

Br Atmananda, some further information.

Interview by Malcom Tillis, 27th December 1980 at Rajpur, Dehradun (from his book New Lives.)

When I met you last month at Kankhal, you were reluctant to give me an Interview — you said you didn't want any personal publicity. When at last you agreed, we found much to your amusement, nothing had been caught on the cassette. I know you have lived in India for nearly 50 years and that you are one of Anandamayi Ma's oldest and first Western disciples. But can you tell me something about your early life and what brought you to India?

My mother died when I was 2 years old so I was brought up by my father and grandmother. He was Polish, but we lived in Vienna. I was interested in religion very early, but I went through many phases. At school I learned about the Jewish religion, and I got very Jewish. I remember saying to my grandmother: I can't stay here, you don't keep orthodox rules — I'm going away! All right — she said — but where will you go? I was 7, so I began to think I better wait.

But by the time I was ten I was an atheist. When the First World War started, I got interested in politics — this lasted a year or two. But I was still religious-minded and began to read Tolstoy when I was 14. That impressed me very much.

When I arrived at the age of 16 I became a vegetarian and started reading Theosophy. But, really, it's very difficult to talk if you are going to publish everything.

Yes, I know. But only what you wish to talk about will be published. You know, our backgrounds are rather similar: I was also born a Jew of Austrian-Polish parents, and like you I became a musician. Can you tell me how you started your musical training?

It was while still a child of 6 or 7. I was considered a wunderkind, although I successfully avoided playing in public. It was at my music teacher's that I met a girl, much older than I, who was a Theosophist. She gave me some books to read, but I didn't like them. Then she brought me Krishnamurti's little book *At the Feet of the Master*. I didn't read it. After some time she wanted it back, so I felt I better read it — you probably know it — it's very short. Well, it had a peculiar affect on me. From that day I couldn't eat meat anymore. My family thought I'd get over it, but since then — it's over sixty years ago — I have never eaten meat. It became contagious: my sister became a vegetarian after one year, then my father, and as my grandmother had no choice, she also followed. It was like that.

From then on I became a keen Theosophist. When I was 21 I came to India for the Jubilee Convention at the International Headquarters in Adyar. That was in 1925. Dr. Annie Besant and Mr. Leadbeater were alive in those days. I should tell you that I had been fascinated by India since my childhood although I didn't know anything about India. When I first heard the names of India's two great epics: Mahabharata and Ramayana, I went home from school repeating those words like a mantra. Of course, I didn't know what a mantra was until much later.

When did you come back to India?

Oh, it wasn't for another ten years... in 1935.

And this time you never went back?

I have not even stepped outside India since then.

How did you meet Anandamayi Ma? She could hardly have been so well-known in those days.

I was teaching at Rajghat School in Varanasi, and although I had heard much about Mataji from friends who knew her, and I was searching for spiritual guidance, I was in no hurry to meet her. It wasn't until 1943 when I was spending my summer vacation in Almora that I had my first darshan. The Danish sadhu who lives there one day said to me: "The Holy Mother is at Patal Devi, why don't you see her on your way back?" The Ashram there was not built then, but I found Mataji sitting in the open on a string cot. A few devotees were squatting at her feet. She seemed all joy and beauty. She addressed a few words to me. She didn't treat me as a stranger but as if I were well-known to her. At that time I knew no Bengali and only some colloquial Hindi, not enough for a serious conversation. I wanted to know more about her. In those days there were no books on her in English. She was always travelling, never in one place for long.

All my life I had been taught to look at things critically and never accept anything on authority. I knew it was difficult to distinguish between an enlightened being and one with a semblance of this divine state. At that first meeting I was wearing European dress, a solar topi, I carried a hand-bag in one hand and a mountaineering stick in the other. My appearance clashed painfully with Mataji's surroundings, and I was sensitive to the curious glances of the devotees.

Nevertheless, I was struck by the inward beauty that shone from their faces. After 15 minutes I got up to go, but within a few months I was able to have Mataji's darshan in Varanasi, where I taught.

This time she was surrounded by a huge crowd under a pandal by the Ganges. This was the site chosen as her new Ashram, although no building had started. Kirtan was going on. I was not used to this spectacular worship and felt out of place.

In spite of the dense crowd and the loud singing and dancing which disturbed me, there was something about Mataji which attracted me profoundly. I wanted to know her at closer quarters, but the chance didn't come so quickly.

