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Afterword

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In the whole universe, in all states of being, in all forms is He. All Names are His names. All shapes His shapes, all qualities and all modes of existence are truly His.

Anandamayi

Words of Anandamayi: Short Communications 1

Question: What are you in reality?

Answer: How could such a question arise in your heart? The vision of gods and goddesses appears in accordance with one's inherited disposition. I am what I was and what I shall be; I am whatever you conceive, think or say. But, more to the point, this body has not come into being to reap the fruits of past karma. Why don't you take it that this body is the material embodiment of all your thoughts and ideas? You all have wanted it and you have it now. So, play with this doll for a little while. Further questions on this matter would be fruitless.

In the whole universe, in all states of being, in all forms is He. All Names are His names. All shapes His shapes, all qualities and all modes of existence are truly His.

If one is to attain the Eternal, it is helpful to look for that in everyone and everything. The search after Truth is man's duty so that he may advance towards Immortality.

The moment that has passed returns not. Time must be used well. Only when spent in the effort to know "Who am I?" has it been used well.

You are yourself the self-evident *atma*: seeking and finding is all in you.

In wealth and property there is certainly no peace. What then does give peace? My own true nature is peace, knowledge, and divine consciousness - unless and until this is revealed, how can there be peace? In order to find your Self, you must become revealed to yourself. How beautiful!

If one stops short at whatever can be achieved by following one line, the Goal of human life has not been reached. What is required is a realisation that will uproot conflict and divergence of opinion, that is complete and free from inherent antagonism. If it be anything less than that it means that one's inner experience is partial and incomplete. In true realisation one can have no quarrel with anyone - one is fully enlightened as to all creeds, faiths, doctrines and sects and sees all paths as equally good. This is absolute and perfect Realisation. So long as there is dissension one cannot speak of attainment.

It is said that even though the Whole is taken from the Whole, the Whole remains the Whole. There can be no additions and no subtractions, the wholeness of the Whole remains unimpaired. Whatever line you may follow represents a particular aspect of it. Each method has its own mantras, its own ideas and states, its beliefs and rejections -to what purpose? To realise Him - your own Self.

One must be fully conscious, wide-awake. To fall into a stupor or yogic sleep will not take one anywhere.

Through every religious Sect He gives Himself to Himself and the value of each of these sects for the individual is that they each indicate a different method to Self-knowledge. He alone is water as well as ice. What is there in ice? Nothing but water.

Question: God has given us the sense of "I", He will remove it again. What need is there for self surrender?

Answer: Why do you ask? Just keep still and do nothing.

Question: How can one possibly keep still?

Answer: This is why self-surrender is necessary

Question: What is the means of entering the tide?

Answer: To ask this question with desperate eagerness.

If you say you have no faith, this body insists that you should try to establish yourself in the conviction that you have no faith. Where 'no' faith is, 'yes' is potentially there as well.

Worship is not a ritual: it is an attitude; it is an experience.

CHAPTER 1

Impressions of Anandamayi

One afternoon, after taking their midday meal, a small group of companions set out by car for Lucknow. After they had passed Unnao, a lady sitting bundled up in the back of the car in gauzy white robes exclaimed: "Look, Didi, what a lovely little village!" and the woman addressed as Didi looked indifferently at the passing view. In all directions stretched the same unchanging expanse of farmland, dotted here and there with clusters of trees and the mud huts of villages. It was a typical scene in the monotonously vast Gangetic valley. The car swept on, raising a cloud of dust in its wake; with the sun high in the sky the scene was shadowless and almost devoid of colour. "Weren't those trees beautiful," the lady in the back persisted as the car sped on. "Come on then," replied Didi patiently, "let's go back and look at them." "But the car has already taken us some distance away," responded the other with some hesitation. "Never mind," Didi put in, "let's go back, driver, please!"

When the car had returned most of the way, it turned off the road and bumped down a track between fields. Silhouetted against the vast horizon, a distant peasant went about his work. The car came to a halt at the edge of the village. The lady who had spotted the trees got out of the car and set off at speed in their direction. Without turning towards the other members of the party, she commanded them: "Bring the basket of fruit and all the garlands that are in the car." Didi did as she was bidden, carrying them all in her arms as she ran to catch up. There was a pond beside a large house with tiled roof and smoothly moulded mud walls. Beside the pond stood two young trees, one a banyan, the other a margosa, growing side by side.

By this time villagers began to collect, curious to know what brought so unusual a vehicle as a motorcar to their rustic dwellings. The woman in the cotton robes of dazzling whiteness cut a striking figure amidst the dun-coloured surroundings, the dun-coloured garments

of the villagers and several dun-coloured dogs. Her fine jet-black hair fanned out over her shoulders and her pale skin was as faintly lined as the delicate grasses silhouetted against a whitewashed wall nearby. She looked about her with keenly alert eyes; a smile came to her lips as she gazed intently at the two trees. Around her a hush fell, the gathering crowd of villagers astonished by the commanding presence of the stranger. She approached the two trees and started caressing their branches and trunks with great affection. Pressing her forehead repeatedly to their trunks she said in soft but clearly audible tones: "Well, well, so you have brought this body here to see you." Everyone looked at the trees with blank incomprehension, there being nothing to distinguish them from countless others dotting the plain. The woman nevertheless seemed to hold everyone in silent thrall.

"What is the name of your village?" she enquired.

"Bhawanipur," was the reply.

"Who planted these two trees?"

"Dwarka," someone offered.

"Is the owner of this land at home?"

"No, but his wife is over there."

The group of visitors, who were now being watched with intense curiosity by a cluster of children, turned and saw the owner's wife approaching. Addressing the woman with sweetness of tone and expression, the visitor in white told her: "take great care of these two trees and worship them. It will be for your good."

Then she took the garlands from Didi and decorated the trees with them and distributed all the fruit from the basket to the incredulous villagers. Without the faintest notion who she was, they all assumed postures of deferential respect towards her, as if they perceived her to be of exalted station. Yet they could instantly recognise her as one of themselves, a simple woman simply dressed and accustomed to village ways. She moved easily among them, but paid tender attention to the numerous children while at the same time encompassing one and all within her friendly and attentive gaze.

She turned back whence she came, closely followed by the crowd, who were now smiling with awkward pleasure, yet still dismayed by the inexplicable attention conferred on them and on a couple of trees by a bunch of total strangers.

"Margosa and banyan - Hari and Hara!" exclaimed the lady.

"Now you've given these trees the names of gods," Didi declared in wonder.

When they reached the car, the crowd were enjoined to plaster the place round the trees with a mud platform.

Then the lady in white asked them: "Do you repeat God's name-. Even though you may not be able to do so daily, at any rate now and again perform *puja* worship and sing *kirtana*, or religious songs, under the boughs of those trees." Then she turned to her companions. "How extraordinary!" she observed, "those trees were pulling this body towards them as people might. The car was carrying us away from them, but it was just as if they caught hold of the shoulders of this body and dragged it back in their direction. This kind of thing has never happened before."

As the visitors got back into the car, one of the villagers diffidently enquired of the driver who was the great lady who had referred to herself as "this body".

"Anandamayi Ma of Bengal. Remember this visit well, for she is a holy person and she never does anything without meaning."

This incident, which I have reconstructed from the diary account of Didi Gurupriya Devi, Anandamayi's lifelong chief assistant, typifies the paradoxical status of a figure such as Anandamayi in modern Indian society. She is so unusual that there is no woman, not even an example known to us from the past, with whom she can be compared except in the vaguest of terms. We are baffled, as were the inhabitants of Bhawanipur, by her unplaceability. A strange event was visited upon the good peasants of that nondescript village - an eruption of the sacred which they would puzzle over for many years.

In her speech, mode of dress and features, the lady with the airs of a holy person seemed to belong nowhere or everywhere.

Nowadays, we indiscriminately call such a charismatic figure a Guru, without being any too clear what that term means other than, perhaps, somebody with pretentious claims to spiritual wisdom. We relegate all Gurus to a dubious category of exotic, perhaps dangerous, cults. Gurus have been seriously discredited by recent scandal and tend to be treated with a degree of caustic suspicion. We recall Bhagavan Rajneesh - he of the 87 Rolls Royces - or various cult leaders whose followers committed mass suicide. We look on them as sinister and mendacious personalities who take backhanders from politicians or seduce the daughters of our friends.

Traditionalists point out that people like Sri Aurobindo, Krishnamurti, Swami Ramdas and Swami Shivananda, Mother Meera, Sai Baba and Meher Baba are not Gurus at all but a hybrid phenomenon catering to foreigners.

Certainly, the glamorised deluxe ashrams which have sprung up in recent decades are a far cry from the modest pattern of the age-old *guru-shishya* relationship of master-disciple tutelage; yet this ancient system survives, for example, in the teaching of classical music and dance.

Throughout Indian history, this pattern of instruction ensured the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. In the case of Anandamayi who did not herself have a Guru, but was self-initiated, the traditional model of the teacher and the taught has, in certain respects, taken on new life, but in other equally important respects she radically departed from tradition.

Her role as a revered Brahmin divine was by no means orthodox since this was a departure from the traditional status parameters of the married woman; further, for some 50 years as a widow and thus a member of the lowliest rank of Indian society, she was at the same time one of the most sought after of all spiritual teachers.

Yet again, she revived the old custom of the *gurukul*, an ancient style of schooling for both girls and boys at her ashrams. Until almost the very end of her life she could not be classed as a Guru in a technical sense; for a Guru is one who gives *diksha* to disciples, or initiation by mantra.

Nevertheless, in the more general and metaphorical sense of spiritual teacher she was certainly a Guru, one of the greatest and the most respected of her time. In addition, she was indeed the Guru to many advanced *sadhakas* spiritual practitioners.

For them she was everything that the Guru traditionally should be a perfect vehicle of Divine Grace. There is a section in the excerpts from the discourses of Anandamayi included here where she comments at length on the spiritual meaning of the Guru. The true Guru is never to be regarded by the disciple as merely human but as a divine being to whom he or she surrenders in total obedience.

The disciple places himself in the hands of the Guru and the Guru can do no wrong.

Moreover, from the point of view of the Guru's disciples, the Guru is the object of worship. Obviously so serious a commitment is hedged about with all manner of safeguards, for the Indian is as aware of the perils inherent in such a position of absolute authority as is any sceptical outsider - rather more so, in fact, for much experience about the dynamics of the *guru-shishya* bond has been amassed over the millennia of its existence.

How could such adulation, such assumption of control over another's destiny, fail to turn the heads of all upon whom this mantle of omniscience falls? Everything depends on the closely observed fact that there are a few rare individuals at any one point in time who are so devoid of ego that no such temptation could possibly be felt. Egolessness is the *sine qua non* of the Guru.

For an Indian, submission to tutelage by a Guru is but one among many possible routes to salvation, or Self-Realisation. In the case of Anandamayi, it has become obvious, indeed widely known, that we are dealing with a level of spiritual genius of very great rank. Her manifestation is extraordinarily rich and diverse.

She lived for 86 years, had an enormous following, founded 30 ashrams, and travelled incessantly the length and breadth of the land. People of all classes, castes, creeds and nationalities flocked to her; the great and the good sought her counsel; the doctrine which she expounded came as near to being completely universal as is attainable by a single individual.

Though she lived for the good of all, she had no motive of self-sacrifice in the Christian sense: "there are no others," she would say, "there is only the One". She came of extremely humble rural origins, though from a family respected over generations for its spiritual attainments.

In the course of time she would converse with the highest in the land, but draw no distinction between the status of rich and poor, or the caste and sectarian affiliations of all who visited her. She personified the warmth and the wide toleration of the Indian spiritual sensibility at its freshest and most accessible.

The fact that she was a woman certainly accentuates the distinctive features of her manifestation. Female sages as distinct from saints capable of holding sustained discourse with the learned are almost unheard of in India. Her femininity certainly imparts to the heritage of Indian and global spirituality certain qualities of flexibility and common sense, lyricism and humour not often associated with its loftiest heights.

Her quicksilver temperament and abundant *lila* sacred play are in stark contrast with the serenity of that peerless exemplar of Advaita Vedanta, Sri Ramana Maharshi of Tiruvannamalai, the quintessence of austere stillness. That a woman of such distinction and wide-ranging activity should emerge in India in the 20th century, the century of world-wide feminism and reappraisal of feminine phenomenology, hardly seems a coincidence. The Guru, by definition, reflects the profoundest and most urgent needs of all followers. While the Guru incarnates the wish-fulfilments of a myriad devotees, he or she also extends, expands and elevates to new and unfamiliar sensitivity those who take heed.

I believe Anandamayi has added a whole new spiritual dimension to the re-awakening awareness of women to their own inheritance. As an exemplary figure, she emanates a feeling of complete ease, warmth and secure confidence in her femininity.

Anne Bancroft, in her line study of modern women mystics, *Weavers of Wisdom*, quotes this moving statement by an English woman: "I felt she loved me so utterly that I could never be the same again. Although I only saw her a few times, I have never lost that feeling

and her presence is always with me. She was a person who had a vision of life and reality which she could transmit in such a way that, since seeing her, I have always known that there is harmony and purpose in the universe."

In the wisdom and profundity of Anandamayi's discourse we recognise the true voice of the sage. But she was more than just a wise person, although when it comes to defining exactly what this special extra dimension to wisdom and spiritual goodness was, adequate words are hard to find. She was, I believe, just about as near perfect a human simulacrum of the divine as we are ever likely to encounter on this planet. I chose the word 'simulacrum' with care for the simple reason that I do not know what a divine human being really is. I am agnostic to this degree, whereas the majority of her followers are devotees, *bhaktas*, and for them she is, without qualification, truly a Divine Being. I have already tried to show that, in India, assertion of such an audacious claim for the Guru is nothing out of the ordinary.

Attribution of divine status to a living person is deeply entrenched in the Indian spiritual outlook.

However, it is important to point out that such an attribution is not made arbitrarily by credulous neophytes. The sacred, the divine and the holy are realities intricately bound up with, and elaborately developed within, the various metaphysical and mystical systems of high learning.

Attribution of divinity is also commonplace in Indian theology. What matters is the unique particularities of the person to whom this attribution is given.

In the present instance, Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Sri Gopinath Kaviraj, who was before his retirement head of the Sanskrit College in Varanasi, devoted long study to this issue in an essay published in 1961. Arthur Koestler was aroused to particularly contemptuous scorn by this essay, pointing out that this kind of scholasticism went out of fashion in Europe in the 16th century. Perhaps, but what I find particularly appealing is Gopinath Kaviraj's scrupulous modesty, at all times he admits the powerlessness of his intellect to fathom a

phenomenon that is intrinsically paradoxical and resistant to rational deduction.

