.e. it is the state of objectless mind. (Nir=no; *vishayah*=object; *manah*=mind). In the words of Ma, *achinta hi param dhyana* i.e. "thoughtlessness is the ultimate *dhyana*". (*achinta*= no thoughts; *hi*=verily; *param*=ultimate) She also said, as we mentioned "*dhyana kara jay na, dhyana ho*" i.e. "*dhyana* occurs it can not be done". Besides, in his Yoga Sutra (Aphorisms on Yoga) Patanjali described *dhyana* as the penultimate, the seventh of the eight limbs of yoga practices. An aspirant is supposed to establish himself gradually in the order of *yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara and dharana*. He should reach the state of perfection while practicing each of the steps. Then only the state of *dhyana* will be there leading to the state of *samadhi* which is the culmination of all spiritual practices. Concepts of *dhyana* and meditation should not be mixed up.

Now let us consider what the purpose of meditation is. In short it can be said that meditation helps in controlling the mind. All the time our senses interact with the objective world and the impressions thereof are brought in and the mind ceaselessly roams amongst them. This restlessness of the mind is the cause of all our unhappiness and feeling of bondage. Interestingly it is in the mind only that one feels happiness. It is the right mindfulness which is required of us to feel happy. For that, we need to control

the mind. To control it, we need to know it first. So it can be said that the purpose of meditation is threefold:

(a) To know the mind, (b) to shape the mind and (c) to liberate the mind.

Our sense organs e.g. sight, hearing, smell, speech, taste and touch are constantly interacting with the objects bringing their impressions to the mind and recording them on the surface of consciousness, (here consciousness is referred to objectively.) The mind tirelessly engaged with the sense organs is in constant movement, as the result of which, we lose the right mindfulness. Some times either there is superimposition or very close sequence of the impressions, so our objective consciousness is unable to discern these and the impressions lose their clarity. If you speedily move a torch of fire in a circular motion, a ring of fire results. In a movie, still photographs are projected on the screen in such quick successions that we see moving pictures. These are all illusions. Because of the limitations of our sense organs in registering the actuality, illusions are perceived. By meditative practice we can pinpoint the factual impressions. It has to be remembered that the mind is restless to get rid of restlessness. The mind is in constant search of happiness, peace and love. All our activities are directed towards a single vector called perpetual happiness. Let us not forget that apparently we have no tools other than the mind to achieve that state. The objective world being a transient one, is it possible to achieve that state of permanence from the impermanent world where I am an integral part of it? If yes, how? What role does the mind play in this context?

Without going into the complexities of psychology a simple and workable definition of mind may be useful to answer the above questions. Mind is a bundle of thoughts and an abstract conception and thoughts are the conscious registration of the impressions of interactions of the sense organs. These impressions are stored in different layers of our memory and are always in an active state. Memories stored interact within themselves giving rise to more impressions which may not be the results of direct interactions of the sense organs with the outside world thereby the volume of impressions increases in geometrical progression at random. It can be said that permutations and combinations of the interactive reactions of the stored impressions and the mind's efforts in ceaseless registrations of these make it hyperactive giving rise to restlessness. With practice controlled registrations of impressions can bring in stability of mind. This is the shaping of the mind. Once the mind is shaped feelings of bondage will disappear resulting in experiences of bliss, peace and love (which are always there within).

Q. What is the role of Puja (worship) in the path of devotion?

A. First let us try to understand what is meant by Puja. Puja is action with love, not mere rituals. It reminds me of one of the experiences I had with Ma. I was asked by Ma to perform puja of goddess Kali in our Delhi Ashram Kali temple every new-moon night for one year. At that time I was quite ignorant of any puja rituals. Three days before the first puja Ma called me in her room in Vrindaban ashram and said that a priest from Varanasi would come to teach me the details about puja. I was being given all possible

instructions in detail including cooking of food for offering to the goddess and items to be cooked.

Then she started demonstrating how to peel and cut potatoes, aubergines and other vegetables. It was the time for Ma's evening Darshan(Her appearance before the devotees)and devotees in hundreds were waiting for Ma outside her building. I thought to myself," What a waste of time for such an insignificant matter. She could easily tell me what to do instead of giving demonstrations. I am intelligent enough to do as she says." But of course, it was a scene to be seen, Ma doing this with all attention and meticulous perfection. After finishing this she said," Your puja has started right from now. Whatever you do, if it is done with love for the divine is called puja." Anything done with love is the key to perfection.

Q.What is the relationship between perfection and happiness?

A. Here is a story: one day a great cello-player was going to perform in a concert. He tuned his instrument properly. Suddenly he felt thirsty. There was no water in the room. He went down for a while to the bar. Then a very young child entered the room and started playing the cello. For professional musicians it would be terrible music but for the child it was an immense pleasure. He put all his heart in it and was enjoying the out-of-tune sound he made out of the instrument. He was quite happy. To a maestro this sound will bring displeasure whereas to the child it brings happiness. Perfection is very difficult to generalize. Everything is perfect by its own standards. Perfection depends on individual outlook. Our life is a wonderful composition. Ma's life was the most wonderful composition. There was beauty in her every gesture, behaviour and word.