She says: No one can come to me until the time is right. It was, therefore, two years later before conditions brought me closer to her.

It was at Sarnath. I was allowed to spend a whole evening with her on the roof of the Birla Dharamsala. Here there were no crowds, only a few companions and Buddhist monks. It was informal and I didn't feel out of place. Sarnath had been my favourite place of pilgrimage ever since I had come to Varanasi ten years before. I spent much time there reading Buddhist scriptures, enjoying the peace and wondering how it was that after millennia the presence of Lord Buddha could still be felt so strongly. I never dreamed that Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon after attaining illumination, would be the setting for a decisive turning point in my life.

I sat quietly by Mataji not wanting to ask anything, just imbibing the atmosphere. Several days passed like this until one evening I had a long private talk with Mataji. What she said was so simple and convincing; no room for doubts. I thought: How strange I had not been able to find

this out myself. And yet I knew it was not another talking to me, but my Self conversing with my self. What Mataji said was evidently only the outer expression of something that took place simultaneously at a deeper level.

The next morning we had another talk to clarify some details, during which Mataji asked whether I had to support anyone in my family. Several weeks later I received news of the death of my aged father, the only near relative I possessed. He had died a refugee in America three days after Mataji had talked to me at Sarnath. The time to make close contact with her came when all worldly ties had dissolved. With extraordinary ease and naturalness she had exploded my problem. Where there had been a constant dilemma, now there was a straight path.

Was it from that time you started editing the magazine "Ananda Varta"?

The nominal editor I have been only for five or six years, but, yes, I have been doing the work from the beginning. The chief editor, Dr. Gopinath Kaviraj, trained me — he was wonderful to me. Anything I couldn't understand he would explain for hours. I used to think: What a waste of time — if he would only dictate the answer I would use it and finish with it. Only afterwards when he was no longer available did I realize he had trained me to do everything myself. The magazine started in the early fifties and is published quarterly. In those early days I had such an intense desire to know what Mataji was saying that I spent all my spare time studying Hindi.

In a year I was able to talk to her without help. No sooner had that happened than Mataji would often call me to translate for foreigners. I had a unique opportunity to witness many private Interviews which enabled me to get first-hand experience of the universality of Mataji's teachings and how she modified them to suit each person's nature, conditioning and needs.

When you were young you were such an accomplished pianist. I wonder if you ever miss classical music now?

Every day I do kirtan for one hour, and at every Ashram function also. Of course, this is Indian music. In the beginning when I heard this loud music I would sneak out — I couldn't bear it as my ear was finely attuned to Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. I think I once told you that when I first came out to India I played piano recitals on the Indian Radio. My favourite composer was Bach, but I also played Chopin, Schumann, Ravel, Debussy, etc. Yes, I gave it all up, but it never was my life really. I was born into another culture and background, but this was no new life that I entered when I came here... you see, I didn't belong to that life.

You would never go back to the West?

No, no, no! No question. But suppose I were deported, I know there would be a quiet place for me somewhere. Even in the West people are living high up in the mountains with no electricity, no running water. One can live the simple life anywhere. If you are meant to live this life, you will live it wherever you are...but I don't want to go back.

Have you taken Indian nationality?

Long, long ago... in 1951. But I have to tell you a strange thing. I don't have a passport. When I was filling out all the forms, they said: You don't want to go out of India? I replied: No, what for? So they never gave me a passport...I don't suppose I can ever leave.

Are you really 76?

Yes. I ought to tell you what happened in 1945 when I wanted to spend the Divali holidays with Mataji at Vindhyachal. The war was not yet over, and being an enemy alien I couldn't leave Varanasi without permission...there was a permit one had to get. I had only just been drawn close to Mataji. So I was anxious that permission be granted. Can you imagine my joy when told henceforth I was free to travel without permission? Since 1939 all my movements had been restricted. As soon as I was free of desire to go anywhere except to be near Mataji, I was suddenly free to go anywhere I liked.

Can you remember something of special interest from those early days spent with Mataji?

I can never forget the Kali puja which was celebrated at Vindhyachal during that first visit in 1945. Mataji was present throughout the whole puja. Her face changed continually: a drama appeared to be enacted on her features. I cannot claim to know how a goddess looks, but she was so radiantly beautiful and so young that night, it surely could not have been the countenance of a human being.