I had felt years ago that it was beyond my powers to delineate through words a faithful picture of Anandamayi, showing her not merely as she was in herself, but even as she appeared to me. I feel the same difficulty and hesitancy even now; perhaps all the more strongly with the deepening of my sense of mystery about her . . . the best thing for us would be to try to love her deeply and sincerely and by loving her to bring ourselves into closer union with her true Self.

I am convinced that as a result of this process she will surely reveal herself to us more fully according to the degree of our fitness and receptivity and that we shall then be in a fortunate position to know *immediately*, and not through our intellect, which sees through a veil and perverts what it sees, what she truly is.

And in so knowing her we shall be able to know our own selves also.

The person herself, divine or not, offers concrete evidence, at a time when our world-view is dominated by scientific rationalism, that spiritual perfection, or at least spiritual *perfectibility*, remains as much within our reach as it ever did in the past. In the face of what this woman visibly manifests I can only play with words.

Although both words and photographs can lie, the photograph does have a certain workaday veracity. I only hope that my combination of words and pictures honours the reality of this remarkable woman.

I first met Anandamayi in 1954, on my first visit to Varanasi. I was a freelance photographer specialising in magazine reportage. I was always on the lookout for fresh feature material.

I was 26 travelling rough, and hard pressed to locate marketable themes in a notoriously competitive field. I heard of Anandamayi through a remarkable Austrian pianist and schoolteacher, Blanca Schlamm, who had been a follower of Krishnamurti for 30 years. On the staff of a school inspired by the ideas of Krishnamurti, she was then in the process of readjusting her whole life to the new perspective opened up for her by Anandamayi. She already had

considerable experience of Mataji's teaching and devoted scrupulous care to the translation of her words into English for the ashram magazine, under the name Atmananda. Moreover, due to her linguistic abilities Atmananda was frequently called upon to act as interpreter, not only for foreigners in private talks with Mataji, but also for many Indians who understood neither Bengali nor Hindi, the two languages in which Mataji conversed.

My first glimpse of Anandamayi was inadvertently preceded by a solecism. Standing by the roadside awaiting her car as she drove into Varanasi, I was nervously holding a small bunch of roses with which to greet the great lady. Time passed and, as I fretted, I took a deep sniff at the flowers in my hand.

"Now you have polluted them with your sniff! You can't offer polluted flowers!"

I must have looked mortified as I glanced at the innocent blooms, aghast at my occidental crudity.

"Oh well, because you didn't know you mustn't sniff an offering, it won't matter!"

The car eventually came into sight, heading towards the beautiful Varanasi riverfront, and pulled up. An impressive party of women scrutinised me as I singled out Anandamayi and offered my roses. I found myself peering in at this handsome woman bundled into the back seat, smiling encouragingly at me. The car swept on into the city.

My professional curiosity had been aroused; no photographer had yet covered her for the Western media. If Henri Cartier-Bresson had recently photographed Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ramana Maharshi, then Anandamayi - their successor in stature, as I was given to understand - might provide me with a scoop. I therefore set out to visit her riverside ashram the next day. My glib cameraman's nose for a story might pollute a rose with a sniff but I resolved to improve my manners and get down to some serious work.

This humdrum beginning to my acquaintance with Anandamayi would lead me into an entirely fresh phase of apprenticeship. Until

then, I had sought to record, among many other themes, the spiritual life of India as and when I found it, consistently from an outsider's point of view. Indeed, I went to much effort to maintain this outsider's view as a positive factor in my work. At that time, reportage photographers consciously accepted a role as detached-yet-sympathetic observers, using a kind of built-in secularism as a means to achieve candid, anonymous, non-judgemental records of things-as-they-are. Now out of courtesy for the feelings of a cloistered group of people under the scrutiny of my lens, I would have to learn an altogether different approach. There was, besides, my ignorance of my subject. First impressions of Anandamayi as I sat in the ashram hall watching her were of a woman truly impressive in stature and intelligence, and of great psychological complexity. Here was a woman of high prestige, of most striking appearance, displaying a diversity of eloquent facial expression, moving about with superb grace and surrounded by a congenial multitude of staunchly individual, highly evolved followers.

However, this was no more than a minimal starting-point. It was not long before I discovered a very striking visual effect: those around her all seemed to converge upon her figure in spontaneous often fast-changing, unconsciously felicitous compositions.

The graceful plasticity with which they took up their places in a single configuration at once recalled to me visual art traditions that I assumed belonged irretrievably to the past. No sooner had I noticed this than I was struck by something I was naive enough to believe impossible: events and experiences essentially inner in nature could best be portrayed in action.

I had assumed that it would be impossible to take high-speed action photographs of movement expressing inner, spiritual love of one person for another - until, that is, I saw someone prostrate at Anandamayi's feet. In that instant, Rembrandt's great painting of his old age, of the Prodigal Son falling at his father's feet, which I had hitherto regarded as a parable, became a living reality. Similarly, when I saw the retinue of women disposed around Anandamayi, I recalled a similar disposition of figures in Poussin's great series of paintings of the Seven Sacraments. Here was a throwback to the past occurring in the here and now with a certain gritty actuality that was unmistakably 20th century in character. I suppose I fancied myself

as an ultra-modern photographer extending the possibilities of visual instantaneity.

The last thing I wanted to do, however - and on this I was adamant - was to imitate the old masters. Equipped with a lightweight camera and fast film, engaging with a peaceable community where stillness and timelessness were of the essence, I would focus upon the fugitive and fleeting instant.

But I had a feeling that I was looked on as if I was doing something tantamount to blasphemy, whereas from my point of view my approach would result in the revelation of a hidden mystery.

The freezing action of the fast shutter does have the power to uncover events which the human eye can scarcely register, but which intuition knows to exist, as it were, in a state of latency. What Anandamayi's retinue feared might *reduce* pure moments of true spiritual feeling to pictorial crudity, could, I was sure, *enhance* them.

It was considered indelicate to portray a revered figure as subject to ageing without recourse to retouching. Preferably, the face of the holy, even in a photograph, should be depicted like an icon, transubstantiated. Whereas, as in the Zen precedent of the famous Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, which represent sequent steps on the path to enlightenment, I would portray the highest attainable state of grace not as a quasi-divine being but as someone who is *nothing special*.

Here, in fact, was my solution: I would adapt the methods of contemporary photojournalism for purposes of visual anti-hagiography. I would proceed with as much tact and patience as I could muster, seeking the revelatory moment when that quality of *nothing special* was revealed in the split second of my open shutter.

Pure paradox! This would be a project made possible by a combination of Anandamayi's quicksilver grace and the cheeky efficiency of a good camera. From the start I noticed how fast was the tempo of her movements, how rapid her changes in facial expression, how swift her gestures, how quick her powers of

observation. The camera seemed to me a thoroughly sympathetic instrument for registering the subtle interplay between the fleeting and that, which never changes.

The sacred art of the past employs stillness, permanence, immobility, hieratic gesture, and stylised and abstracted features in the depiction of exalted spiritual beings. To achieve transcendence of mundane appearances, sacred art of all epochs and all cultures also depended upon the artist's ability to depart as far as possible from any factual resemblance to natural appearances. For instance, the sublime beings carved from the living rock of India's ancient cave sanctuaries do not counterfeit the look of mere mortals - they are divine by reason of their distance from the facts of material reality.

Was I, by freezing action with fast shutter speeds, committing sacrilege in a holy place, or was I pushing the limits of the optical to evoke that which lies beyond time? Anandamayi did not curb my immoderate zeal; one of her most persistent *leitmotifs* was the need for *skill in action*. She tolerated my close attendance with intrusive apparatus for days at a time spanning a period of four years. So, with equal generosity, did many of her followers, who no doubt had better things to do than fuss over my needs.

What was I trying to do? First, I was trying to be truthful to experience. A friend of mine, the veteran educator Sanjiva Kao, compared Anandamayi's mind to an extraordinarily sensitive photographic plate. "She contacts the world around her without the mediation or interpretation of a busy mind. This mind carries an absence of independent activity of its own, but generates a clear mirror for the reflection of Truth. The photographic plate records without distortion the physical and psychic events occurring around it. Anandamayi possesses an extraordinary gift of remembering people she has met despite the ceaseless and numberless parade of faces which passes daily in front of her eyes." Here was my model in a dual sense: on the one hand, a paragon of that "I am a camera" truthfulness I sought to emulate; on the other, a photographer's "model" whom I could record from every angle. By a series of decisive moments, recorded by ultra-efficient lens and film, at the very quick of life, I would move in close to this hypersensitive person as she in turn moved out to meet me. In that conjunction of reciprocal awareness, a third reality would come into being, an

image escaped from the trammels of time recording an occurrence powerful enough to eclipse my own intrusive ego.

As things turned out, this proved to be a hard apprenticeship: sessions involved intense visual concentration and, often as not, ended with no picture being taken, due either to the press of devotees or insufficient light. Almost all the best moments with Anandamayi occurred at night or in deep shade, when it was not possible to use a camera. Besides, her attention was so acute that she seemed at times to anticipate my every move, however discreet, permitting me to use my camera only briefly - no verbal refusal was ever given, just ingenious evasion - and at her own moment of choice! There was, often, no mistaking those occasions when photography was deemed unacceptable. At other times, compliance was tacit and the work proceeded without mishap. My most important requisite, I soon discovered, was my own heart. Nothing worked if I was not focused heart and soul upon my task - there would simply be no way through and I would be blocked. Only when my emotional temperature was sufficiently high, or sufficiently cool, so it seemed, did she pick up the correct signal and make way for me. Here was a lesson in a new kind of concentration. Photography became my *sadhana* spiritual exercise, as meditation and yoga were the *sadhana* of my fellow ashram inmates. It was my path to Truth.

The ashram garden was like the wings of a theatre; people made their entrances and exits through its screen of foliage to the handsome terrace over the Ganges. Here I watched many scenes of breathtaking beauty. It was indeed a kind of stage, but for the performance of sacred drama; it never had even the slightest touch of theatricality about it though, nor were the players given to strutting the boards", as my figure of speech might suggest.

The marvellous thing about this terrace stage was the fact that every action, which took place there, sprang from the inner motivation of all who walked upon it. The performances were not according to a script in an assumed and predetermined role, but a spontaneous participation in divine *lila*.

Like iron filings attracted by a magnet, everyone was drawn into the ineluctable patterns of a current whose force was holistically greater than the sum of its parts. The location high above the sacred waters, the magical light which is so distinctive a charm of this ancient city,

the pulsations of the *kirtan* singers circling close to Anandamayi - all contributed to the enchantment. The retinue of women who seemed to accompany her wherever she went looked exactly as one would imagine the Greek Chorus looked -and no doubt had a kindred function.

Here on the terrace people would gather for Mataji's *darshan* blessing by presence during her promenades. Very early in the morning, when the mist created the effect of a lace veil in the still air between parapet and river, she might stroll for a while, heavily wrapped in a shawl. Nobody could tell when she would come out of her room; when at last she did so, all eyes would be upon her, following her every movement in a contemplative vigil. It was lovely to watch the people come and go, some prostrating themselves at Mataji's feet; sometimes she gave an exquisite response, her hands folded delicately in ever-changing *mudras*, at other times she would become absorbed with a suppliant in brief counselling.

I soon noticed the complete absence of regimentation - no serried ranks or rows of obedient congregation, no processions no massed lines of followers performing synchronised rituals at the command of intoning priests. The only activity organised in patterns was the chanting of hymns, particularly a fine *arati* hymn, evensong verses composed for Anandamayi's people. There were many occasions, especially during festivals, when the music provided an insistent and compelling rhythmical pulse to quicken the spirit and carry people to the border of rapture. More usually; *nama kirtan* was an opportunity to generate ardour. I can still, 40 years on, feel a tingle in my spine when I recall the haunting voice of Pushpa, a gifted young woman, as she repeatedly called out the name of a deity - a wonderfully archaic sound, like a maenad shrilling in the sacred wood. Now and then Anandamayi would sing - inimitably - in a sweet, youthful, transparent way. The mood was relaxed, but also poignant.

In those days, in the 1950s, hardly any people from the West turned up. It was considered a "difficult" ashram, with orthodox pollution rules scrupulously observed, Bengali and Hindi the only languages spoken, and the routine a distinctively paradoxical mixture of genial informality and stern discipline. This was a place of absolutely strict asceticism, no two ways about it. And, interestingly, there was never any question of it being anything other than just that. It was an

irreducibly chaste regime and this simplicity gave the institution freshness and lightness of tone. At that time, there were only two non-Indians resident in all Anandamayi's ashrams. A year before I arrived, the celebrated anthropologist of the Ituri pygmies, Cohn Tumbull, had spent a while imbibing Mataji's compelling ways.

She had filled exactly that emptiness I had felt in the western world, and through her I learned how to lead a whole life how to carry the spirit into the every-day world, how to lead an every-day life that is at the same time a dedicated life, and intensely spiritual.

In her ashram I felt the bond of brotherhood which will eventually unite the world, and in the mutual love and consideration which pervaded all those gathered around Mataji I found a way of life which is yet but a dream among the majority of the people of the western world. There was no question of rich and poor, good or bad, high or low there was perfect brotherhood among all.

I think that perhaps the greatest things I learned were a love for Truth and a love for all my fellow beings. Truth can be a hard master, but there are none better, for Truth is one of the ways in which the spirit is revealed. Those around Mataji could not help but be impregnated with this wonderful ideal, and at the same time feel all the petty differences and distinctions which normally surround us disappearing. Here was life as it should be led, life for the One Self not for the little individual self, a life in which all of us could join equally no matter how feeble and weak we were.

Foliage and flowers in the Varanasi ashram were monastic - nature here was barely more than hinted at in the immediate field of vision; beyond stretched a hazy waste of water and distant fields.

Soon after I first met Anandamayi that sounds so social, it was more a silent encounter! I spent a number of days in close proximity to her at her ashram in Vindhyachal. Here I was able to see her in the depths of the Indian countryside and to gauge how deep was her relation to all living things. Vindhyachal, at some distance from Varanasi, huddles at the foot of a sacred hill on the edge of a rocky wilderness clad with jungle overlooking the Gangetic plain. It is a hallowed spot sacred to Tantrics, with remains of great antiquity. On the slopes of the hill are plunging, forested gullies, sequestered

temples and primeval shrines. It was winter when I arrived and the leaf-strewn ground beneath gnarled trees and rocks was littered with beautiful sculptures that had fallen from ruined temples. The little ashram, strangely reminiscent of Tuscan farmhouses, commanded a magnificent view from atop the hill. The majestically wide Ganges meandered across a vast sandy bed into the far distance. The main ashram building was a rectangular two-storey tower surrounded by verandas on all sides. From the upper balcony one could view clusters of dwellings at the foot of the hill and a square temple tank, with a single pillar at its centre rising from the water like the Axis Mundi, the still point of the turning world. Everything at Vindhyachal was steeped in the bright winter hush. During the day, the air was very clear and every speck of detail stood out sharply, as in a medieval miniature. Only the distant sound of a dog barking or a temple bell rang through the echoing air. At night, it became misty and extremely cold, the temperature dropping almost to freezing point.