Q. What is the meaning of your name Nirgunananda and who has chosen the name for you?

A. *Ni* means no and *Gun* means attribute or quality. Nirgunananda means the bliss of attributelessness.As for the selection of the name I heard this story from Swami Bhaskarananda while he initiated me into Sanyas.Br.Bharatji, Br.Kusumji and Br. Tapanji were the three senior ascetics of our ashram. After completion of three years intense and austere spiritual disciplines and practices they were to be initiated into a special category of ascetics having new names. All of them wanted Ma's name as the first part of their new names. Ma's name was Nirmala. So it was decided that all the three names should contain *Nir* as the first part. Ma herself selected the names Nirmalananda for Tapan, Nirvanananda for Kusum and Nirgunananda for Bharat. It is a common tradition and scriptural ordain as well that the first syllable of the original name should also be the first syllable of the new name. The Pandit who was conducting the ceremony was very meticulous in the observance of scriptural injunctions. He raised an objection to the new names. Two of the Brahmacharis categorically refused to change their names. Ma was in a fix, she wanted to find a compromise. She asked the pandit

whether it would be alright if one of the names was in accordance with the scriptures. The pandit agreed to that. Ma asked Bharatji the future Bhaskarananda whether he would agree to drop his new prospective name. Since Ma herself was asking, he agreed.

When I wanted to take sanyas I had selected the name Shambhavananda. It goes well with the tradition. I was called Shanti Brata, so I chose a name starting with “S”, an unusual, “modern” one. This refers to an epithet of Shiva, Shambhu [peaceful being] and his consort Shambhavi. In my daily practice, I worship Shri Yantra which is associated with Shambhavi. Moreover, there is a reference to the shambhavi mudra in Yoga Darshan where eyes are open, but attention is directed inwardly. This represents a practice of the unity between outer and inner world which is significant for me. Swami Bhaskarananda was the one to give me the sanyas *diksha* and new name. At first I was reluctant to take the name but when he told the story I accepted it. Swamiji could not take the name because of a scriptural technicality. It was a great honour for me that this very name was selected by Ma and my *diksha* acharya offered it to me.

Q. Is grief arising out of the past inescapable?

A. Grief and pain are always the things of past. All the religions teach us the ways to escape pain and be in perpetual happiness. Let me tell one of my experiences from which I try to learn the way to escape grief.

In Calcutta, there is a place called Dhapa which had always been used as a refuse disposal site. Some time ago with a friend I was passing through a new township near Calcutta in a car. I noticed a clean new city with wide roads, modern architecture, parks and gardens. Before embracing the ascetic life I stayed in Calcutta for almost two and a half decades and I was quite familiar with places in and around Calcutta. When I enquired about the place my friend told me that this township was built on the dumping ground in Dhapa. This was an eye opener for me. If I bore deep into the ground of this modern beautiful city layers of garbage that have been dumped for the last two hundred years would come out. But why should I do so when I can enjoy the beauty of the clean modern city leaving the rubbish underground? We won't be able to erase our memories of the past, but we could build for ourselves a beautiful and happy life leaving aside the sadness of the past in its own place. Our life should be like a modern city built on the landfill.

Q. How did you take Marol's passing away?

A. Momentarily his death was a shock to me but I escaped it in my own way. Now he is quite alive in me and he will live with me.

[Jean-Claude Marol was a devotee of Main France for many years. He was a writer and published in Paris three books on Ma's sayings. He died of cancer in October, 2001 in Paris. . He met Nirgunananda near Paris a few years ago and since that time was communicating regularly with him]. The first time I met him for fifteen minutes only. . I had heard that Marol was a writer, a poet, a spiritual and spirited cartoonist, someone with a genial inspiration. I wanted to meet him. We spoke of our respective views on Ma. Although he advocated a view on Ma quite different from that of mine, I listened to him. I did not object to his viewpoint because I believe that every one is right from his own platform. He did the same when I expressed my points. I do not know why, but Marol started loving me. He used to say that I was his brother, his friend, his teacher and son. I too had found something very attractive in him. He gave me much more than I was expecting. The last time I saw him in Paris, he was very sick and I knew he would not survive, but one cannot say that to the face of another. From that time he used to phone me once or twice a day, wherever I would be, in Switzerland, Italy, UK, Delhi or in Almora. Unfortunately during the last days, he could not communicate with me. The phone lines were too bad. I was informed of his passing away through Jacques Vigne who at least could phone me.

My 96 years old mother also passed away in July 2001. It was also a momentary shock for me. But I could manage it in the same way. Whenever I felt their absence I tried to remember the good times spent with them. Both my mother and Marol are alive in my memory and I can be with them whenever I like.

What makes us happy is to have a relationship with ourselves; but all alone, we are not able to have this relationship with ourselves. We cannot experience this love we have in ourselves without loving someone else. So, we have relationships and we exist in others like mirrors. This mirror that Marol was, seemed broken in the world outside, but the mirror inside is still intact.

Q. How did you feel when Ma left?

A. It was the greatest shock in my life when I came to know of Ma's departure. I was on the way back from my pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. When I crossed the Chinese border and entered Indian Territory a person from the military who was escorting the pilgrims gave the news. At first I could not believe that. The man said that it was broadcast from All India Radio on the 27th Aug. 1982 in the evening. It seemed as if the sky had fallen on my head. I had a mental black out. The only thing I remember is that I wanted to commit suicide by jumping from a cliff in the high mountain. One of the senior ascetics of our ashram who was coming behind saw and saved me from committing suicide.

Q. How did you reconcile yourself to this?

A. It took a long time and now I feel that I love Ma the same way as when she was in her physical form. If I claim that I love Ma I should love her words as well. She said, "Remember, whenever and wherever you are the gaze of this body is always on you. You don't want to see; what can I do?" This saying of Ma brought to me a great consolation and conviction that Ma is always with me.

Q. Marol's memories make me sad. How can I overcome this?

A. It is quite natural to feel sad for the bereaved one. Is there any way to get him back to life? You can not undo what is inevitable or ordained. Death may be the end of the physical life of your beloved one, but not your life. Your memories are the very parts of your life. These will remain alive so long as you live. Your beloved is dead but not your love for him. Remember, you love someone because you love to love him. It is your self love which makes you love others. Bring in the present the sweet memories of the past and be with them.