When the puja was over, I didn't feel sleepy in the least, but I went to my room to lie down. Someone knocked at the door calling my name. An asana — a small meditation rug — was handed to me with the message: Mataji sends you this. It was 4 a.m., the time one usually rises for meditation. How subtle — I thought — Mataji is presenting me with a reminder: this is no time to sleep but to sit in meditation! I went outside to thank her; she was still surrounded by people, but she said to me: You were cold sitting without an asana? This small treasure is still with me although through the years it has become badly worn.

When I interviewed Simonetta, she had much to say about Ashram hells. Have you gone through any hells?

Now you see my place...where are the hells? Yes, in the beginning there are difficulties, but difficulties are a necessary part of the training. People from the West think that when you come to the guru you just bask in the Holy Presence. That's part of it — the other part is the difficulties. Mataji is often asked about this. She says: Whatever happens to you is due to past karma which has to be worked out. We come to Ashrams from different social and cultural upbringing and have to mix together. Naturally it's going to cause upheavals. But we take it as part of the polishing.

Perhaps we only see this when the polishing is complete? What do you have to say about the benefits of Ashram life?

The secluded life isn't a thing you choose like going to a hotel. It has to be meant for you. The benefits? I couldn't live any other life. Where would I go? I could never live with a family.

When did you start wearing ochre robes?

You probably know Mataji doesn't give sannyas to Europeans. In 1962 when I had been with her for almost twenty years, she asked someone in my presence whether he wanted to take sannyas; he was not willing. I said: "Mataji, I can take it." She replied: "Achha?" (Indian expression to show approval or surprise) So she gave me a robe with instructions how to dye it and that I should bathe in the Ganges before wearing it. My name she gave at the very beginning.

Is that when you started shaving your head?

Oh, that!...no, no, that's a funny story. Mataji never told me to do that. A few years ago I slightly injured my head; it became septic and troublesome. I asked the doctor to shave the hair off, but he wouldn't. The wound didn't heal so I did it myself. The wound healed but I like to keep my head shaved.

With all the literary work you have been doing, does it not keep you away from Mataji?

I am now too old to travel with her all the time. It was different in the beginning — I was with her very much, at times going to small villages where they had never even heard of a bathroom. I often had to sleep in a storeroom — on the floor — having arrived in the middle of the night. All that was good; you see, everything depends on your attitude. Yes, there may be Ashram hells, but there are two sides to everything. If you wish to be with such a being like Mataji, you have to be prepared to go through ups and downs. I have seen Rajas and Ranis putting up with conditions they hadn't met before. It's hard, but look at how many Ranis come of their own accord to the Samyam Saptah!

Is that the austerity week Mataji holds every year?

Yes. The one that has just ended is the 32nd. They started in 1952. You see, Mataji is extremely particular about one thing: Without self-restraint nothing can be achieved. Mataji firmly maintains if we live soft, indulgent lives, nothing can be achieved. She tells everybody there must be self-discipline. She says that worldly pleasures lead to spiritual death. But knowing that most people live like this these days, she started advising them to keep one day a week or at least one day a month to observe strict rules: eat only one meal, don't smoke, drink or talk unnecessarily, don't visit anyone but stay at home reading scriptures and meditating.

What were the eating arrangements during this week?

On the first day we only take Gangajal — water from the Ganges. The next six days, nothing until mid-day when a simple meal is served. We are not supposed to take tea or coffee but as much Gangajal as we like. That is most cleansing. In the evening there is hot milk for those needing it.

Why do you drink so much Gangajal?

According to what the stomach consumes so will the mind work. When we start this austerity week, the first thing to be done is to clear out the system by drinking plenty of water. Together with the fasting, this clears and tones up the body. For anyone living in luxury, how can they take to the spiritual life? It can't go together. That's why many of those coming from the West get ill — they are spoilt by every sort of comfort. I tell you, the hard life is absolutely necessary.

I wonder if you could end by telling us something about the benefits of the spiritual life?

Oh, oh, oh — there is no end to the benefits. On the superficial level, just look: there are no worldly distractions, you don't have to go out visiting people, or doing useless things. Once you give up these things you can live a private life, a life of seclusion. People used to leave their homes and live alone, but this is difficult. Ashram life is the next best thing, although you have to put up with all sorts of temperaments.

I will tell you one last thing. For me coming to India was not really a new life: I was interested in this from the beginning. I never had to give up anything as I was always out of place there.

In the early days Mataji asked me what I wanted.

I said one word: "Enlightenment."

She replied: "All right. Then sit perfectly still in meditation" .