There were only about a dozen of us there. Anandamayi often retreated from the crowds to this ashram. It was a perfect, unhurried setting in which to imbibe the nature of her being and savour the atmosphere of this enchanted spot. It was a remarkably non-culture-specific scene. On that hilltop one might have been almost anywhere in the world, so muted was the detailing. At the ashram, people wore plain, anonymous garments, mostly unadorned lengths of wrap-around cotton with woollen shawls.

These clothes were white and indeed the whole scene was very muted in colour. In this basic environment I had the sensation of being located at the outer reaches of what had once been a single, vast hegemony which stretched from the eastern extremity of India to the furthest western fringe of Ultima Thule.

Upon this domain, as one can often feel in the Gangetic plain, there remain faint traces of an ancient uniting force, that of Greece, which spread across immensities of time and space to leave their gentle impress - no more than ghostly traces now, but palpable none the less - upon dwellings and people.

In this antique land, Anandamayi had something about her of the sibyl and walked abroad like a Homeric prophetess or Hebraic psalmist. She also brought to mind archetypes from the basilicas of Byzantium and Constantine's home, and from *Zeud Avesta* and Mahabharata.

The upper storey of the ashram contained Anandamayi's very simple quarters, with surrounding balconies. She would sit here on the southern balcony every morning in light shade, perhaps dictating letters while having her long and fine hair combed by an attendant. One morning it became wordlessly clear that I could approach with my camera. The light was perfect; all was quite still. I stood directly and silently in front of her, paused to collect my thoughts, made some camera adjustments, pre-focused my lens to its closest range and moved forward until her features came into focus on the ground-glass viewfinder of my reflex camera. Holding the camera below my own eye-level, I slowly looked up from it. My eyes were now level with hers and she was precisely 68 centimetres, 27 inches away. For what seemed like an eternity I steadied my breathing and we very gently gazed into each other's eyes. Or at least I did, but she cast her cleansing glance right through me into the far distance. For a moment I felt myself to be completely transparent, without substance. Then I pressed the shutter once and moved away. I never needed, nor wished, to do that again.

I used to go for walks in the sacred groves and wander around the temples, quite alone. I peered into dark, sinister niches in the rock where stood terrifying images of deities. Only in close-up could the truly Indian character of Vindhyaachal be appreciated, particularly in the juxtaposition of these deities of the local folk culture with the refined sweetness of the classical sculpture that tumbled from some great, lost monument nearby. Then I would pick my way among rocks and pebbles beneath intricate networks of bare winter branches, or clear the autumn leaves from the sculptures strewn around. Everywhere there were streaks, veins, marks, striations, dapplings, twigs, bark, lichen, moss, ferns, and thickets.

I would return to the ashram and take my place with the others at the foot of Anandamayi's bed. She was only a pace or two away; sometimes there was talk and laughter, animated discussion and tales recounted of her early life. There was no exaggerated emotionalism about her; her voice flowed, mellifluous and clear, like the water in a stream, tumbling without hesitation over sparkling pebbles. At other times she was silent, swaying a little from side to side, her head tilted as if listening to something far away. Her face was tender and her whole personality radiated a secure warmth. In a swift mood-change her sense of humour shone. She was at home, among her people, perfectly natural, charged with life.

Now and then I would disengage myself from this deep immersion and look into the room from outside, along with a few bystanders from Vindhyachal. The scene, especially by lamplight, reminded me of Flaubert's famous remark on catching sight of cottagers in their lighted hovels: "Ils sont dans le vrai" - literally; "they are in the truth". But the analogy I will use for these scenes is that of a conductor with an orchestra, each musician playing a different instrument. Here, Mataji was conducting a symphony of quietness, not by commands or even by a unifying beat, but by a kind of focused persuasion, suggestion, inspiration. Each person present would be pursuing his own inner tune and perhaps occasionally giving voice to a solo or joining a duet discussion.

When Mataji fell silent, as she often did for minutes on end, she would tilt her head upwards in a variety of ways, but always accompanied by a flick of her locks and a shift in her gaze - intent, alert, *hearkening*. It seemed to me that, with these little pauses, she was whisking all present through the portals of an open door into a larger, more magical domain of invisible intimations. Even as I write, I can recall these little adjustments of her posture exactly: they had a "creature" quality, like a bird ruffling its feathers before it settles to roost.

These were moments of pure enchantment when I could watch everyone respond as if to fresh inspiration. Like ears of ripening wheat in a light breeze, they would sway a little before they too would settle and glow.

I could look over her shoulder, through door and balcony, and see the branches of trees, pebbles, rocks, leaves and twigs which I had

recently examined closely. My eyes would return indoors and scan this sibylline figure as she sat relaxed and bemused. I marvelled at the soft texture of her skin, at the way the shadows round her eyes seemed to have the density of velvet. She retained a youthfulness, which belied her age: 58. I was fascinated by her incessantly mobile features, especially the multiplicity of extremely delicate lines that wove a mobile network across her skin, notably on her forehead and on her lips.

I felt I was looking again at all the intricacies of line I had been tracing in the woods - as if she were a part of the vegetation and the markings of her face and the markings on the trees were all part of a long intricate inscription written in one single script. I had stored in my memory a beautiful observation of Paracelsus on this theme.

It went something like this: 'there are many kinds of chiromancy, not only the chiromancy of man's hands, from which it is possible to infer and discover his inclinations and his fate; there are yet other kinds of chiromancy - for example, that of tree leaves, of herbs, of wood, of shells, of rocks and mines, the chiromancy of landscapes, countries, their roads and rivers.'

Written horizontally across Anandamayi's brow were five lines like those of a music score; crossing these were a myriad fine-spun vertical lines in constant movement, knitting and fanning out, narrowing and widening like the action of a loom when the warp and weft open and close. At the mid-point, her brow was momentous, with a suggestion about it of a membrane for receiving and transmitting signals. The brow arched high, expansive and flat, to meet the hairline abruptly. This arching forehead and an energetic jaw like the prow of a ship sailing out of harbour were her most distinctive features. The nose and brows were rounded, gentle, and unassertive. The mouth was very wide, with a multitude of little dips and puckerings, a trenchant line dipping at the centre; so changeable was her mouth that to find any definitive shape in it was impossible.

The eyes of a sage are, of course, the focus of intense interest. Anandamayi's eyes were, as might be expected, most unusual and strange. It was actually quite difficult to settle your gaze on them, regardless of whether or not she happened to be looking at you. At times they were serene and still, but more often they flickered and fluttered like hovering moths, with neither self-consciousness nor

agitation certainly not in any way flirtatious or hypnotic. No, their flickering seemed to indicate intense receptivity, mental agility, as if she was listening to a myriad inaudible and different signals on a radio receiver.

I have never watched such an *eventful* face. It was not exactly focused on any one spot however, but this acute attention seemed diffused in order to encompass both the very near and the very far. Then, like a light being switched off- without the least drama - all animation, all expression, all the fine sensitivity that held you in thrall, would abruptly vanish. Just for a little while, the face would become, like that in the last of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, *nothing special*.

Once or twice on these occasions our eyes would meet. But even then, it was hard to say whether they did or didn't meet, for the radar power of her eyes seemed to cover a wide range. It is difficult to tell what their colour was either, but I guess it was a mixture of black, brown and russet. The irises were irregularly flecked, crumbly with golden glints. I could focus on one eye quite easily, being as near as I was; I could settle on it comfortably even when she seemed to be looking straight at me. But if I made a concentrated effort to look into the other eye, it was not only extremely difficult to hold my gaze but the eye became strangely perturbed and to blink within an otherwise impassive face. My description of this scrutiny no doubt reads as detached, clinical, controlled. In fact, it was much more feeling-saturated and communicative than I can put into words. It was a truly extraordinary experience, inspirational, uplifting, consolidating. Yet it is natural that I should describe this particular face in such impersonal terms, considering who she was. In her silence she was, it seemed, *aside*, detached, apart. She did not give an impression of coldness in the very least, but her sheer presence was paradoxical.

One had to take a long searching look before one found this ultimate redoubt of Selfhood.

No sooner has one made any kind of assertion as to her true nature than one has to qualify it! I could say she had the simplicity of a rose,

but I could equally say she had all the complexity of a rose. Her *nothing special* quality did not, however, conceal her distinction of manner and movement, especially in a crowd.

Her walk was unusual and this alone marked her out, even when viewed from a long distance away. It had a sort of comfortably springy elasticity: she seemed to relish the sensation of walking. The English poet, Lewis Thompson, who, from long experience, had developed a discerning eye for people of very high spiritual quality, met and had long private talks with her in 1945, and said he could tell at once she was a realised being from the way she walked - completely without ego.

She had a marvellous way with words and a marvellously musical voice, as anyone who has heard her in person or has listened to tapes of her singing, will testify. Bengali is a sweet-sounding and sibilant tongue. To my ear, her mode of speaking seemed to be quintessentially feminine, but more than merely in its vocal pitch and its emotional colouring, for she used words in special and remarkable ways. She was a virtuoso in the use of dazzling verbal cadenzas that bounded away from every scriptural score - pure spontaneous extemporisations, not only with the sounds and the puns inherent in word-play or *word-lila*, but, more importantly; in the import of the thought behind the words. Here was the other half of spirituality - the often-unheard feminine half-reunited and completed in non-dual gender.

There was an essentially poetic organisation in everything she said, but then all sacred utterance, all sacred text is traditionally poetic in the Eastern cultures. Her words bounded out of her without the least hesitation, rich in vocabulary, endlessly allusive within the heritage of quotation and conceptual paradoxes, which comprise the corpus of India's spiritual traditions.

She had a curiously tele-grammatical way of constructing her sentences, leaving out any words which her care over clarity of meaning could dispense with, as if there was no time for lingering; so swift was her mind, so direct its route. A Bengali poet told me: 'she talks the way modern Bengali poets write@'

And she never wrote anything down, never prepared her discourse, never revised what she had said; somehow; it came out perfectly

shaped. In her irresistible way; her woman's way, she could ignore the rules of the game in order to play it all, more exultantly; copiously, freshly.

Sadly, the problems involved in noting down exactly what Anandamayī said in her discourses have been so great that very little has been safely and accurately preserved. What we have, even so, is impressive, although the musicality and alliterative word-play somehow die on the printed page. Only one man, I gather, Brahmachari Kamal Bhattacharjee, had the ability to transcribe her discourse with scrupulous fidelity. Only a few of these transcriptions have been translated into English. Through her patient labours and insight into Mataji's teaching, Atmananda managed to convey the transparency of the words, although their musical enchantment could not survive. Here are two examples of dazzling word-play in the service of thought of the highest subtlety - though, alas, there must be recourse to explanation:

You should understand that one who loves God is but out to destroy identification with the body. When this has come about, there is destruction, *nasa*, of delusion, of bondage, in other words, of desire, *vasana*, of "not-Self", *na Sva*.

Your dwelling place, *vasa*, at present is where the Self manifests as "not-Self", *na Sva*; when that is destroyed, it is only destruction that is destroyed.

Sva and *sa* are pronounced alike in Bengali; thus *nasa* (destruction) sounds like *na Sva* ("not-Self"). *Vasana*, desire is where the Self dwells as "not-Self": *vasa* (to dwell), *na*, (no, not). In translation, a beautiful thought which had come tripping from Mataji's tongue, and which could be easily understood by an attentive ear, becomes laboured.

What goes and what comes? Behold, it is movement as that of the ocean, *samudra*, He expressing Himself, *Sva mudra*. The waves are but the rising and the falling, the undulation of the water, and it is

water that forms into waves, *taranga*, limbs of His own body, *Taranga* - water in essence. What is it that makes the same substance appear in different forms, as water, ice, waves? What actually have you realised? Find out!

With marvellous plasticity, with "concrete" poetry she makes a *murti* image of a deity out of words - *samudra* means sea; *sva mudra*, His own expression; *taranga*, a wave; *tar*, His; *anga*, limb, intrinsic part. In spite of these difficulties with the translation of some passages, Atmananda succeeded in rendering the meaning of Mataji's subtle teaching with clarity and precision.

She had the longest association of any European - 40 years almost to the day - and played a significant role as the principal interpreter of Anandamayi to the non-Indian world. Her journals, a remarkable account of a 20th-century woman's spiritual pilgrimage towards her final goal as a disciple of Anandamayi, are currently being prepared for publication. When, as Blanca Schlamm, she became a permanent resident *sadhaka*, her name was changed to Atmananda, and Mataji allowed her to adopt the ochre robe of a *sanyasini* in 1962. She was given *jal-samadhi*, immersion in the waters of the Ganges, a privilege reserved for renunciates, on her death in 1985 at the age of 81.

The Sanskritic roots of most modern Indian regional languages run even deeper than those of Latin in some modern European languages, and the Sanskrit vocabulary for spiritual matters, being the richest and most precisely differentiated of all ancient languages, figures prominently even now in daily religious usage. Around 200 of the Sanskrit terms used by Anandamayi are included in the English glossary used in her ashrams, compiled by Atmananda with assistance from Gopinath Kaviraj. The precision and tensile strength of Sanskrit were well suited to Anandamayi's purposes; unlike Sanskrit scholars, she would pick up words and play with them like toys or trinkets - yet remain mindful of their philosophical implications and semantic resonance. Like the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold Path - a formulation indelibly stamped with Gautama's style despite millennia of elaboration - Anandamayi's compressed formulation of God's essence - like ice and water, waves

and limbs - will also enter the mainstream of mystical thought and probably survive for just as long.

By the time I met her, Anandamayi's "genius" went into her public and private discourses as well as her on-going tutelage of innumerable *sadhakas*. Her large following included many distinguished and impressive people. Because they had known her, and each other, for a great many years and had witnessed many extraordinary scenes associated with Mataji, there was a vast repository of oral history at the disposal of anyone like myself who was interested in the anecdotal level of so lively a scene. I learnt more about India's living spiritual culture in this way than by any other means. My own anecdotes are few; I include some here to amplify what I think my photographs express more vividly;

During the 59th-birthday celebration in Almora, a very large number of people gathered daily for *satsang*; the hall would be absolutely packed. In the mornings, distinguished speakers gave talks while Anandamayi sat to one side listening. There was always a pile of recently offered flowers beside her on the dais, and I watched her one day playing with these flowers abstractedly while someone sang *bhajans*.