Q. What is Marol doing now?

A. Marol's body is no more; he can not do any physical action anymore. You can imagine that with his subtle body he is with Ma and know that with Ma he is happy. Do you love Ma? Yes, so you love her body, her spirit and her words too. Ma said that she was ever with us. So, she is with Marol as well.

Q. What is Marol thinking now?

A. When Marol was alive you did not know either what he was thinking. Only you knew to the extent he was expressing his thoughts and that too was not the whole of his thinking.

Q. How am I able to interact with Marol?

A. Love in its true essence does not expect any reciprocation. First of all think why you want it? It is for sure that you can not reverse his death. But your love for him wants to relate to him. You have his memories within. With the help of these memories bring him back to life in your imagination. One often does it in the course of his day to day life when his beloved is not physically present with him.

Q .Ma said that we should be like children but we have grown up. How is it possible?

A.It is true that by passing through childhood and adolescence we have attained adulthood by now. But the memories of our childhood innocence are still there within us. Try to go down memory lane, pick those up and be with those. If you can not reconvert yourself to a child you can try to feel like a child.

Q. Emotions bring problems in life. How to deal with these?

A. All our emotions are not problematic. Before dealing with these let us try to find the place of emotions in our life. Emotions are the mental states arising out of the interactions we had with the objective world. This objective world is not only the outside one. We have it within us too. Now the question is, can we erase these emotions which are the root of all our problems? Do we need to erase out the emotions? The answer to both the questions is a simple "NO." Now let us examine a few emotions one by one:-

DESIRE: Desires are feedback to our lives. Life will stand still without desires and will seem meaningless. As such desires can not be called the root of unhappiness. Fulfilment of desire brings us happiness. It is said that first deserve then desire. But most of the time we desire for something we do not deserve and this is the root cause of our sorrow. What is needed is to put a limit to our desires. God is the culmination of all our desires.

ANGER: Unfulfilled desire is the mother of anger. In other words it can be said that when our expectation faces any hindrance anger comes. We need an object to be angry with. Let God be our object of anger and by this way one can have constant God remembrance.

GREED: There is a difference between greed and desire. It prompts us to go for more than what we already have. As such there is nothing wrong in that so long it does not cause other's unhappiness. Be greedy for God's grace.

EGOISM: Projecting one's own "I" in order to establish his very existence before others is inherent in human nature. But at times we project ourselves in order to prove our superiority over others. If the man in front of me tries it in the same way as me the collision of egos begins. Very often it is advised to get rid of the ego and that would be the end of all troubles. That could be quite sensible. But could it be practicable? My very existence depends on my I' ness or the workable self. How could it be possible to get rid of the self by the very self? Ego would not invite problems so long I do not try to prove my superiority before others. Invite a fight with God's ego and see the fun.

JEALOUSY: It is an expression of an inferiority complex or an expression of a mental state of deprivation. Have-nots are always jealous of the haves. One is never happy

with what he has and become crazy after what the others have. Let us be content with what we have been gifted with by God.

All these emotional states are nothing but the result of interactions of our senses with the objective world and are transient. Those come like a tempest and go away. If one tries to look at these like a witness he will be less unhappy.

Q. Are changes of path advisable in spiritual practice?

A. If one starts along a right path there arises no question of changing it until the end. No spiritual path is intrinsically wrong. One thing should always be kept in mind that a spiritual goal is not bound by any time frame. Once I start following a path I shall try for my advancement in that direction with unperturbed attention and sincerity. Life is too short to go for trial and error spiritual endeavour.

Q. What are the meanings of the words Sadhana and Tapasya?

A. These are Sanskrit words. The literal meaning of the word Sadhana is spiritual practice and that of the word Tapasya is penance or austerity. Ma defined these in her own way. She said, "*Swa dhan praptir upay halo Sadhana*" i.e. the way to get back your own riches or treasure is called Sadhana. For Tapasya she said, "*Tapasya halo tap saha*" i.e. to endure or get acclimatised to the heat of the world is Tapasya. In Sanskrit language *Swa*= the self and *Dhan*= riches or treasure; *Tap*=heat and *Saha*= to endure or acclimatise. The greatest treasure one always craves for is the bliss or peace which is there within him. He is oblivious of that and seeks for it in the world outside. Sadhana shows the way to an aspirant to get inside enabling him to recognize his own treasure.

Generally people take *Tapasya* as synonymous with sufferings in the course of spiritual endeavour. If the ultimate goal of spirituality is the state of perpetual bliss or happiness and if it is associated with the memories of sufferings one can not experience pure bliss. The difference between Tapasya and sufferings should be clearly understood. Let us take an example:-

Two persons are engaged in making stone chips by breaking boulders with hammers in the hope of earning their daily wages at the end of the day. One of them is an ascetic who wanted to buy a flower garland for his beloved God in the temple. As he had no money he takes up the work. The other is an ordinary daily wage earner. While doing work the ascetic is imagining his God's idol with the garland around his neck and is enjoying his work whereas the other is thinking of when dusk will fall, so that his tiresome work will end. Both of them are doing the same work using same strength and will get the same remuneration. To the ascetic the work is Tapasya to the other the same work is suffering.

Q. In the Christian world we are taught to suffer for God. How do you take this view?

A. They must have their point in that. As I am not a Christian I do not think about it.

Q. How can one enjoy his Sadhana?

A. If he takes Sadhana as play he will enjoy it.

Q Is it possible to consider Sadhana as a play?

A. Yes, of course, it is possible. Very often Ma used the expression "Play of Sadhana" (*Sadhana ka khel*). First of all let us try to understand what a play is? Play is a sequence of actions in a time frame which give us pleasure from the beginning to the end. Play and competition are not the same. When we compete our happiness depends on the end result i.e. Win or defeat. But when we play in the true spirit win or lose does not matter. If we take Sadhana as play we can enjoy doing it irrespective of what may come as the end result i.e. win or defeat.