See also this link for Atmananda's own written description of how she came to Ma. <http://www.anandamayi.org/books/Flower2.pdf>

Taken from "As the Flower Sheds its Fragrance."

The following are excerpts from "Death Must Die," the diaries of Atmananda edited by Ram Alexander.

Her early life:

Atmananda's journey began in Vienna on June 7th, 1904 where she was born into a wealthy Jewish family and given the name Blanca. Her childhood was seriously marred by the death of her mother when she was only two, shortly after the birth of her younger sister, and the two girls were raised by their grandmother and a series of tutors. Blanca's father, although often away on business, took a keen interest in his daughters' education and was determined that they should have the best of everything. Thus, there was one governess who spoke only French to them until they became fluent and another who spoke only English until the same result was achieved.

Upon discovering that Blanca had musical talent, a grand piano was purchased and the best teachers provided. She turned out to be something of a prodigy, giving her first acclaimed public recital at six.

Her father encouraged Blanca's immersion in the extraordinarily rich cultural life of Vienna, then the capital of the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire. This was the Vienna of Freud, Mahler, Gustav Klimt and Richard Strauss, which for one giddy moment had arrived at a pinnacle of Western civilisation. But all this splendour would soon come crashing down under the guns of the First World War, during which at times she, along with much of the rest of the city, would undergo near starvation conditions.

It was amidst the ruin and devastation of this period and its aftermath that the seeds of Blanca's life-long mystical quest were sown. She began reading the spiritual writings of Tolstoy, the sermons of the Buddha and Meister Eckhart, the mystic poetry of Rilke and the esoteric novels of Herman Hesse and Gustav Meyrink.

Then one day, when she was sixteen, while walking alone through a park pondering the senseless destruction around her, one of the defining moments of her life occurred. Suddenly, all matter -trees, rocks, the sky, water- was vibrantly alive and filled with a divine light in which there was no separation between the seer and the seen, but only an ecstatic unity which was by definition, eternal love. For one timeless moment all this was overwhelmingly revealed to her and this revelation was to be the driving force of her life from then on.

Her passing away.

On the afternoon of 24th September, 1985, when Atmananda arrived by taxi from Dehradun at the Kankhal ashram, where the body of Anandamayee Ma had recently been enshrined in an impressive marble temple specially built for this purpose, she was in an extremely debilitated condition. She was running a high fever and her throat had been acutely inflamed and swollen for the last week 6, as a result of

which she had eaten practically nothing. Although quite conscious and evidently not in great pain, life was holding her by the slenderest of threads and she could only speak in a faint whisper. It is not clear whether she went first to the ashram (it was thought she was suffering from diphtheria from which her sister had died from at the age of 17) and then to the dilapidated dharmasala, where she was accustomed to stay on her visits to Kankhal, or whether she went directly to the dharmasala, which was about one kilometre from the ashram, and where her friend and fellow disciple of Anandamayee Ma, Melita Maschmann, was living.

What is very clear, however, is that she was not offered a place in the ashram (where three doctors were residing) in the recently built well-fitted ashram guest house. Instead, it was decided that she should be sent to the ashram hospital in Benares that very night, as it was felt that only there could she receive the proper care. This would have entailed a gruelling 20 hour train ride which would have been excruciating for her. Every effort was made to convince Atmananda to go along with this, but she adamantly refused. This was undoubtedly very upsetting for her, particularly as it was almost impossible for her to speak or to withstand the slightest exertion.

She had come to Kankhal to complete her final sadhana within the sacred precincts of her Guru's samadhi, but this final attachment also had to be renounced. She would have to make do with the primitive and often over-crowded arrangements in the ancient pilgrims' rest house, with Melita to look after her.

The dharmasala where she was taken (where I have also stayed on many occasions), is a massive run down 18th Century structure built like a medieval fortress. Its lime walls are at least 6 feet thick and its four corners resemble turrets. It fronts on a narrow lane that serves as the main avenue to the local cremation ground situated nearby on the banks of the Ganges. At various times during the day, triumphant Hindu funeral processions pass by carrying the body of the deceased on a flower decked bier, the mourners chanting: "Ram nam satya hai" - the name 'Ram' is truth. The rooms, which open onto a central courtyard downstairs and upstairs onto a large open verandah, are extremely minimal, although quite large and draughty, with dirty white-washed walls and a bare cement floor. The only furnishing is a simple Indian rope bed. The windows have rusted iron bars with no glass and cracked wooden shutters. At this time the place was often used for Hindu wedding parties, which are unbearably noisy and frequently go on all night. Fortunately there was nothing scheduled for that evening. The main problem for Atmananda would have been that there was only one primitive latrine that served all of the 10 upstairs rooms (in one of which lived a family of 5), and it was located at least 120 feet from the room she occupied. Nevertheless, in spite of these physical inconveniences, the place had its own charm and she was probably much more relaxed here than she could ever have been in the ashram - particularly as Melita was there to look after her. In fact, it seems profoundly fitting for someone who had renounced all and whose entire life had been nothing if not a pilgrimage, to embark on her final journey from such a humble pilgrim's rest house. There could be no doubt that the Guru's grace was also present in this.