She selected one particularly handsome bloom, a big dark red dahlia, so dark that it was almost black. She started to smooth down its petals and sway from side to side, shaking out her hair, which had been coiled on top of her head.

Now she went into a wild *bhava*, she herself darkened and the structure of her head became noticeably different. The *bhava* was somehow secretive, in-drawn, particularly when she began, with accelerating speed, to pull off each petal, one by one. When, finally; she had pulled off the last petal she held the dahlia by its stalk, fingered the golden centre, and then for a long time gazed at this with the most rapt and delicate attention. Had she, I wondered, made the connection between what she had just done, and an incident recorded by her beloved disciple, Bhajji? The Almora ashram, after all, was built beside Bhajji's last resting place, his *samadhi*, in 1937:

One day at the ashram, Sri Ma took a flower and plucking away all its petals, said to me: "Many of your *samskaras*, psychic traces, have dropped away and many more will fall off like the petals of this flower, till I shall remain as your main prop, just like the one stalk of this flower. Do you understand?, saying this, she began to laugh. I enquired: "Ma, how can I reach that state."

She replied: "Every day remember this once: you need not do anything else."

One of the morning speakers that season in Almora was an eminent and powerful monk who headed the Shankaracharya Math in Bombay; A very tall and imposing figure with bald head, bull neck and ash-smeared brow, he was an intimidating presence on his dais in the centre of the hall, while Anandamayi was seated well to one side, taking no part at all in the proceedings. She was in a restive mood, looking about her, apparently not listening to what the monk was saying. He was lecturing on Vedanta, larding his words with formidable Sanskrit terminology in a somewhat hectoring tone.

Playing with the string of a flower garland, very casually, almost in an absent-minded aside, Mataji interjected a one-sentence remark, addressing the Swami respectfully as Pitaji father, but in the lightest of tones. The Swami stopped in mid-sentence, paused, looked down and suddenly burst into tears.

To everyone's astonishment the giant monk just crumpled before our very eyes. With a word to an attendant, Mataji swept the girls of the ashram school into *bhajans* and everyone joined in. The mood relaxed, the Swami regained his composure and was soon rattling on. What had touched him to the quick nobody could tell.

During *satsang* in Varanasi about 50 of us were gathered while Mataji listened to someone talking. In the background, down below in the courtyard, two men were talking, their voices rising in a crescendo until they were bellowing angrily at each other. Hitherto, no row had ever erupted during any of my stays in the ashram.

The noise was now beginning to wreck the peaceful atmosphere in the hall. Mataji looked at me, beckoned an attendant to her side and sent him over to speak to me. Would I, he whispered please go and stop the argument. I had no alternative but to do as I was bidden. I went down to the yard and found that the row was between the senior Swami and Mataji's brother. It suddenly dawned on me why I in particular had been selected to remonstrate with the culprits.

The plain fact was, I realised, I could not speak their language, nor could they mine! Thus are the winning ways of Anandamayi! She knew I would not become ensnared in the karmic net of other men's disputes and that everyone's self-esteem would remain intact. It ended with both protagonists reduced to helpless laughter by my futile remonstrations.

One drowsy afternoon at Vindhychal there were very few people about; nothing stirred. Up on her balcony; Anandamayi was having her hair carefully combed by an attendant who had just washed it. A young doctor from Allahabad came to take his leave. "What train do you intend taking?" Mataji enquired.

The doctor indicated which one. "And where will you change trains to get the Allahabad connection?" Mataji persisted. The young man gave a seemingly reasoned reply; but this did not satisfy Mataji and she questioned him further concerning his connection, suggesting with some emphasis that he not take the train he had first proposed, but the alternative which she was now proposing.

She was most meticulous about this, yet the doctor just could not see any logic in her suggestion. Mataji was not looking at him, her head bent to the comb as it was passed through her hair. Selecting a long strand, she tautened it as she talked.

The eyes of all three of us were now fixed on the strand of hair. Holding it in her right hand she began, very slowly; with the most attentive care, to wind it round the first joint of her left index finger. She wound it with such precision that it made no more than a fine millimetre-thick circuit of her finger. She wound it thrice in

overlapping coils without looking up, and again addressed the acutely discomfited young man.

"Everything I *say* . . .", and at this she made a further turn of hair tightly round her finger, ". . . and every thing I *do* has ' - one more turn, ' . . . *meaning*." She looked up; the man raised his hands in *namaskar*, bowed, and departed without saying another word.

If I had to find one word with which to describe the most outstanding characteristic of Anandamayi's teaching it would have to be "inclusiveness". But to account for why I find this word the nearest approximation possible, I would have to make my reply inclusive too. I will attempt no more than a rough sketch.

In the simple terms of her life story, she had passed, level by level, through the entire gamut of spiritual development by the age of 30 - from childhood piety to humble religious ardour, to worship of gods, recitation of God's name and service to others in the name of God, to visionary experience, to meditation, to initiation, to glossolalia and prophetic utterance, to the practice of advanced yoga at the highest levels of perfection, to ecstatic rapture, kirtan and the dance of the *bhakta*, to *samadhi*.

In addition, she had emerged as an exponent of contemplative esoteric, or mystical, religion through direct experience and personal awareness, where the inward sense of the self is one with the feeling of the external world.

At this latter end of the process, her teaching became like the delta of a great river system, an infinity of tributaries, each one flowing towards the unanimity of the human spirit. In short, she encompassed the particularistic states and stages within a unitive whole. She carried with her, as she raised awareness from one level to the next, all those who retained their divergent *beliefs*, but she then reached beyond these surface differences to the transcendental unity of *all* religions.

It was not just a matter of mouthing platitudes about "the oneness of all religions"; she gave detailed instructions to people of different faiths and at different stages of development which were precisely in tune with their own particular situation.

Her teaching certainly did point to the unity hidden beneath all the outer symbols, affording a glimpse into a universalistic stratosphere without departing from down-to-earth detail.

She was always precise, never vague.

She was the unassuming country girl from a dirt-poor village home who became the cynosure for all eyes.

Yet still she would say: "I am always the same."!

Anne Bancroft puts it beautifully: "All of us sense a timelessness dwelling in our heart, an essential core of being *which does not change*. Thus Mataji, who seems to have known herself to be total timelessness, always responded from this essence to the same essence in the situation."

While she knows exactly who and where she is - "I am always the same" - we don't know that we also are where she is!

There is no need for us to "become" liberated; we are already free.

Most graphically, she shows us how to find this out for ourselves. The clarity of the way she does this is revelatory: "I do nothing of my own volition." Nothing? Surely; this is a trite remark - or mediumistic? It is nothing of the sort. If we could only realise it, she is saying, she can do nothing by her own volition and *nor can we*. All action is His action.

Bhaiji puts it this way: "Her life is an eye-opener to us all. She shows by her everyday activities how we can link every minute detail of life to the Infinite and how we can cultivate a new outlook in our

relations with men and make this world a place of new joy and hope and peace. . . . She has devoted herself wholly and completely to the good of the world. All living beings are her own kith and kin. "If you think that there is something peculiarly my own, I must tell you that the whole world is my own."

Here is a strangeness, an indefinable rarity, an uncanny, ineffable quality which comes so near the limits of the recognisably human as to call for a revision of what we mean by that very word "human". Some would undoubtedly find her behaviour very strange, and her freedom to behave strangely both audacious and disturbing.

She was, throughout her life, in every domain, the acme of effortless perfection. Were it not for her lifelong exertion for the good of all, this perfection would be insufferable.

And 60 years of total accessibility must surely have been unendurable had not Anandamayi herself sustained a marvellous balance between effort and effortlessness.

"There are no others. All others are like the limbs of this body."

Douglas Harding, who met Anandamayi, told Anne Bancroft that the essence of her life and doctrine was "to care and not to care."

She was totally detached from what was going on and paradoxically totally united with it. And these *two* are both necessary, for if you have one without the other - look out! She was free of the world in the sense that her essence was the Source of the world and she was not limited by its products or involved in them. Intrinsically she was freedom itself -that was one extremely important half of the truth. The other half was that she was so involved in everything. You see, to be totally separate from everything, to be space for it, capacity for it, is to be it. Paradoxically if one is free of a thing one is free to be it. She exhibited this paradox - to be free of the world is to be the world. To be free of grief is to be grief. A woman came to her who had lost her son and they sat together weeping for hours and then the woman went away comforted. At the same time her teaching was totally

uncompromising when it came to the essence of things, very tough; but absolutely gentle and generous with people's efforts.

In a letter she sent to a group of *sadhakas*, Anandamayi reveals her own high-energy inclination:

.."Those who are pilgrims on the path must develop great inner strength, energy, mobility and swiftness, so that their lives may become beautiful, to fill their new life with a new current. It will not do to sit down and ride in a rickety, jolting bullock-cart. At all times, the mind must be intensely vigorous, energetic, and alert - then only can you forge ahead with great speed. Remember that every person has to mould his or her own life. Accept cheerfully whatever He may bestow on you or take away from you."

Words of Anandamayi: Short Communications 2

Be like a child who never grows up: the only reason why the child-like state does not last is "desire".

I am a little child and do not know how to lecture or give discourses. Just as a child, when it finds something sweet and good, takes it to his mother and father, so do I place before you what is sweet and good. You take whatever pleases you. Mine is only a child's prattle. In fact, it is you alone that questions and you alone that answers. You beat the drum, and you hear the sound.

I am a little child and you are my parents. All unmarried people and children are my friends. Accept me as such and give me a place in your hearts. By saying "Mother" you keep me at a distance. Mothers

have to be revered and respected. But a little girl needs to be loved and looked after and is dear to the heart of everyone. So this is now my only request to you - make a place for me in your heart!

The household itself can be an ashram.

To do *pranam* obeisance means to put one's head where it should be - at the feet of God. His feet are everywhere and therefore one may do *namaskar*, salutation, everywhere, remembering the feet of God.

To do *pranam* means to open oneself to the Divine Power, which is always streaming down on everyone. One usually shuts oneself away from it. To do *pranam* means to give one's mind, one's I to Him, to surrender oneself to the One, so that there should be only He and not you.

You attempt to appease want by want; hence want does not disappear and neither does the sense of want. When man awakens to the acute consciousness of this sense of want, then only does spiritual inquiry become genuine. You must bear in mind that only when the sense of want becomes the sense of the want of Self-knowledge does the real Quest begin.

There are two kinds of pilgrims on life's journey: the one like a tourist is keen on sight-seeing, wandering from place to place, flitting from one experience to another for the fun of it. The other traveller treads the path that is consistent with man's true being and which leads to his real home, to Self-knowledge. Sorrow will certainly be encountered on the journey undertaken for the sake of sight-seeing and enjoyment.

So long as one's real home has not been found, suffering is inevitable. The sense of separateness is the root-cause of misery, because it is founded on error, on the conception of duality. This is why the world is called *du-niya* - based on duality.

What is wanted is genuine Awakening, an awakening after which nothing remains to be attained. . .

To become fully conscious is not enough, you will have to rise beyond consciousness and unconsciousness. That which Is has to shine forth.

Each vision produces some result. In a real vision the immediate result is the destruction of the veil of *Maya*. When it is removed, God stands revealed. The aim of all spiritual exercises is the removal of this veil. But by what special work of yours such vision would be possible, no one can predict. It may be a slow, gradual process or it may be a sudden flash - it is all His Grace. If we could have His vision as a result of any particular action on our part, He would come under that limitation. But He has no limitation whatsoever. He is ever free. All our effort is intended only to lift the veil of *Maya*.

The result depends on His Grace absolutely.

Rising, sitting down, walking in fact any gesture taken up by the body is called an *asana*. It corresponds to the rhythm and the vibration of body and mind at any particular moment. Some aspirants can meditate only if seated in the pose indicated by the Guru or formulated in the *shastras* scriptures and not otherwise.

This is the way to proficiency in meditation. On the other hand someone may begin his practice while sitting in any ordinary position; nevertheless, as soon as the state of Japa, repetition of a mantra or *dhyana*, concentration has been reached, the body will spontaneously take up the most appropriate position.

As one's meditation grows increasingly intense, the postures correspondingly gain in perfection. When a little air is pumped into a tyre, the tyre will be flabby; but when it is filled to capacity, it remains completely stable in its own natural shape. Likewise when real meditation has been attained the body feels light and free, and on rising after meditation there is no fatigue of any kind, no pain, numbness or stiffness in one's limbs.

The various activities that aid the spiritual life have to be knit together closely with ever renewed effect - as the thread is not seen in a garland, without a gap. No sooner does the mind get an opening than it will direct all its actions downwards, towards the perishable.

Truth is everything and yet nothing; you may call it one, two, many or infinite; all as well.

CHAPTER 2

The Early Years of Anandamayi

Anandamayi was born on 30 April 1896, of a poor but prestigious Brahmin family in a small village called Kheora, in the district of Tripura. The area is now in Bangladesh but was then part of the province of Bengal, on the eastern edge of India. Her given name was Nirmala Sundari Devi, which means Immaculate Beauty; she was a blithe and happy child. Details of her childhood are sparse, but then the daily life of her toilsome family was also sparse. While there is no pretext for romanticising the life of India's rural poor, it would be equally unrealistic to assume that Nirmala Sundari's childhood domain of imagination and play was in any way impoverished; on the contrary, it was full of 'thick-coming fancies'. Though deeply rural, the Bengali environment was burgeoning with new cultural vitality, producing great spiritual figures too, such as Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. While only the faintest ripples of this would have reached Tripura district, the local folk culture nourished the imagination of village Bengalis. There is an indwelling lyricism in this rural culture which comes through in the writings of modern Bengal's great poet, Rabindranath Tagore. When I try to imagine the kind of childhood Anandamayi may have had I think of the haunting beauty and pathos of the children in the masterpiece of film-director, Satyajit Ray, *Patha Panchali*.

I imagine, too, the woodland glades, the rice fields and the ponds in that film would not be so very dissimilar to those she knew.

In his *Glimpses of Bengal*, Tagore writes: "the flow of life in the village is not swift, but neither is it entirely inactive or inert. Work and leisure keep the same pace, as if walking together hand in hand. They seem harmonised into a music that is tranquil, dreamy and infused with pathos - something immense, but also restrained."

In an essay on the modern neglect of India's villages, "The Robbery of the Soil", Tagore likens the village to the figure of the neglected woman: "In their keeping is the cradle of the race. They are nearer to nature than the towns and are therefore in closer touch with the fountain of life. They have the atmosphere, which possesses a natural power of healing. Like women they provide people with their elemental needs, with food and joy, with the simple poetry of life and with those ceremonies of beauty which the village spontaneously produces and in which she finds delight."

I would add one further detail to this evocation of village Bengal, which I remember most vividly from a few marvellous days I spent in Bhirbhum district at the home of a remarkable minstrel who had known Tagore, the Baul mystic, Nabani Das.