Q. What do you think about a spiritual profession?

A. A profession is a way of livelihood but spirituality is life itself. I do not believe in professionalism in spirituality.

Q. Does luck play any role in spirituality?

A. Luck is another name for ignorance about the results of actions. Chances and accidents are alias of ignorance.

Q. You said that you never knew Ma before you met her. But you stayed on with her from the moment you met her. Would you not call it luck?

I do not think that I met Ma by chance or by luck. It may be that in the innermost recess of my heart there was a constant and intense longing to be with someone who is the incarnation of perfection, purity and love in the human form. I did not know that.

Q. How do I know what is there inside me?

A. By self introspection. We have all the resources within us. Always we try to know the minds of others but not our own. I see the world outside and fail to know myself. Here is a story: - Ten friends were travelling together. On the way they came across a river. There was no boat to ferry them. They swam across and reached the other bank. The leader asked someone to count heads to confirm that no one was swept away by the river current. The man started counting and found there were nine of them only. They were sad to lose one of their companions and started crying. An ascetic passing by saw them and asked the reason for their sorrow. The man who was counting said that there were ten members in the team and after crossing the river the tenth is missing. The ascetic smiled and said, "Thou art the tenth." We take into account everything and everybody but do not count ourselves. I find goodness and fault in another and feel comparative superiority and inferiority in me, caring very little about self assessment. I can recognize a thing only when I carry the impression of a similar thing in me. Overrating oneself is bad but underrating is worse. If you can not find the way to go within yourself pray to God for that.

Q. How to deal with fear?

A. Sense of insecurity is the mother of fear. We are born with it. At birth a baby cries because it is afraid of the newness around him. It undergoes a change of states. But gradually it starts coping with the changes and got less afraid. One can utilise fear in spiritual practice. Fear at times restrain us and saves us from doing wrong. They say, "Fear thy Lord." In love and fear there is constant remembrance of the object of love and fear. Whether you love or fear God He will be in constant remembrance. It is up to you how you utilise your fear. Love can neutralise fear. If I try to bear love for one who I am scared of I shall be less afraid. It is true that the greatest of fears is the fear of death. No one can escape it. But I am yet to witness my death. I have seen people die before me, I know about other's death but surely I would not be there to see my death. So long as I shall live my death will remain dead to me. Ma said, "Death must die."

Fear is always in the future having its roots in the past. Somebody may say that he is afraid of the past lest it come again in the future. If you love the present, death will die. Death is a conception of the future. Yama is the son of the Sun-god. He is the Lord of Death.. Should I be afraid of God? Live now and be happy. Death will take its own time to come, when, where and how I do not know.

Q. Why do we at times fail in our efforts in spite of being sincere?

A. Most of the time it is due to over estimation of our capabilities. Success in our efforts depends on sincerity, capability and methodology. When these three are complementary to each other only then one can expect the desired result. If on my way to a destination a big tree falls and block the narrow path is it not advisable to find a way round to avoid the blockage rather than to exhaust all my energy in futile efforts to remove the tree?

Q. Don't you get bored staying in the same place, living the same life style for so many years?

A. Boredom and love are poles apart. It is a transient world. Every thing is changing every moment. We do not have the eye to notice these changes. Remember our trekking last night in moon light. On our way back to the Ashram I lost track of the usual path and found a new one. Each morning comes with a fresh new day. Every dusk comes with a new night. I never felt bored with the white snow clad peaks of the Himalayas extending along the Eastern and Northern horizon. I never felt bored with the greenery around. There is a special bird here. It sings all through the night. The sound of the bird is a special attraction for me. At nightfall I eagerly wait for the melancholy sound it makes when there is silence all around. Neither I have seen the bird nor do I know its name. I am in love with the sound of it. It has been my companion for the last sixteen years. It matters little for me to investigate whether it is the same bird or not. But the sound is the same. When you are in love with some thing or some one you find some thing new in it/him every moment.

Q. Is it necessary that body and mind should be in tune in spiritual practice?

A. Of course, it is necessary. The physical state acts upon the mind and *vice versa*. So long there is identification of the body with the self physical well being is obligatory in spiritual pursuits.

Q. Why do we mostly feel disturbed during meditation?

A. A good question indeed. Let us first see what happens during meditation. Here we are considering objective meditation. We first select an object, try to focus attention on it and contemplate on it. The object may be of any type like visual, sound, smell, taste and touch.

Repeatedly we try to bring our attention to it. During the wakeful state sense organs are in continuous interactions with the world outside and the mind is occupied in quick sequences with these objects. We are left with scattered mindfulness. In the

contemplative state when we select a single sense object by cutting off the interactions of other sense organs for the moment, the stored memories of the interactions of those sense organs which also are in active states come to the fore. The world within replaces the world out side. It is to be remembered that cutting off the interactions of sense organs does not mean deactivation of the sense organs. For example, sitting in silence neither makes one deaf nor negates the capability to hear. Only there is absence of objects of hearing. Take for instance this quartz table clock in my room. There is no audible sound from it now. But every night I put this clock in the closet because in the silence of the night the sound of this same clock seems like drum beats and is most disturbing. Neither the apparently inaudible sound increases during night nor is there any change in my sensitivity to sounds. My audio reception is undisturbed because of silence all around.