Anandamayee Ma often used to compare the world to a dharmasala, saying that it is merely a temporary shelter on our eternal pilgrimage.

What happened next is best described by Melita who was the sole witness to many of these events:

"It was early afternoon when someone called me out of my room. There were two young men, one from the Dehradun ashram who was accompanying Atmananda and the other was, I believe, the taxi driver. They were holding a large bundle in which, I understood, was Atmananda, although I could not see her. Together we carried her upstairs and put the bundle down on the cot in her old room and, suddenly, there she was! She spoke in a very soft voice. I spread her bedding on another cot and made it as comfortable as possible and that seemed to make her feel more at home. After that her voice became a little stronger and she said that she had had a very high fever but was now feeling a little better. I made her some tea which she drank but we did not talk much as I guess it was difficult for her. So we just sat quietly. After 2 or 3 hours. Swami Swarupananda and the French doctor, Swami Vijayananda, came. The latter examined her and, as I recall, found her not to be mortally ill. Later, after dark, most of the ashram brahmacharinis came to visit and brought her fruits and chatted with her, but her voice was rather weak and she did not say much. Finally one of the swamis said that she should leave for Benares as soon as possible to stay in Ma's hospital there where she could get the proper treatment. But Atmananda was very much against it and it was put off for the next day.

When the guests left, I made some soup for her and we talked. She made me promise to bring out three books containing the accounts of Mother's activities (Matri Lila) which she had published in the "Ananda Varta" over the years. I promised to do so and this made her happy. Then she went to sleep and later on I went to sleep on the second cot. I woke up several times as Atmananda seemed to be having trouble breathing but then she always fell asleep again quickly.

Early in the morning, around 5:00 a.m., I heard her breathing with difficulty and got up and made her some tea. I was worried because she looked so pale and hardly spoke. After the tea, she seemed to feel better and I began talking in a low voice about Ma, Her beauty and Her love, and about how much we had received from Her. Atmananda also said some things along these lines but then, suddenly, I became very concerned as her voice became so soft. I ran to find the father of the family who lived in the corner room. He at once got dressed and went to the ashram to call one of the lady doctors then staying there. Atmananda was continually repeating Ma's name as she had been doing so all morning. In spite of her weakness, with my assistance, she was able to walk to the bathroom and then was able to manage by herself. I then helped her to walk back to the room and again helped her into a sitting position, holding her in my arms and softly repeating the japa of Ma's name along with her.

When I could no longer hear her, I went on repeating "Ma, Ma, Ma..." Suddenly, I felt a strange movement in her whole body and I understood that she had given up her life. I slowly laid her down and covered her face, and kept on praying Ma's name while sitting at her side.

A long time passed and still no doctor came. So I sent someone else to notify the ashram that Atmananda had left her body. Then a big crowd arrived. The Gujarati lady doctor and myself propped her up and arranged her clothes. Later the body was brought to Ma's Samadhi mandir, where the ashram girls washed and dressed it in fresh clothes and placed her just in front of the Samadhi. An hour later she was placed in an open vehicle, with her body seated in a crossed legged position on a chair and covered with many garlands. Then she was taken in procession, in the traditional manner for a sannyasi, to a special area of the Ganges reserved for the submersion of sannyasis. Many ashramites accompanied her and when we returned to the ashram, a bandhara [a ritual feast] was given in her honour - and that was that."

It was observed by those present that Atmananda's exit from this world was that of a true yogini -sitting upright repeating her Guru's name with complete composure. To the credit of the ashram, particularly to the brahmacharinis who made most of the arrangements, in the end Atmananda was given the full honours due to her as a Hindu sanyasini. To my knowledge, she is the only Western woman who has ever been accorded such an honour.