He lived in a typical mud and thatch hut in the middle of the fields away from any village and we spent the day on the tamped earth outside his simple home. What I remember most is the *earth* itself: we sat right on the sun-baked earth with the peasant's low-angle perspective of ploughed earth clods stretching to infinity under an enormous sky. This bare-minimum view opened upon a void cleansed of everything save the omnipresence of God.

Nirmala Sundari's father, Bipin Bihari Bhattacharya, was a devout Vaishnava with a typical Bengali love of devotional music, which he shared with his daughter, teaching her many songs. Bengalis are very musical; song, more than any other art form, is the main vehicle for the expression of their emotional nature, the development of their exquisite language and the primary conduit through which the spiritual culture of the region so richly flows.

Dadamahasaya as Nirmala's father came to be known in his daughter's ashrams, in his later years a stately and bearded old gentleman, loved to regale the company with hymns he and his daughter had composed. Nirmala's mother, Mokshada Sundari Devi, familiarly known as Didima, was a gentle, pious woman who lived to an advanced age; she took *sannyas* became an ochre-robed renunciate with the name of Swami Muktananda Giri, and accompanied her daughter on her incessant peregrinations.

To form a mental picture of Kheora it is necessary to appreciate how very remote it was, just one among many villages of the deltaic region. Not long ago a Frenchwoman, on a pilgrimage to visit Anandamayi's birthplace, searched the area for a whole week without any success. Stranded in the middle of nowhere and in tears, she was finally rescued by a helpful Bangladeshi on a motorcycle who took her to her destination. Kheora is near the eastern border of Bangladesh; the Indian state of Assam is only miles away. But a visit to see the actual birthplace itself is a frustrating experience as Nirmala Sundari's family home was bought by Muslims soon after she left and drastically altered.

The French devotee, Claude Portal himself among the last of the few to receive Mataji's *diksha* described Kheora for me after a recent visit: "It is a very peaceful and welcoming village in beautiful countryside quite flat, with many small fields surrounding each little village. The soil is sand very soft and gentle to bare feet - and that is nice!

There are several ponds round Kheora and plenty of little woodland glades full of atmosphere and a strong sense of place. The village is too small to have a mosque, but a very simple Hindu shrine still stands - just four walls. Altogether, a village of most delightful aspect. Almost indistinguishable from many others - how small it is!

There is, indubitably, a fabled quality to all the tales of Nirmala Sundari's childhood in this upright high-caste family, but this is not solely accountable to pious imagining. At Nirmala's birth, Gurupriya Devi tells us, her mother did not suffer much, the delivery occurring after ten minutes of moderate pain. Didima put Nirmala under a *tulashi* basil plant for a while on the morning after she was born and, for 18 months, she would put the baby under the plant every day. The *tulashi* is sacred to Krishna and is usually garlanded on festival days, with incense waved before it. Signs of Nirmala's unusual nature were barely visible, even to the most attentive eye. However, it was noted that she was scarcely ever heard to cry. This and other signs suggest that she was perceived as a little unusual, but because

nobody understood what these signs might portend, the general view was that she was an unexceptional little girl. She became curiously entranced whenever she heard *kirtan* music or Muslim chanting of the Namaz.

And one night, undetected by anyone, she sat outside the tent of some visiting Christian missionaries and listened to their hymn singing in a state of solitary rapture. As she got older, the child's ecstatic states became more noticeable, and many people came to look upon her as retarded, while Didima herself often said she was a simpleton.

Ancestors on both sides of the family had attained spiritual distinction: her father came from the well-known Kashyap clan of Vidyakut. Before Nirmala was born, he took off one day and disappeared - in the way that Brahmins of his kind tended to do - becoming a kind of wandering pilgrim with no very clear goal. He turned up again three years later as if nothing had happened. To outward appearances, Nirmala Sundari was fair and beautiful, of bright and sunny disposition. Apparently, everyone was very fond of her. The population of the village was predominantly Muslim and relations between themselves and the few Hindu families were entirely amicable. Muslims often carried the child around in their arms and this affection has endured through the years.

Even now, the Muslim population of Kheora still refer to her as "our own Ma".

Nirmala was conspicuously docile, obedient to a degree, with a lively sense of humour, although she was sometimes "absent-minded". The extreme guilelessness of her nature and her habit of carrying out orders to the letter sometimes led to amusing consequences, but not always. When still a child she was taken to a fair by a relative, who put her down before a Shiva temple and told her to sit there quietly while she went away with her companions. But the relative then forgot all about the child. Remembering her at last after a long time,

she hurried back and was amazed to find little Nirmala Sundari sitting in exactly the same position - she had not moved at all.

While giving Nirmala lessons in reading, her mother had once pointed out that she was to pause only when she reached a full stop. Subsequently, if she came across a long sentence she would twist and contort her body in an effort to reach the full stop in one breath. If she was forced to take a fresh breath in the middle of a sentence, she would start all over again. Such extreme obedience naturally irritated her mother, but the child's palpable innocence and obvious good intentions deflected all rebuke.

A moribund lower primary *partasala* was the only educational institution available to Nirmala - and this she attended only irregularly for one or two years. Despite her patchy attendance she did quite well at school. She once said laughingly, 'somehow or other I invariably happened to look up the very lesson the teacher would ask and consequently he always found me well prepared. But her parents had misgivings about her future. It happened at times that she didn't know where she was, or could not remember what she had done or said a few minutes before. Sometimes she was so bemused that while reading aloud she would even get lost in the middle of a word, as if the interval between one syllable and the next had lasted an eternity.

In 1909, when barely 13, and as was the custom in those days, Nirmala Sundari was married to Ramani Mohan Chakravarti, who later became known as Bholanath, or Pitaji. He was much older than her and at the time of their marriage worked in the Police Department, although he lost his job soon after.

He was then in and out of work in what became a pattern - picking up a post as a station master or working as a gardener. A personable and decent man, he was subsequently to make a great success of his marriage and contribute to the care of Nirmala Sundari with ungrudging kindness. Meanwhile, the child bride was received into the family of Bholanath's eldest brother, where she remained until she was 18.

In the manner of the day she had to endure the ordeal of moving from a carefree childhood into the role of the inexperienced, deeply shy young daughter-in-law - a familiar pattern of domestic drudgery,

unremitting hardship and severe discipline. She cooked, cleaned, fetched water from the pond, took care of the children and served her sister-in-law with exemplary patience and modesty.

In the words of a long-time devotee, Bithika Mukerji: Hard work is the lot of village women not only in India but all over the world. What sets Sri Ma apart from all such girls placed in similar situations is the fact of her total adequacy and a little extra, as it were. She remained uniformly cheerful, good-humoured and more than willing to shoulder other people's burdens. Nothing was a chore to her.

Her serene and equable temper was never disrupted by thoughtlessness or unfair treatment at the hands of elders. It took time for discerning people to understand that Sri Ma was obedient but not biddable or suggestible.

Her boundless compassion overflowed in concern for whoever came within the orbit of her ministrations: family, neighbours, servants as well as animals and plants felt the magnetic touch of this innate interest in their welfare. She also had a very ready and impish sense of humour. .

She always had the aura of perfectibility all around her but somehow it never overwhelmed her companions. On the contrary; by her gentle ways and ready smile she endeared herself to everyone who came in touch with her.

Anandamayī personally described this period of her life:

This body has lived with father, mother, husband and all. This body has served the husband, so you may call it a wife. It has prepared dishes for all, so you may call it a cook. It has done all sorts of scrubbing and menial work, so you may call it a servant. But if you look at the thing from another standpoint you will realise that this body has served none but God.

For when I served my father, mother, husband, and others. I simply considered them as different manifestations of the Almighty, and served them as such. When I sat down to prepare food I did so as if it was a ritual, for the food cooked was after all meant for God. Whatever I did, I did in a spirit of Divine service. Hence I was not

quite worldly; though always engaged in household affairs. I had but one ideal - to serve all as God, to do everything for the sake of God.

When she was about 17, Nirmala went to live with her husband in Ashtagram.

It was here that a devout neighbour, Harakumar, developed a habit of addressing her as "Ma", and prostrated before her morning and evening. "Ma" is a respectful, affectionate name for an older woman, not necessarily one's mother; but it is also used as a way of addressing a certain kind of saintly woman in Bengal, where worship of the Goddess is widely prevalent. One day, Harakumar declared: "Daughter, you will see, now I am calling you Ma, but one day the entire world will call you Ma."

During her stay in Ashtagram, strange states of her body during the singing of *kirtan* were first noticed and these *bhavas*, or ecstatic trances, were to become the most striking aspect of her behaviour for about eight years. At times she would become mute and motionless after chanting the names of the deities. During *kirtan* her body became stiff and benumbed.

Although Nirmala Sundari was as gentle and obliging as the most exacting person could wish, the extraordinary nature of her character and of her skill in the performance of all tasks was never seriously in dispute.

But she was very shy and heavily veiled at all times - more so than was customary.

At that time also, she began to go into states of *samadhi* a state of total withdrawal inward, but people could not understand what this was. "Sometimes such states would occur while she was cooking," Gurupriya Devi relates, "and people thought that this daughter-in-law was a rather sleepy one. Sometimes the rice and dal would fall to the ground. Then her brother-in-law's wife would scold her. Ma would get up shamefacedly, tidy up everything and cook again."

These incidents did not change her general behaviour; very great and simple people, unaware of their deeper portent, were glad to gloss

over this aspect of her life.

In 1918 Bholanath was transferred from Ashtagram to Bajitpur and thereafter was only intermittently employed. This patient, good natured and handsome man was now brought face to face with an unexpectedly grave challenge to his loyalty as husband to this extraordinary young woman.

He found her surrounded by an aura of such awe-inspiring sanctity that this precluded any physical relationship. In retrospect, it does not seem appropriate to describe the married life of this couple as one of purity and celibacy because such questions never even arose. As Anandamayi herself put it many years later:

At the time of my marriage, they told me that I should respect and obey Bholanath. Consequently, I gave him the respect and obedience due to my father. Bholanath himself also behaved just like a father to me. From the very beginning, he seemed to have absolute faith in me. He appeared to be convinced that whatever I might do could not be anything but right.

And on another occasion she said:

There was a time when this body tried to carry out to the very letter anything Bholanath asked for. But when he saw that this body became rigid, that it was incapable of performing certain types of worldly actions, unable to bear them, he himself most gladly took back his request.

This is how, notwithstanding that some tasks could not be attended to, strict obedience was being observed in one sense. However, one day the husband of Bholanath's sister came on a visit. When he saw this body obeyed Bholanath in all matters he felt annoyed and exclaimed: "Have you no opinion of your own? Have you to consult your husband about every little detail? What a state of affairs. Suppose he asked you to do something wrong, would you obey then also?"

He got the reply: Let such an occasion arise and, on setting out to put the order into practice, just see what would happen: This answer left him dumbfounded.

Nirmala Sundari was famous in Bajitpur for her beauty. A neighbour, the wife of Bholanath's boss, said She was so beautiful that whenever she went to the bathing *ghat* steps down to pond, river or tank, the *ghat* lit up with her radiance. Others began asking her outright: "Who are you?" - meaning by this "What kind of spiritual being are you?"

When really pressed to answer this question she appeared to experience, at least in her younger days, a considerable degree of agitation. Her usual light response to this increasingly common enquiry was: "I am whatever you take me to be."

Members of Bholanath's family did not respond to his wife's strange behaviour as calmly as he did. In the course of time, when they got the measure of Nirmala Sundari's personality, it became clear to them that it would never be possible for Bholanath to lead a conventional home life, settle down and have children. They thought it their duty to urge Bholanath to marry again. This Bholanath absolutely refused to consider, declaring with remarkable forbearance that he was quite satisfied with the existing state of affairs.

In spite of heavy household responsibilities, Nirmala found time to develop her skills at various arts and crafts. During her hard-earned spare time, she would visit the houses of neighbours, and there learnt needlework, cane-work, the spinning of fine thread and other handicrafts. She could thread so finely that she could put the entire length of a brahmin's sacred thread inside the empty shell of a cardamom. She used to present these sacred threads, packed in this manner, to various male relatives. A few specimens of her handiwork were preserved by Didi in the Varanasi ashram. There was one beautiful piece of embroidery, a depiction of Krishna, which Didi had innocently framed and hung on the wall. The day Anandamayi

noticed it, she took it down and before anyone realised what she was doing, she threw it in the Ganges. She did not like hoarding of any kind and threatened Didi that on the day of her *kheyala*, spontaneous upsurge of Will, she would get rid of all the souvenirs. Consequently, Didi kept everything well hidden.

During the seven years from 1918 to 1924 when the couple remained in the township of Bajitpur, Nirmala Sundari went through the experiences, processes and techniques of intensive *sadhana*, or spiritual practice, that were performed for the purpose of preparing oneself for Self-Realisation.

.." One day in Bajitpur I had as usual gone to the pond near the house where we lived for my daily bath. While pouring water over my head, the *kheyala* came to me, "how would it be to play the role of a *sadhika*? and so the *lila* began."

She uses two words here, which are crucial to our understanding of not only what happened next but also her whole life. *Kheyala*, in common usage means "a spontaneous thought" as distinct from an act of will or a wish for some desired end.

Gopinath Kaviraj writes of the word *kheyala*: "Ordinarily it means a sudden and unexpected psychic emergence, be it desire, will, attention, memory or even knowledge without any adequate causal antecedent behind to account for its origin.

There is an element of spontaneity in the act. It might thus seem to be analogous to the playful vagaries and caprices of an eccentric and non-purposive mentality. Mataji has borrowed it and used it in her own sense, enriching it with her own associations." In her case and in daily terms, her *kheyala* appears to have taken shape from the needs of her companions. Once expressed, it was seen that a concatenation of events led to its fulfilment. The term *lila* most commonly associated with the lively frolics of *kheyala lila* means "sportive play", particularly *sacred play*, or the endlessly variegated play, the manifestation, of the Supreme Being.

With the benefit of hindsight we are now in a position to view Anandamayi's phase of spontaneous *sadhana* - entirely self-taught - as *lila*. She was to draw on this extensive experience in countless ways for the rest of her life and it is an outstanding example of her practicality, a stunning demonstration of the 'skill in action' as she called it, which she enjoined on others.

When she gave instruction she did so with great exactitude and expert knowledge. For this reason the phase of her *sadhana lila* is crucial. At the time that it occurred, for Bholanath - the one person privy to the process - it must have looked, at the very least, bizarre, occasionally perilous, frequently awesome.

It might seem to us, initially, almost on the verge of mania, particularly if one has no notion where it is leading; viewed within the span of a whole lifetime it all falls into place as if it were inevitable.