Q. You said that Ma never hurt people. Can we be like that?

A. Surely one can. One hurts others either physically or mentally. Physical assaults are the outcome of anger and anger has its root in expectations, greed and jealousy. By proper introspection one can try to minimize these. Mental assault has its root in the tendency to undermine and belittle others to magnify one's own self image or to establish oneself right by proving the other wrong. Ma used to say that everybody is right from his own standpoint. Take for instance, a lady; she is a daughter to her mother, a mother to her daughter and a wife to her husband. Each of the three is right in its own relationship with this lady but the ways one describes the relationships are not the same. Is there any point in arguing to establish one relationship by proving the other wrong?

Q. Can art be a tool of spiritual practice?

A. Yes, of course, but it depends on the outlook of the artist and the purpose for which he is doing it. Art is the expression of the inner world of the artist. The outer world an artist interacts with has its impressions within. These impressions supplemented by the mentality of the artist get form and shape and are translated into the form of his creations. Besides, an artist when engaged in work has unperturbed attention. In other words it can be said he has right mindfulness for the specific work and this state of mind can easily be called a meditative state. With practice this very state serves the purpose of shaping the mind. It is up to the artist to how he utilizes the very shape of the mind.

Q. How one can distinguish between spiritual and non spiritual activities?

A. Do we really need to put a line of demarcation between spiritual and non spiritual activities? I would say no. What I have learnt and saw during my association with Ma and it is becoming a conviction is that life in totality is spiritual. Before World War II it was one Germany. The Berlin wall was erected and we saw East and West Germany. Now that the Berlin wall was demolished we have Germany unified again. It was neither there before nor at the end. It was a temporary separation. Likewise in our life the classification of our activities into spiritual and non spiritual are never tenable.

Q. How would you define intuition and thinking?

A. Both intuition and thinking follow the logic of correlation between cause and effect but their sub stratum are different. The former emanates from the subconscious whereas the latter is from the conscious mind.

Q. What is the place of grace in spiritual endeavour?

A. In Sanskrit language grace is termed as *Kripa*. According to some schools, this *Kripa* has to be attained through your actions. There is another school which believes in *Kripa* without any cause behind it. (*Ahetuki Kripa; A=no; hetuki=reasoning/Cause*) Ma gave us a beautiful definition of *Kripa*. She said, "*Kripa means Karo ,pao*" (*Kri=Karo=do,pa=pao=obtain/get*) She further said, "God's grace is being incessantly showering on you. If you keep your vessel upright it will be filled up and if you keep it upside down *kripa* will be empty." There is no conditionality in God's grace. He is gracious to all without any discrimination. What is needed is to understand that His grace is always there with me. The greatest feature of His grace is that I am gifted with the ability to think about grace. Spiritual practices are the means to understand that.

Q. What role does faith plays in spirituality?

A. It is the foremost requirement in spiritual endeavour. Before being faithful to anything else one must have faith in himself. Ma said, "*Atal biswas*" (*atal=Firm like a rock; biswas=Faith*) which is required of an aspirant. Our faith is always vulnerable. We remain faithful to God so long as everything goes well with us. In our pretentious faithfulness we love to think "Let thy will be done." But as soon as something untoward happens we exclaim, "O God, what have you done!" As an aspirant I need to have the conviction that everything happens by the will of God and that too for my good.

Q. I love to be independent and feel freedom without any bondage even that of spiritual discipline.

A. Before I say anything let me try to understand what you said right now. What is independence? To feel, think and act freely. If any one asks you to do something you are free to do it or not. If he insists you get annoyed or angry. This is no expression of independence. You are in fact under the spell of anger or annoyance. Behind the desire for independence lies your constant inner craving for perpetual happiness. In the pursuit of happiness if you get angry the very purpose of being independent is in jeopardy. Rationalization/balance of the patterns of interactions with the world both within and outside minimises the feelings of unhappiness in life. If you achieve the feeling of happiness at the cost of somebody else's unhappiness, this is no happiness.

To bring in this balance in life is another name for bringing in self-disciplines or self-restraint in life. This is possible only through practice. At first this may seem to sort of bind you but when this gets to be your habit the feelings of bondage will vanish. They say you pick up a thorn to remove a thorn from your heel, after that you throw both away. Your so called independence is rooted in your desire for independence. Genuine freedom is the freedom from desire. In this world you can not live alone. You have to depend on something or somebody. Ours is the symbiotic life. Symbiosis is not antagonistic to freedom. So long as our lives are objectively oriented freedom will always be on the far horizon. The more we try to go near it the more it will recede.

It is well said that you love freedom. It means that you had the taste of it within you. Otherwise how can you love it? Try to go within and you will find that it is there only. Spiritual practice shows us the way to freedom.

For coming to Dhaulchina, you asked me to organize your trip, and I did it. You could have come without my help, but it would have been less comfortable. There is another place in the area called Dhaula-Devi; many people make this mistake and waste one day before reaching here because they do not care for any guidance and so face trouble. To tread the path of spirituality you need a guide to assist you with his experience. Trust, try and accept him. It does not act upon your independence but makes your journey to independence easier.

Q. Are restrictions on food obligatory for spiritual practice?

A. Before answering the question let us try to answer another question. Why do we take food? The simple answer is, we eat to live. Life is action oriented. For any action energy is needed. Food is the source of energy. In fact food serves three purposes i.e. metabolism, end of hunger and satisfaction. There is a saying in India that food makes the mind. In other words it can be said that there is an intimate relationship between food and mind. If one likes to have control over the mind, control of diet is necessary.

An aspirant is supposed to eat to live not live to eat. Most of the time we eat more than needed. For an aspirant food intake should be need-based not want-based.

Q. What about vegetarian and non-vegetarian food?

A. Food habit depends on various factors. Variations in geographical location, climatic condition, availability, work load etc. influence the eating habits of a person. In India vegetarian food is recommended for a spiritual aspirant. But according to the food rules prescribed in Yoga practice spicy and hot food is forbidden. Food should be well cooked; easily digestible, nice to look at and should not be stale.. It may sound strange to you that the mental condition of the cook and the way the food is prepared also play an important role. Take an example; if you cook a dish in a bad mood and the same dish is prepared on another occasion with love, the taste of these two dishes will not be the same.

Q. What is Puja?

A. There are varied and detailed definitions of Puja in our scriptures. The simple definition of Puja is actions performed with love to please someone. Conventionally Puja means performing some rituals and make offerings to God along with Mantras in order to please Him.

Q. What is surrender?

A. Dedicating everything including the self to the beloved or God unconditionally is called surrender. It is the highest goal in the path of devotion. In that state there is complete cessation of individual desires and total dependence on the divine will. Let me tell you a true story in this connection. In Bengal there was a great scholar named Shashi Bhusan Sanyal who was contemporary of the then great saint of India Sri Ramakrishna. His authoritative scholastic wisdom encompassed medicine, science, mathematics, philosophy, religions and scriptures. Sri Ramakrishna sent his bright disciples like Vivekananda and Abhedananda to study Vedanta with him. Although Sri Sanyal was a disciple of another famous saint of India Swami Sivarama he had great reverence for Sri Ramakrishna. He never accepted fees from his students and practised all three branches of medicine; homeopathic, allopathic, and ayurvedic for his livelihood. He was the only earning person in a dependent joint family of thirty-five members. Once Sri Ramakrishna asked him not to practise medicine and try to be fully dependent on the grace of God even for the worldly needs. He took a vow not to ask anybody for anything and started Akash Vritti. (One who never asks or begs for outside help even for the day to day worldly needs and is fully surrendered to the will of God.) Just imagine what a tough time he had to face to feed thirty-five hungry mouths with two square meals a day, without any earnings. At times the entire family had to fast for days

together but nobody knew about it. Neither did he lose his mental composure nor did he deviate from his vow in spite of these hardship. One day while he was teaching a postman delivered to him a registered envelope from an unknown person in Banaras. He opened it; took out a letter, read it and continued with the topic he was teaching. Tears rolled down his cheeks. The students were astonished to see that and thought that it was quite unbecoming of a man like him who had established himself in the highest state of Vedanta to be in pain after reading a letter. They had seen the same man carry his young child's dead body in his arm without any signs of grief or tears in his eyes. Swami Abhedananda (then Kali Maharaj) could not resist asking Sri Sanyal the reason for his pain. Sri Sanyal handed the letter to Swami Abhedananda and said, "these are not tears of pain, I am moved by the grace of the Lord and can not resist my tears. You can read the letter and see for yourself." The letter came from a well known member of the famous Mitra family of Choukhamba area of Banaras and contained Rs.500/- in cash . It was written that the person had a dream where Lord Siva appeared before him and told him that a devotee in Calcutta was in dire need of help and had been fasting along with his entire family for the last few days. The Lord told him the name and address of Sri Sanyal in the dream. Based on this Mitra sent the money and the letter with the hope that this would reach the proper person. Sri Sanyal only then expressed to his students his miserable pecuniary condition. Sri Sanyal knew for sure that many people would come forward to help at the slightest hint from him but he was fully surrendered to the will of God and had the strong belief that God will look after all his worldly needs. He had surrendered to God out of love for Him.

There is another kind of surrender which is the outcome of fear. Suppose a man with a revolver attacks me for some reason. To save myself I shall raise my hands and surrender to him. It is the circumstances not love that compelled me to show the gesture of surrender to save my life. But I am not sure whether the attacker would spare me or not. Surrender is a conviction for one's whole life not for the convenience in a circumstantial time frame. Let us take another example. It is very commonly said of a God fearing man that he leaves everything to the will of God. Maybe he is honest in saying so for the time being. If his young boy is on his death bed and the doctor has given up hope, the only option left to him is to surrender and pray to God. If the boy dies immediately he will exclaim, "O, God what have you done?" This is motivated surrender. True surrender is the merger of individual will with the will of God without any ulterior motivation.

Q. How does a Guru help his disciple?

A. The way a teacher helps his student or a coach teaches his trainees. A Guru shows the way to the exposure of the latent potentialities which the disciple carries within.

Q. Do the relationships which we maintain in the world help in our spiritual development?

A. Of course these do help us. All the relations have their essence in love. The world is not something out side the domain of God. If God is all love and has created the world it must be out of his love for creation. Nothing bad can come out of God. Good and bad are from our outlook. An aspirant first establish a relationship with God which he knows from his experience in the world, irrespective of the religion he follows and with practice he tries to elevate it to its ultimate essence. The primary tool given to us is the understanding of worldly relationships. A famous prayer widely used in India by almost all the spiritual aspirants goes like:- *Twameva mata cha pita twameva ,twameva bandhuscha sakha twameva.....* (Thou art my mother, father, brother and friend....) Here all the relationships referred to are worldly relations we know in our life of worldly existence but in superficial ways without going deeply into the essence of the relations. With practice we gradually experience the essential nectar of the relationship. If we can maintain these as symbiotic rather parasitic which we often do, worldly relationship can bring us near God. Ma used to say, " Love your young ones as incarnations of young gods and goddesses." She further said, "Yatra nari tatra Gouri, yatra jiva tatra Siva." (Where there is woman there is the Goddess Gouri and where there is man there is Lord Siva") In this context let me tell you a story. Saint Eknath of Panderpur, Maharashtra ,India was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. The Lord's name was always on his lips even when he was engaged in household work. He served his disabled old father as his beloved lord. One day he was feeding his father constantly chanting the name of lord Vishnu. The lord appeared before him at the door step but he continued with serving his father. He offered a brick to the lord and asked Him to stand on it until he finished with his father's service. The lord complied with his request and was pleased to be standing on the brick itself. The famous idol of Vittalnath in Pandarpur temple is standing on the brick till to-day as a reminder of the episode. Eknath's worldly relation with his father was elevated to such a sublime state that even the great lord had to appear before him.