The very first point to emphasise is that the entire process occurred spontaneously, without any teaching whatsoever.

There was nobody around to help her even had she wanted it. Nor had she any prior knowledge, no manuals, no reading in a library; instruction in such matters is not normally available in rural India - adepts congregate in centres, and Anandamayi would not have been acquainted with these until after the whole process had been completed. In itself, the fact that she was entirely self-taught marks her out as extraordinary.

On his return from the office at the end of the working day, Bholanath often found Nirmala lying on the kitchen floor, the food half cooked or burnt. She would be oblivious to the world and he could do nothing with her, until of her own accord *she* would come back to normal. He naturally did not understand what was happening and, courageously, left her alone. Gradually, *she* started practising *sadhana* in a more systematic manner. Her knowledge, of course, was meagre. All she knew was how to repeat the names of the Lord - Hari in her case - learnt from her father. She did this whenever free, but Bholanath was perplexed.

"Why do you repeat the names of Hari? We are not Vaishnavas, we are Shakta worshippers of the Goddess."

"Then what do you want me to do? Shall I repeat the names of Shiva?"

"Yes, you may do that," Bholanath replied.

It was all the same to her.

When she had finished her day's work in the house she would thoroughly clean not only her room but the area surrounding the room, and when Bholanath settled down to his rest with a hookah, she would sit in one corner of the room in a relaxed posture. Bholanath then watched with fascination as she assumed various yogic *asanas* and *mudras* postures and hand gestures. Some he recognized, but the sheer variety of these processes and the speed with which she went through them were quite beyond his comprehension. He was amazed, enthralled and awed, but never frightened. It was apparent to him that these yogic movements occurred involuntarily. Referring to the spontaneity of these *kriyas* creative actions, she later said, "If I tried to help my limbs while performing the *asana*, the sequence of movements would be automatically upset., She would also make it clear that she was merely a *witness* to all these activities.

.. "All these *asanas* and so forth were not done of my own volition. Indeed, I was unable to do anything with my own hands. I saw that this body was bending and performing various *asanas*. Every day a variety of *asanas* was performed. One day, a particular *asana* occurred, but another time when the same *asana* began again, I thought I would watch what happened. I supplied extra support with my hand and readjusted slightly. This caused a severe pull to my leg and I was hurt. Even now it feels sensitive at that spot. At that time I didn't know what were, but various kinds formed of themselves. Till then I had not been informed externally as to how many kinds of *asanas* existed nor what their names were.

After that, I began to hear and understand clearly from within what was going on. The body was being twisted and turned to perform *asanas* in such a way that it was entirely boneless and only thus was it possible for it to contort in that way. It was turned topsy-turvy in all kinds of positions. The head would bend backwards and remain touching the middle of the back. The hands were bent so sharply that it was stunning to watch.

This body has not followed one particular line of *sadhana* only, but has covered all known lines. It passed through all the different varieties of practice referred to by the sages of ancient times. This body successfully went through *nama sadhana*, *hatha yoga* with its numerous *asanas* and through the diversity of yogas, one after another.

In order to attain to a particular stage along only one of those lines an ordinary individual may have to be born again and again, but in this body it was a matter of seconds. Moreover, the different forms of *sadhana* that this body has been seen to practise were not meant for this body, they were meant for you all.

This body has no desire, no intention or set purpose - everything occurs spontaneously.

Whether this body talks to you or laughs or lies down to sleep, or whether it sinks to the ground and rolls about, as sometimes happened during *kirtan*, no matter how many different states and conditions this body may appear to be in, it nevertheless remains always in the one state.

Indeed everything arises out of one Being.

The theme of the Witnessing Consciousness is central to classical Indian yoga. This is a state of unitary awareness, an even, undifferentiated continuum of choiceless witnessing which remains constant and unchanging throughout *all levels* of consciousness, all levels of mental and emotional intensity, in waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep, in *bhava*, in *samadhi*, during yoga, meditation and ecstatic musical expression.

The Witnessing Consciousness is both the fruit of yoga and prior to it, for it exists in the Eternal Present. By extension, we can say that the *lila* of Nirmala's *sadhana* is not ordinary human play-acting, or role-playing, but play of a sacred nature in which the "player" is witness to the play, simultaneously "actor" and "audience".

But this is only a commentary from an ordinary mental level and lacks the brevity and the clarity of Anandamayi's own account of her yogic experiences.

During these periods of intensive *sadhana lila* she was oblivious to everything. Even acute physical pain did not affect her. Sometimes when engaged in complicated yogic postures her long black tresses would get entangled with her limbs and her hair would be torn out by the roots.

Sadhana mostly took place at night, but her person was changed during the day also. She seemed very remote and her constant companions, puzzled and apprehensive, avoided her.

They regretted that so charming and loveable a girl had, in their eyes, become possessed by evil spirits. This opinion gained ground and Bholanath was variously advised to consult doctors and *ojhasmen*, who drive out evil spirits.

Feeling helpless in the face of adverse criticism, Bholanath finally agreed, but they could not "cure" Nirmala Sundari. A doctor with some experience of religious hysteria was of the opinion that there was nothing pathological in her behaviour.

He advised her husband to protect her from public curiosity as she was clearly in an exalted spiritual state.

Such intensive yoga, not surprisingly, did have a massive effect on her body, including many of its otherwise involuntary processes, which were brought under rigorous control. But of course our terminology is once again inadequate to the situation: someone whose actions are involuntary is hardly likely to exert "rigorous control."

Be that as it may, observers noticed that between 1918 and 1924, when she was aged between 22 and 28, her physical states during

trance and during illness were very strange indeed. At one time her body lost all co-ordination, with limbs, neck and head so limp as to immobilise her for days on end.

Such conditions, and the fact that she reached the menopause at the age of 27, indicate the radical nature of these physical changes. Arthur Koestler, after a very cursory look at the literature on these phenomena and no direct observation of them loftily declared that - "Anandamayi could be judged both from the mystic and the psychiatric point of view, and the two do not necessarily contradict each other. She had, however, still other symptoms which belong to the pathological domain alone" - *The Lotus and the Robot*, London, 1960.

Pathological states, if left to take their course, lead to the progressive *disintegration* of the personality and can only operate negatively towards disorder, breakdown, and insanity. Mystical states, or yogic states, on the other hand, deliberately precipitate a restructuring of being in order to achieve coherent spiritual goals.

"It can never be repeated too often," Mircea Eliade says, "Yoga, like many other mysticisms, issues on the plane of paradox . . . all these exercises pursue the same goal, which is to abolish multiplicity and fragmentation, to reintegrate, to unify, to make whole" *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, New York, 1938.

On the completion of her *sadhana*, Anandamayi would emerge with remarkable robustness to trek at high altitude in the Himalayan foothills at a rate of 40 kilometres 25 miles a day without suffering breathlessness.

Hardly a sign of morbidity or hysteria!

On the full moon night of August 1922, at midnight, Nirmala Sundari went through the actions of spiritual initiation - all by herself. She was 26 years old.

There were no external accessories and she herself was *Guru*, *Mantra* and *Ishta* chosen deity. For the next five months her *sadhana* became more concentrated, and included the pronouncing

of the syllable "AUM" and the recitation of mantras, although she had no previous knowledge of Sanskrit or mantras.

Word of this reached other members of the family.

Come to watch her perform her *sadhana*, her uncle became exasperated, demanding: "What's going on here?" Turning to Bholanath, he asked, "she's received no initiation or anything, so what's all this she's doing? Why don't you speak to her about it?"

Instantly, Nirmala's expression changed and she spoke sharply: "What do you mean? Just what might you be implying?"

He took one look at her fiery expression and backed away in fear, blurting out: "Who are you?" The startling reply that burst from Nirmala's lips shocked him: "Purna Brahma Narayani". Since this means "Absolute Unconditioned Being", or words to that effect, her reply provoked Bholanath into asking her the same question and with similar abruptness, to which came the reply: "Mahadevi".

While these replies of Nirmala employ the feminine gender, there were to be other occasions when, in response to similar questioning, she used the male gender of the named deity. Didi was later to pester her on this matter of her real identity until, one day, she told Didi to fetch her the thorn of a lime tree.

A tiny berry with purplish juice was squeezed to make ink and the lime tree thorn served as a nib. Mataji wrote on a leaf the word "Narayana" and forbade Didi to reveal this to anyone until a long time after. On being asked about all these cryptic replies she would answer: "Essentially there is nothing manifest or unmanifest: I was only trying to explain the Perfect. I followed each questioner's attitude. I was performing *puja* at that time and therefore such words were uttered."

Other replies were forthcoming too. Asked by Bhaiji, her reply was: "If there were I-consciousness in me I could express who I am. As it is not there I am what you may choose to say about me: To the registrar of Dhaka University: 'this entire universe is my home. I am in my own home even when roaming from place to place'.

Finally, she gave three different replies to a certain questioner: "I am conditioned as well as unconditioned; I am neither infinite nor confined within limits; I am both at the same time." "My will would be irresistible if I expressed it."

"I am with everybody, no matter what their age; I exist before there is any creation, duration, or dissolution of the world."

At the time when her uncle questioned her after her self-initiation, she also blurted out her intention to initiate Bholanath, even to the extent of announcing the date on which she intended to perform the *diksha*.

Bholanath was her first initiate, the second was Bhaiji many years later, and then no more until her old age. When that day came, four full moons after her own initiation, Bholanath, with a vague idea of eluding anything as much against his inclination as *diksha*, particularly from his own wife, hurried off to the office without taking his breakfast. At the appointed time, however, Nirmala sent for him.

When Bholanath replied that he was busy and could not leave work, she sent word that if he did not come home immediately she would fetch him herself. Not daring to risk that, Bholanath reluctantly went home. She asked him to bathe at once, change his clothes and sit down. She then pronounced mantras and gave him his first spiritual instruction. Nor was this to be the only time she did so, for from that moment she became his spiritual preceptor, indeed his Guru.

Yet outwardly her manner towards him did not change at all and she remained his affectionate, dutiful wife. Didi writes of a much more emotive aspect of the question of her real identity, this time revealing a remarkable aspect of the marriage. Nirmala was being closely questioned by a formidable gathering of eminent scholars in Dhaka.

She related the incident when her uncle had questioned her, and these learned men wanted to find out what exactly had transpired.

Her face flushed and her eyes filled with tears as she replied: "The words uttered by me then were - "Purna Brahma Narayana"." Despite her manifest distress the men persisted, asking her about her self-initiation and her initiation of her husband. Nirmala Sundari turned towards Bholanath, smiled slightly and awaited his permission. Bholanath signalled his refusal to grant it and she then said, "He forbids me".

She then retired to her room, still distressed. Following her in, Bholanath asked her why she had revealed so much when she herself had earlier forbidden anyone to speak of such things. She replied: "I do nothing by my own will. It seemed that the time had come for it to be revealed."

She lay down in bhava and wept profusely for a very long time.

There was something altogether remarkable about their marriage, and this incident throws light on it. Bholanath, so staunchly loyal, so warmly liked by all his wife's followers, was as zealous as Nirmala in maintaining outward appearances. Both watched over each other's needs with attentive concern and Bholanath was a tower of strength on innumerable occasions when it was her *kheyala* to make almost impossible demands on all who served her.

Yet, as this incident shows, there was a kind of *lila* in the marriage too. The outward conventions of dutiful wife and patriarchal husband prevailed throughout their 20 years of shared *post-diksha* life.

In fact, the situation was virtually unprecedented in an Indian marriage: the wife deferred to the husband but the husband obeyed his wife's instructions as his Guru, as did all her other followers, though he had no authority over the latter. In a remarkable way, Bholanath actually mirrored her *kheyala*: since she could do nothing by her own volition but only enact that which proceeded from the Essence, there was no question of her breaching the etiquette of the dutiful wife when "giving orders" her *kheyala* to her husband. But likewise, as a husband, Bholanath was entitled to give orders to his wife - yet, since she was also his Guru, any order he might give her

would have to be only for the sake of maintaining appearances would have no substance but be for *Her* sake!

More light may be shed on the meaning of this *kheyala* if we see in the marriage a "circle" of *kheyala* flowing between the partners. The sturdiness of Bholanath prevents it from sounding sentimental, but his was truly a marriage made in Heaven.

The young wife was careful to keep her face veiled, so men found it difficult to approach her and were thus obliged to receive her *darshan* from a distance. If Bholanath asked her to speak to anyone she would do so, but not otherwise. The women of the neighbourhood, however, loved to gather round her, at times taking unreasonable advantage of her patience. She once warned Bholanath lightly of the consequences if she were to cease acting in this consistently obedient manner. She told him that once she came out of seclusion it would no longer be possible for him to deny access to anyone who came, irrespective of caste, creed or position. In other words, he would have to resolve to welcome the whole world, as it were, and their lives would become public and they would have to put up with all the disadvantages which that entailed. But Bholanath did not let such things worry him.

From December 1922 Nirmala became *maunam* for three years - that is to say, she took a vow of silence, an entirely normal procedure adopted by many a serious *sadhaka*. Occasionally, she would draw a circle round herself and then pronounce mantras or speak in unintelligible tongues. After the glossolalia she might speak for a little while and then turn silent. There were no rules or fixed times for these occasional interruptions of her silence. During her *maunam* she was visited by Dr Nalini Kanya Brahma, who has described this encounter most vividly:

It was a cold evening in December 1924 when I was taken to Shahbagh for *darshan* of Mataji. . . . We were taken straight to the room where Mataji was sitting alone deeply absorbed in meditation.

A dim lamp was burning in front of her and that was perhaps the only thing in the room. Mataji's face was completely hidden from our View as in those days she used to veil it exactly like a newly married village girl.

After we had waited there for about half an hour, suddenly the veil loosened itself and Mataji's face became visible in all its brilliance and lustre. Hymns containing many "seed mantras" began to be recited by Mataji in uncommon accents, producing wonderful resonance, which affected the whole surroundings.

The stillness of the cold December night, the loneliness of the Shahbagh gardens and above all the sublimity, and serenity, of the atmosphere in Mataji's room - all combined to produce a sense of holiness which could be distinctly felt.

As soon as the recitation ceased Mataji's father began to sing a few songs of Ramprasad in an exquisitely melodious voice, and Rai Bahadur Mukherji remarked that the sweet songs of the old man must have been instrumental in bringing about the descent of the Mahadevi. As long as we were in the room, we felt an indescribable elevation of the spirit, a silence and a depth not previously experienced. We came away from Shahbagh late at night with the conviction that we had been in the presence of a superior Being whom it is difficult to doubt or deny.