Here is another story:- A yogi had practised austerities and penance and had acquired some supernormal power. One day while meditating under a tree a bird defecated on him. The yogi looked up at the bird with anger and the bird was burnt to ashes. After a proper wash and bath he went out to the village nearby to beg for his daily food. He reached a house and knocked at the closed door asking for alms. The voice of a young lady from inside prayed to him to wait for few moments until she finished with the task she was presently engaged in. In a few moments he knocked again and the same request came from inside. The yogi got impatient and enraged and knocked for the third time when the door was opened. A young lady with food in her hand stood before the yogi who was looking at her with angry eyes because of the delay in giving the food. The lady apologized for it but the yogi's anger was not lessened. Then the lady told the yogi in a very sweet voice that she was not the bird and his angry look would not act on her. The yogi was taken by surprise and thought the lady to be an advanced spiritual person otherwise how could she know what had happened to the bird. He asked her about the spiritual practice by dint of which she was able to know what had happened at

a distance. The lady answered that she only served her husband as god with all her mind speech and actions. Her delay was due to serving food to her husband. As soon as she finished the service to her husband she came with the alms for the yogi.

Q. What roles do silence and solitude play in spiritual practice?

A. Before answering the question let us first try to define these two terms in a simple and understandable way. Solitude means the state of being alone. This has two aspects - mental and physical. One can feel loneliness in a crowded atmosphere and *vice versa*. Real solitude can be felt when both mental and physical aspects go hand-in-hand. In other words real solitude helps one to be with oneself free from objective disturbances of the world outside and within. The state of being alone should not be confused with the state of melancholy.

Silence means absence of noise or refraining from speech. The first one is physical and the second is the mental aspect of silence. In Sanskrit silence is called *Maun*. It is derived from the word *Manah*. (Mind) So real *Maun* is refraining from speech and thinking as well. Physical silence to some extent helps in silencing the mind. With this primary understanding about solitude and silence let us now examine their roles in spiritual practice. When you retire to a solitary place to some extent you can get rid of various sounds and visual disturbances which you encounter in busy daily life. This is a direct way to have control over your mind. Physical silence helps you to avoid direct disturbances through noise. In solitude when you have no one around to speak to there is automatic restraint in speech. You would agree with me that most of the time we speak out of habit not out of necessity and waste a lot of energy this way. This energy could have been preserved and used in fruitful ways to achieve our goal of life. Once you get used to silence and have restraint in speech your capacity for self introspection will increase significantly. Ma always advocated *Maun*. In our Ashrams all inmates are suppose to observe silence from 8.45 pm. To 9.00 pm. You will notice that when we observe silence activities of the mind do not stop and the inner urge to express yourself exists initially and you resort to sign language. Besides, you cannot stop people talking to you. As keeping silence does not deactivate your sense of hearing you may feel disturbed. Solitude is great help in this respect. My three years observance of *Maun* during Ma's time and sixteen years retreat in solitude at Dhaulchina were a great help in spiritual practice. Initial compulsive *Maun* and solitude should become a habit. Then only you can feel the bliss of these. It is almost impossible to have control over all your sense organs simultaneously. If one of those is restrained another will follow its course. Remember, true *Maun* is called the state of *Samadhi*

Q. Ma said, "Be like a child who never grows up." As such this is impracticable both physiologically and psychologically. Again this saying of Ma seems to negate the role of intelligence in spirituality.

A. You raised a good point. Let me quote another saying of Ma in this connection. She said, “ You have had enough of the play of intelligence in life. Victory or defeat, whatever came has happened. Just for once only look at Him and jump on His lap, you need no thought about anything.” Yes, she apparently negated intelligence here. Now please tell me what role intelligence plays in love? Had you ever come across such a term as intelligent-love? Does a child need to apply intelligence in loving its mother? I do not mean to say that intelligence has no role in life. It has importance in its own place. I think spiritual endeavour is not a game to play with intelligence but to play the game of life intelligently to achieve the ultimate objective.

I agree that it is impossible to get back my past childhood both physiologically and psychologically. But I am always carrying the impressions of childhood with me. I can try to delve into my memory, dig out these impressions, be with them and feel my childhood back again. By doing this I can taste the nectar of love which I had lost in the play of intelligence. This is neither impracticable nor impossible.

Q. Sometimes I feel my heart like a stone. I do not feel love for anything or anybody.

A. Your heart can never be like a stone because a stone has no heart to feel. What we call heart is the seat of emotions in minds not the physiological one within the cage of the ribs. Without going into the literal meaning of what you said I can well understand the state of mind you referred to. It is quite natural for a human mind. Now let us analyse why it happens so. In such a state the mind loses its natural composure due to the random disturbances from the objective world outside and within. This state can be the result of frustration. Your expectations are not fulfilled or you are not capable of ascertaining exactly what you want at that point of time. You have a scattered mindfulness. Because we are in a relative world our likes and dislikes are also relative. Behind the aversion to anything there is an inner craving for liking something else which we can not ascertain at times and so get bewildered. If your heart be like a stone, it would be the most desirable state of mind. That is, you have no thoughts and state of thoughtlessness is called the state of Samadhi, the ultimate goal of all human endeavours.

Q. How can one develop love for God?

A. The way is very simple. First try to establish a relationship with God and nurture this with all your heart. Gradually you will feel His closeness. Try to make a permanent seat for Him in your heart.

Q. What are the primary requirements on the path of devotion?

A. Love for God, total faith in Him and untiring practice as advised by the Guru are the few basics on the path of devotion.