During the period of *sadhana lila*, Nirmala Sundari went for days without eating or even taking a drop of water. She did not feel any inclination to eat until a particular phase of yogic processes had ceased. During such periods of complete or partial fasts her appearance was bright and cheerful, her body nimble, full of health and vigour as usual. She passed five months taking just a handful of food, towards the close of the night. For eight or nine months she took only three mouthfuls of rice in the daytime and three at night. Then for five or six months she lived on no more than a little fruit and water taken twice daily. There were other occasions when she spent five or six months eating a small quantity of rice only twice a week; on other days a few fruits sufficed.

Once this body lived on three grains of rice daily for four or five months. Nobody can live for long on such a minuscule diet. It looks like a miracle. But it has been so with this body. It has been so because it can be so. The reason for this is that what we eat is not all necessary for us. The body takes in only the quintessence of the food, the rest is expelled. As a result of *sadhana* the body becomes so constituted that though no food is taken physically, it can imbibe from the surroundings whatever is necessary for its maintenance.

From 1926, and for the rest of her life, she could no longer feed herself. Whenever she tried to put food in her mouth, her grip slackened and the food slipped from her fingers. This was not due to any illness. So it was arranged that whoever was feeding her would, once during the day and once during the night, give her only as much food as could be held in the tips of two fingers. On alternate days, she would also drink a small quantity of water. In this way four or five months went by. By nature she needed very little food. Since she often said "I look upon all hands as mine; actually I always eat with my own hand," we can more easily understand what otherwise might seem grotesquely bizarre. For if she possessed so deep a feeling of identity with all living creatures, so that all were like the many parts of her own body, then an act as private and separate as putting food in her mouth might well be inconceivable. Here, however, the enigma of the Spirit become flesh seems to elude all interpretation.

We can best appreciate the very evident hypersensitivity of Anandamayi's body by attending to her own words on the subject:

.." When this body was engaged in the play of *sadhana*, at times if any person approached it in a spirit of deep faith, this body would feel as if suffocated. If someone came and touched my feet, I would in return touch his. . . .

Yet later again, whether anyone touched my head or my feet, it made no difference at all. Once the feet of this body became sore as a result of being touched by so many people. It also happened that when I was walking someone might catch hold of me and stop me by force in order to do *pranam*, obeisance.

Then again at the time of playing the role of a *sadhaka* it occurred that when people offered *pushpanjaliceremonial* offering of flowers in worship or placed a garland round my neck, this body would become as if paralysed.

At other times if a bhakta put my feet on his head this body would feel an electric shock. Once it was as if this whole body was burning. Then also when someone as much as put his hand on my foot it became difficult to breathe; yet on other occasions, people could touch my feet or seize my hands and it did not matter in the least. Someone would bow down to the ground before this body and it would remain seated quite comfortably; feeling nothing - so much so that someone remarked: "Look how grandly she is sitting!" It happens that when people do *puja* and *arati* to this body someone invariably exclaims: "Just see how she accepts worship and adoration!"

Words of Anandamayi: Short Communications 3

Relentless one-pointed perseverance brings about the change in perspective which will establish you in Peace.

Our mind is the swiftest thing in creation. Let the mind move at its own speed constantly towards the One Aim, which is God.

If you endeavour to fulfil yourself by entering the current of your true being, this current will eventually lead you to the perfect poise of your own true being.

The Beloved is comparable to ice, which is nothing but water, and consequently He is without form, without quality and the question of manifestation does not arise. This is the state of Self-Realisation. For to find the Beloved is to find one's Self to discover that God is one's Self, wholly identical with Oneself, one's innermost Self the Self of one's Self.

When one sees a stone, it cannot be called a *vigraha*, an image of the deity; and seeing a *vigraha*, it cannot be called a stone. Where it is regarded as a focus for the presence of God, there He actually is.

Just as it is said that everything is God's own *vigraha* it is only fitting that one should strive after the direct perception of this fact.

Stone-mindedness is foolishness - the fact of God's immanence has not yet been grasped. The delight in the things of this world, in sense objects, is fleeting indeed. It does not last; it is impermanent. But where God alone stands revealed, there is no such thing as impermanence. Your attention is directed towards the world, not towards the Eternal; you are identified with that which is transient in constant flux.

What is revealed thereby? The perishable. In the perishable there is no Self-revelation. How can Reality, true Being, be in that?

For the destruction of destruction has not yet come about.

The perishable must perish.

The light of the world comes and goes, it is unstable. The Light which is eternal can never be extinguished. By that Light you behold the outer light and everything in the universe; only because It always shines within you, can you perceive the outer light.

Whatever appears to you in the universe is due only to that great Light within you, and solely because the Supreme Knowledge of the essence of things lies hidden in the depths of your being is it possible for you to acquire knowledge of anything.

Keep your thinking on a very high level; praise and blame, filth and sandal paste must become alike. Nothing in the world should be repulsive to you.

Look into our own heart and become repelled by the repulsion.

Divinity, is complete, whole, nothing whatsoever can be excluded from it. Thus, there are and must ever be new expressions according to the varying modes that are being manifested at different times and places.

Nothing without exception can be rejected or left out where.

Truth is revealed in its purity.

CHAPTER 3

The Perfection of the Beginning

In 1924 Bholanath obtained a job as manager of the Shahbagh Gardens in Dhaka. Nirmala soon discovered an old Kali temple and the couple took up residence there beside a huge uprooted pipal tree, *Ficus Religiosa* from which, emblematically, fresh boughs were growing in a re-creation of its beginnings.

According to Nirmala, the Siddheshwari temple had been a place of *shakti sadhana* since ancient times and this sacred site had been associated with the great eighth-century sage, Shankaracharya.

Sadhakas, including Bholanath in a former life, had performed *tapasya* ascetic austerities here.

This residence at Siddheshwari coincided with Nirmala's period of *maunam*. From the way things developed, it is clear that Nirmala was thinking in terms of settling down here and establishing her first ashram. Settling somewhere represents a serious decision; founding an ashram, especially a first ashram is an even more momentous step to take.

To build one is not just a matter of constructing a shelter, it is the creation of a world; it is the universe one constructs for one-self by imitating the paradigmatic creation of the gods, the cosmogony.

Since the habitation constitutes an *imago mundi*, it is symbolically situated at the Centre of the World. The multiplicity of world centres raises no difficulty for religious thought, for it is not a matter of geometrical space or of legal ownership, but of an existential and sacred space with an entirely different structure.

When the sacred manifests itself in a hierophany - such as within the ancient space of Siddheshwari - there is a differentiation of that

space which makes it qualitatively different from all other spaces; there is a revelation of an absolute reality in that hierophany which singles it out from the "non-reality" of the vast surrounding expanse. If this sacred space, this world, is to be lived in, it must be *founded*.

Every hierophany in sacred space implies an irruption of the sacred, an *occurrence*. The events which comprise the founding of the first ashram are all recorded in various publications, but have never been related as a story which clearly indicates its cardinal importance in the life of Nirmala. Yet it is a fascinating tale and one which tells us important things about Anandamayi which no other event affords us in quite so graphic a way. I have long been interested in this part of Anandamayi's story, and 25 years ago I published part of my interpretation of some details from it in my book *The Speaking Tree*.

I have reflected on the story in the intervening years and through my friendship with one of the leading authorities on the Vedic cosmogony, John Irwin, I have drawn on material which is not at all widely known - even by India's great Vedic scholars - and which throws light on the unique spiritual genius of Anandamayi.

I am not, however, proposing that Nirmala went about the establishment of her Siddheshwari ashram by drawing on scholarly - knowledge of Vedic lore - that was absolutely contrary to the exercise of her *kheyala*.

In a factual sense, neither she nor anyone associated with her, had the slightest knowledge of the traditional, and exceedingly ancient, components in the Vedic cosmogony that are relevant to our story. Indeed, the first modern scholarly attention to the theme of the ancient Indian versions of the cosmogony was not published until 1943. What I am claiming is that we have here, in accordance with her *kheyala*, an entirely spontaneous, involuntary re-emergence of a long-forgotten ancient hierophany.

I have already referred to Anandamayi's acute sensitivity to things immemorially ancient, often neglected or even abandoned by the custodians of tradition. The following quotation reveals a most vivid and outstanding example of that. As I hope to show, this is a matter of fundamental importance to a full understanding of Anandamayi's uniquely distinctive style.

In this instance, she seems to filter the ingredients of the ancient cosmogony - the archetypes, if you like - out of a larger common stream and impress them with the stamp of her own personality within the given limits of the immediate situation; a plot of land with its own contours and configurations on the north-eastern outskirts of Dhaka.

Anandamayi told Didi:

"I had one and a half seers, roughly one and a half kilos, of green gram dal., having cleaned it, and made everything ready, I said to Bholanath, 'Come, let us go to Siddheshwari': Bholanath never put obstacles in my way. We set out. I went to Siddheshwari and cooked all the items and after offering them to the deity we ate . . Then I said to Bholanath. I shall stay here. . . .

I said I would stay in the small room near the Kali temple. And so was used to bathe very early in the morning and go into this room, after which I would not come out again throughout the day and night. No food was eaten the whole day.

At night, Baul, a friend of Bholanath, would arrive with fruit, singing away. Very late at night the fruit was offered to the deity, and then eaten. In this way seven days passed.

On the eighth day, it rained heavily in the morning. I signalled to Bholanath, at that time the three-year *maunam* was going on, and called him outside.

I did not know which path went where but I unhesitatingly set out northwards. Finally this body seemed to arrive at its destination and walked round a particular plot of land as if performing *pradakshina*, circumambulation of a sacred entity. Then I sat down facing south and what you call mantras started pouring forth, for at that time only that kind of speech would emerge.

In the meantime, I had placed my right hand on the ground and was leaning on it. Strangely, it felt as if layer after layer of soil were slipping away; like the drawing of curtains; my hand and arm entered the ground right up to the shoulder. Bholanath was alarmed and quickly caught hold of me and managed to pull out my arm. At

the same time warm reddish water welled up from the hole thus made in the ground. The water was so red that my white conch bangle was stained and remained so for many days."

Bholanath saw that Nirmala was clutching something in the hand which she had brought out of the hole. Not liking the look of this object neither ever revealed to anyone what it was and not knowing what might happen next, Bholanath took it from her hand and hastily threw it into a nearby pond. Nirmala then told Bholanath "Put your hand in the hole." When Bholanath recoiled from doing this, Nirmala said, "there is nothing to fear. It is necessary for you to insert your hand. Put your hand in." Thereupon, Bholanath thrust his hand into the hole. It felt like warm, empty space to him. When he withdrew his arm, the warm reddish water again welled up from the mouth of the hole. Nirmala and Bholanath stood there for a little while, watching as the water trickled away. Then, stopping the mouth of the hole with mud, they came away.

A few days later, they planted a sacred *tulasi* and some flowering shrubs round the hole, and the surrounding area about 5 metres, 16 feet, square was lightly fenced in with bamboo according to Nirmala's instructions.

Didi relates how, a little while later:

"Mataji went into *bhava* during *kirtan* after which she recovered slightly but was still seated in a dishevelled condition. At this point, she announced to Bholanath: A room is to be built at that spot in Siddheshwari. The next day my father asked about this room. Mataji sat absorbed in *bhava* and replied in this state, providing all the details as to exactly how large and how high it should be, although she was not in a normal state. She talked about building a *vedi*, or altar, of bricks over the hole and then constructing a room round the altar."

Mataji said, "the enclosure of bamboo which has been put up is not to be removed. The walls have to be built round the outside of it."

She forbade the building of a permanent structure as yet, saying "I shall stay only in a room made of mud." When she was asked whether the altar was to be covered with mud, she replied, "Let the work start first. Whatever has to happen will happen. Nothing more is going to be revealed just now"

" Later, my father asked Bholanath to have a word with her requesting her to give my father permission to go ahead. 'You construct what-ever you can, then whatever has to happen will happen' she said.

So the land containing the altar was purchased and Father started to build the room. Mataji said, 'the room has to be completed within seven days. Meanwhile she spoke further about the *vedi*. Closing her eyes, she said, "No mud shall fall on the altar. The base must rise on all four sides round it and the *vedi* must remain like a pit'."

In other words, when the floor was cemented the *vedi* formed a hollow pit in the middle, and only the mud covering with which Nirmala and Bholanath had stopped up the original hole in the ground would remain untouched.

Within seven days, and in great haste, this room was built in the month of Phalgun February-March, 1926. On the seventh day; Mataji entered the room and invited everyone in to sing kirtan which continued throughout the night. Mataji went back to Shahbagh in the morning. From time to time she would return and sit on the altar in the centre of the pit. In that tiny enclosed space she managed to fold her legs and even lie down. Devotees would sit all round her and she would sometimes stay in the room for one or two days at a time. After a few days Mataji announced that *Vasanti puja* was to be performed at the inauguration.

Thus, in her own way, Nirmala re-enacted consecration rituals dating back to earliest times, at the very fount of Hinduism - rites

with which, three or four thousand years ago, Aryan priests celebrated the cosmogony.

There is nothing unusual about the measurements and the consecration rites, which are traditionally still often performed. What is especially interesting is the hierophany of the hole in the ground and the fact that this particular occurrence led to the ritualised construction of a *vedi* and shrine room. In ancient times, the building of a sacrificial altar signified the need to get into right relationship with the sacred world as the source of cosmic order. The birth of the cosmos, Order out of Chaos, was felt to be the key to the perpetuation of life on earth. For this purpose, ancient man placed himself and his shrines at the Navel of the Earth, *prthivi nabhi*. Henceforth, the building of every sacred shrine was a paradigmatic reiteration of the archetypal cosmogony.

At the outset of the story, with the opening of the hole in the ground, we encounter the first sign of the hierophany. As often happens in such cases, the possibility of transcendence is expressed by some kind of *image of an opening*; here, in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible.

We could then say the warm water oozing from the hole is the "chaos of the Primal Waters", the preformal modality of cosmic matter. Then, the planting of sacred trees and erection of a fence so precious that it would later be preserved after it no longer served any functional purpose, constitute the consecration of the territory, like making it a little cosmos, a re-enactment of the Creation.

The water in which the clay is mixed is assimilated with the primordial water; the clay that forms the hollow symbolises the earth; the lateral walls represent the atmosphere, the roof is the sky.

The three cosmic levels - earth, heaven and underworld - have thus been put in communication. So far, then, there is a passage from the virtual and the amorphous to that which has form. The new shrine is the core of the first ashram - equivalent to a new beginning, a new life. The sacramentality of the World is affirmed. Regardless of whatever would happen later in the ashram and in the life of Nirmala, this first manifestation would remain the significant one rather than any successive epiphanies. On any occasion when this

inauguration is related, as it is here, the entire community, including the living and the dead, is renewed; it rediscovers its "source", relives its "origins".