Q. Is it possible to love without any expectations?

A. Yes, of course it is possible. You are doing it all the time without knowing it. You can not deny that you love yourself most. At the background of all your objective love lies your love for the self. What do you expect from you own self? You love to look at the image in the mirror. Do you expect the image to love you back?

Q. How can I develop love in me?

A. There is no question of developing love. The only thing required of us is to feel that it is there within us in its full glory. With practice one can acquire and develop a special faculty in him. We are born with love. The objectivity of the world has veiled it and for that we are not able to feel it in its fullness. There is no qualification for or quantification of love although we often do it objectively. By practice when we will be able to unveil it, love in its full glory will shine in us.

Why do we love? Because we know that it is the permanent ambrosia for all our worldly sufferings and pain. If that be so, can love end in pain? But it is not uncommon to witness around us the result of love ending in pain. Here the very definition of love is not tenable. Why is this so? Because, our understanding of love is at fault. Love manifests in action but is not the action itself. No action is perpetual. It starts, continues in a time frame and stops. So is our love when we take it as an action. When we take love as an object it can not be perpetual. It is a transient world. Everything is changing in the temporal frame. My object of love this moment does not remain the same in the next moment. So is my love as long as I take it objectively. The ultimate result is pain again. These facts prompt us to see love with a different outlook beyond the conventional understanding. Love is not there in the object but I need an object to project my love to feel that it is there within me only.

Q. As you said before there is no qualification of or quantifying love. What do you mean by saying so?

A. It is a good question indeed. Quantification is possible in case of a material or an object. To measure anything you need a unit. Now tell me what is the unit of love by which you can quantify it? You love to please yourself and your beloved simultaneously. It is also natural that you are in love with more than one person. If you say to one person that your love for him is less than that which you have for the other, would he be

pleased to hear that? When you give something to others there will be quantitative depletion in your stock of things. But when you give love to others do you have less of it in you? Now you can judge for yourself whether it is practicable to quantify love or not.

Let us consider the qualifying of love. Qualification is always comparative and in degrees. Here again we face the same difficulties as in the case of quantification.

Q. What is Japa and how does it help in spiritual practice.

A. In a simple way Japa can be explained as the repetition of a name or Mantra related to God. It can be done in three ways e.g. mentally, silently and loudly. Another explanation of Japa is the constant remembrance of God. Whenever you remember a person his image along with his qualities appear in the field of your consciousness. You feel his closeness and the relationship between you gets stronger and ultimately you identify yourself with him. It is suggested in the scriptures that when one practices Japa he should contemplate on the very meaning of the name or the Mantra. It is the easiest of all spiritual practices.

Q. What do you think about motivated spiritual practice?

A. No spiritual practice goes in vain. You consider prayer as a spiritual practice. Is it not motivated? In the Gita (Widely known Indian scriptural text) Lord Krishna the narrator named four classes of devotees - helpless, inquisitive, motivated and wise. Whatever may be there in your mind you are in constant remembrance of Him.

Q. What about idol worship? Is God there in the idol?

A. Is your beloved there in the photograph you always carry? What about the statue of mother Mary with child Jesus in her arms on every church alter? Try to get the answers for yourself and your doubts will go away. If you are a believer you also believe in the omnipresence of God. If God is everywhere is He not in the statue or idol?

Q. Why is the same god represented in three ways like Image, Yantra and Mantra?

A. Image represents the gross form of god. Yantra is the geometrical representation of god in subtle form and Mantra represents the subtlest or causal form. An aspirant chooses the form in accordance with his mental make up. It is easier to start with the gross form and with practice one can gradually go higher from gross to causal.

Q. Is AUM a mantra?

A. According to our scriptures it is the primordial sound and the root cause of the ever expanding creation. It is also called the *Sabda Brahma* or the representation of the ultimate reality in the form of sound. The *Vedas* call it the first *Mantra* and all other *Mantras* are the derivatives of this primary one.

Q. What is Maya?

A. Though it is a very short question the answer is not very simple. Being within the shackles of *Maya* it is impossible to feel and understand what *Maya* is. However, for intellectual understanding let us see what Ma said about *Maya*. She said, " *Maya* means *Mai*=Self or ego; *Aya*=Came." When ego comes in between me and God, which clouds my clear vision of Him, it is called *Maya*. In other words, the veil of primal ignorance in sentient beings is called *Maya*.

Q. Can a Guru give me realisation?

A. Realisation is not an object which can be handed over from one person to another. From the Guru one can at best get an academic understanding and that too objectively. Realisation is subjective. The Guru can help awaken your inner potentialities so that you can tread the path to your realisation. Guru can say, "Thou art that." But it is for you to realize, "I am that."

Q. Are you afraid of Ma?

A. Why should I be afraid of someone I love? When I feel secured in the love of Ma fear (that means the sense of insecurity) has no place in me. Fear and love can not stay together at the same time. When I am afraid of someone at that point of time I am surely not in love with him.

Q. In many religious scriptures an aspirant is asked to fear God. How will you explain this?

A. So long you do not establish yourself fully in the love of God a sense of fear of God may be of help in your spiritual practice. It will restrain you from doing wrong.

According to mythology Lord Krishna had been adopted by Yashoda. He was an unpredictable child. One day he went with his friends to the bank of the river and started eating sand. Those who were there could not stop him, so they called his mother. She came with a stick to beat him and asked him whether he had swallowed sand or not, but Krishna did not tremble because he knew that his mother was only acting. She has all love for him.

Love is the key to our happiness. Love is not an object. An object changes but not love. You cannot touch it physically but feel its touch in your heart. When you expect reciprocation in love, it gets diluted. You live with fear of losing love. With a bitter pill in your mouth you cannot have the taste of honey.