It is significant that Anandamayi's followers considered it very auspicious *sadhana* to hear her re-tell the stories of her early years. When I was present on such occasions, she invariably spoke with great warmth and enchantment.

Not far from the hole in the ground, Anandamayi tells us, there was a dome-shaped mound to which she attached considerable significance. For here, she said, was the specific site of Bholanath's *tapasya* ascetic austerities in a former life. At one time Didi's father wanted to build another room, right there on the dome-shaped mound. However, labourers called in to dig the foundations were stricken with fear at the idea of breaking into this most distinctively shaped mound. For them it was taboo, inviolable.

Nirmala herself said at the time that there was indeed significance in the mound, in addition to its links with Bholanath, but declared the time was not ripe for its divulgence. Despite this, she persuaded Bholanath to be the first to break the earth, and it was only then that the labourers felt safe enough to proceed.

From the mud of the dome-shaped mound was moulded the image of the goddess Vasanti, which was worshipped next to the *vedi* during the inauguration rites for the shrine. Vasanti Puja, the day of the spring festival, was considered the appropriate occasion as it celebrates the beginning of the annual crop cycle.

Didima and Dadamahasaya, Nirmala's parents, both came to the ceremony. She was very calm and quiet, while he enjoyed singing a great deal, to everyone's delight.

A number of other relatives and prominent devotees also came.

Didi recounts:

"Preparations for the *puja* began with great festivity. *Under the room built about Maraji's altar was a big anthill.* Even after the

house was built, white ants, termites, used to make piles of caked mud inside the room. To Mataji's instructions, this mud from the white ants was mixed with that used for making the image of the goddess Vasanti.

Mataji had told Bholanath to measure the height of her body with a wicker stick and the Vasanti image was made to this measure. Priests arrived from Vikrampur to perform the *puja*. On the sixth day of Navaratri the festival of Nine Nights, when the goddess Durga is worshipped, everyone converged on Siddheshwari. By then several buildings had already been put up and the jungle more or less cleared.

On the next day the *puja* started and Nirmala sat in the pit of the *vedi*, facing the image. She didn't rise the whole night through.

All Mataji's work is unusual. Whatever she said was done.

She was seated in the pit very near the priest, her face veiled, her hands always positioned in some *mudra*."

With this second phase of the story two extremely interesting and unusually strange details have appeared: the dome-shaped mound and the white ants. As we shall see, they are linked together in the unfolding of the Vedic cosmogony.

It is hard for us now to appreciate how central to the ancient religion of India was the cosmogony - for the simple reason that, in the modern imagination, the cosmogony's connection with the return of the sun after winter and the germination of the seed in spring has lost its metaphorical force. The cosmogony as myth has also lost its primacy in the religious practice of Hindus, and the symbolism of cosmology now receives far greater attention.

In the story of the hierophany at Siddheshwari, each new element in the unfolding story was experienced by the participants as an occurrence vested with mysterious power, but not consciously viewed as the symbolic content of a myth. The "message" of the hierophany, which we read with the benefit of hindsight as a coherent structure, came about bit by bit, enigmatically, and who are we to say what was the participants response? Any "difficulty" there

may be in following the events is ours, not Nirmala's, in as much as she appears to have kept her own counsel; it clearly was not her *kheyala* to comment in this instance.

The significance of the mysterious warm, red liquid oozing from the ground has obvious gynaecological connotations. The desire to return to the origin of things is very deeply rooted in the psyche. It prepares a new birth, but not a repetition of the first, physical birth. It can be likened to regression to the state of Chaos before Creation.

Classical Indian thought and yoga developed methods called *pratiloman* of going against the stream, to retrace Time in order to arrive *ad originem*, the paradoxical instant before which Time was not. One then attains to the beginning of Time and enters the Timeless, the Eternal Present. This is a sophisticated refinement of the cruder, more archaic notion of a regression to the womb. The fact that Nirmala returned again and again to the *vedi* hollow; manifestly in a state of bliss, suggests, in the silence of pure poetry, the perfection of beginnings regained in a non-conditioned state.

A dome-shaped mound emerging from a swampy environment hard by a pond has less immediate connotations, but none the less interesting for that. For in the Vedas, and indeed in all the great ancient religions of Europe and Asia, including Egypt, the cosmos emerges from the Primal Waters as a clod of earth which then rises and forms a dome-shaped mound, known to scholars as the Cosmogonic Primordial Mound. Thus, any such striking natural formation of land adjacent to water can be mytho-poetically regarded as corresponding to the Primordial Mound "founded upon the waters".

In the Vedic cosmogony these cosmic waters constitute the cosmic ocean, but in later cosmology they have become identified with subterranean waters, which could be said to correspond to our modern concept of the "water table".

The components of the Siddheshwari hierophany are experienced as manifestations of sacred power. But the mode of revelation is, at this point in its unfolding, bizarre and obscure, at least at first sight.

In Didi's account of the Vasanti Puja, it may be remembered, she specifically mentioned that there was a large white ant-hill beneath the *vedi*, that white ants continued to make mudcakes in the shrine room and that, on Nirmala's instructions, this mud was mixed with mud from the dome-shaped mound to make the image of the goddess.

In a sense there is no mystery about this, because the link between white ants and the Primordial Mound, and between both and the cosmogony is clearly indicated in the oldest Indian religious texts, the Vedas, dating from around 2500 BC.

To our eyes, white ants are at best prosaic and insignificant, at worst destructive nuisances. But in ancient India they were mysterious and revered creatures. Moreover, worship of termite nests has survived in folk culture all over India, a ghostly echo of the cosmogony but severed from its original meaning in the memory of simple people.

The ancient word for a Sacred Spot is *bhavana*, derived from *bhu* coming into existence. The cosmogony was imagined as being shaped and moulded from what already existed - that is, *asat* chaos.

It is the Primordial Mound, which is so shaped.

In the parabolical language of the ancients, the important thing was not cause and effect but the overlapping and interdependence of relationships of which the Siddheshwari hierophany is a vivid modern example. The hole in the earth, the *vedi*, the dome-shaped mound and the white ants have, at the very least, echoes of this archetypal substructure - shared, it must be said, with all the great religions.

To return to the taboo-laden significance of the dome-shaped mound, its shape would suggest that it was a disused ant-hill eroded by the monsoon. Nirmala's linking of this mound with Bholanath's austerities in a previous life enriches its charged significance. There was a common tradition in India that sages, yoginis and rishis used to perform their austerities on ant-hills. The implication is simple and clear: enlightened souls would experience metaphysical identity with the Divine Principle as embodied in the primordial mound through their return to the Source of Life. Likewise, the

Siddheshwari hierophany as experienced by Nirmala and her followers is also such a return to the Source of Life. By the same token, Nirmala's own immersion in the *vedi* can be seen as an experience of this identity, and of course was experienced as such by on-the-spot witnesses.

In all likelihood, the hole in the ground was a shaft-hole of the anthill over which the *vedi* was built. It is also my conjecture that the object which Nirmala was holding in her hand when she withdrew her arm from the hole was a queen termite. Shaft-holes are an essential feature of the termite nest and anyone who has broken into one, as I have done, will know that there would have been every likelihood of her hand accidentally encountering termites in the nest, perhaps even touching a queen.

And if Bholanath had handled the fat worm-like body of a queen termite, which is unpleasantly slimy, his revulsion would have been quite natural. It is, however, only conjecture; in any case, the object's actual identity does not concern us and is only a minor detail in the interpretation of the hierophany.

But Nirmala's experience would be no less extraordinary for having natural causes as its simple explanation. On the other hand, her "occult" location of the spot and the way her arm found its way into the hole are by no means easily explained. Nor does the link with white ants "demystify" the hierophany.

On the contrary, such facts as are known about it render all the more remarkable the way these particular natural phenomena are integral to the whole scenario.

In the *Yajur-veda*, termites are addressed as "the earliest of Creation". Their Mound is identified with the original lump of mud that was raised to the surface of the Cosmic Ocean. In the *Satapatha Brahmana* termites are invoked as "the first-born of the world"; in yet another early text, the mounds made by ants are also identified with the first lump of cosmogonic mud.

The insects are addressed as 'Ye Divine Ants, who originated at the Creation, ye who are combined with Rita', Rita being the Vedic term for Cosmic Order, hidden in the nether world.

It is curious that modern science also tells us that termites are indeed extremely archaic creatures and have been active since the Permian level on the geological time-scale - that is, for no less than 200 million years. In Indian folk culture, termites are associated with ancestor-worship and, because their shaft-holes are believed to lead down to the nether world, with Death and the "Womb of Life and Rebirth".

There are many stories of gods and goddesses said to have been literally "born from an ant-hill".

The deity does not represent the ant-hill, or vice versa; the ant-hill is the deity, and the deity is the ant-hill; mound and deity are regarded as one. In the Vedas, the water from a termite mound is cited as a remedy for flux: "Deep down do the Asuras bury this great healer of wounds. The ants bring up this remedy from the subterranean waters. And finally, and of special interest to us, clay from an anthill which is inserted in the foundations of a temple is still termed the 'embryo'".

Nirmala's use of ant-hill mud, both in laying foundations for the *vedi* and in the making of the image of the goddess, is still common practice in modern India. The link between the ant-hill, the cosmogony and the Siddheshwari hierophany turns out to be not so obscure after all.

Nirmala continued her trance states in the *vedi* over the next few years. Since she was tall and sturdily built, says Didi, who often witnessed her posture in the pit, it was astonishing that she managed it. But Nirmala's relaxed way of melting into the extremely restricted space of the *vedi* no more than 22 inches, 35cm, square perfectly expresses her sense of identity with the unmanifest Ground of all being.

Curled up in the *vedi*, her physical state is a graphic verification of her assertion that 'this body is That'. She is at *home* - not the home of a personal God, but of a formless, unmanifest Supreme Reality, the *anandamaya-kosha*, the bliss body.

There is an air of inevitability about the way she takes up residence in the *vedi*: for her it is nothing special.

Someone who has reached the stage of the last picture in the Zen Ox-Herding Pictures, their commentary explains, is regarded as being so elevated as to look no different from ordinary people: *I use no magic to enhance my life; now; when I approach, trees bloom."*

Didi used to say that Mataji's followers became so habituated to her secure warmth and ordinary manner that they tended to take her for granted, forgetting how really extraordinary her true identity was. Perhaps it is because of this apparent ordinariness and ease that none among them felt any need to remark upon or interpret the Siddheshwari hierophany.

Bhaiji was the first disciple who gave overt recognition to Nirmala's true stature. His contribution at the climax of the *vedi* story indicates his acute insight.

Jyotish Chandra Roy - his original name, - a senior government official in Dhaka, describes how, one noon:

"I was busy at my desk. Someone came with a message from Mataji asking me to go to Shahbagh. He had told her that the Director of Agriculture could take charge of the office that day. Without a moment's hesitation I abandoned all the paperwork on my desk and without informing anybody, left for Shahbagh forthwith. When I got there, Mataji said: 'Let us go to Siddheshwari Ashram.' So I accompanied her and Bholanath. There was a small hollow, the *vedi*, exactly where a small pillar and a Shiva Lingam now stand.

Mataji sat inside the hollow, her countenance soon wreathed in smiles and radiant with joy. I exclaimed to Bholanath: 'From today we shall hence forward call Ma by the name *Anandamayi*.' He at once replied: 'Yes, let it be so!'

Mataji gazed at me for some time but did not *say* anything.

When we were about to return to Shahbagh she enquired: 'All along you were so full of joy, so how is it that you now look so pale?' I replied that the thought of going home had made me remember all the paperwork I had left unfinished at the office.

She said: 'You need not worry about that.'

Next day I asked Mataji why she had called me so unexpectedly in the middle of work the day before. She said: 'to test how much progress you have made in the last few months.'

Then she added with a genial laugh: 'If you had not come, who else would have given a name to this body?'"

The naming was Bhaiji's flash of intuition; at the furthest remove from learning, scholarship and research, the moment of naming is traditionally seen to be highly significant. The name emerges at a moment of inspiration in the namer. Pronouncement of the name is a condensation of the person's essence - *nama-rupa*, convergence of name and form, a mantra of the Self. "Ananda" simply means bliss, a self-luminous word for the self-luminous state.

"Anandamayi" means the Self of bliss. Perhaps "steeped in bliss" catches the tone of Bhaiji's pronouncement.

Shankaracharya, the great exponent of Vedanta, cited by Anandamayi in connection with Siddheshwari, says "when a being, by means of the cognition of absolute identity; finds *absolute rest* in the Self consisting of bliss, then he is free."

We could say "the bliss of absolute rest in the *vedi*".

The naming was the real climax to the Siddheshwari hierophany. It occurred at a time, so far as the observer's outward eye can perceive, when the role of Anandamayi crystallised. She was beginning to establish her public identity and it would soon reach far beyond the circle of companions gathered round her in Dhaka. But the difficulty in writing an account of how all this came about arises from the fact that the hierophany itself is pure poetry. It does not lend itself to interpretation in expository prose something essential is missing from my words. To make up for this I will quote from a poem which *does* convey exactly what I believe to be the inner meaning which Anandamayi gave to the hierophany the Jnanasagar of Aliraja, as transcribed by the great scholar, S. B. Das Gupta, himself one of the first learned men to recognized the true nature of Anandamayi.

It is said that the universe has its origin in love, and the chaos is systematised into the cosmos through the bond of love. There is love between fire and air, between earth and water; without this love neither heaven, nor earth, nor the nether world would have originated at all. There is love between heaven and the skies, between heaven and earth, between hell and the nether world in which it lies, and thus are the three worlds supported in love. There is love between the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars and in love they are all fixed into the sky above.

There is love between the sea and its water, between the moon and the night and the sun and the day; - the tree is fixed to the earth by its roots, the black bee is attached to the lotus, fish is bound to the water, man is bound to the woman - and all in love.

The body is in love with the mind and the mind with the vital *prana*. In love does the mother conceive the child, in love does the earth hold fast the root of the tree, in love does the tree hold fast the branches and the flowers and fruits, in love does the fruit accumulate juice in its kernel - thus is the whole creative process supported in love.

This "absolute rest" is more meaningful than a merely pleasing figure of speech and takes us right to the innermost meaning of Anandamayī's repose in the *vedi*. Fundamental to all Indian thinking about phenomenal existence is a deep and abiding belief in the continuance of the Beginning, but not as a unique "big bang" or originating moment sparking temporal succession, as in Western thinking about the origin of the universe. To the Indian mind, genesis is a *continuing function*; the cosmogony takes place not at the "beginning of time" but in the Eternal Present.

All Indian symbolism for this ineffable Beginning helps to "reverse human experience of genesis, reintegrate the wasteful entropy of time and regain the continuing original whole" - Philip Rawson.

Reading the various accounts of Anandamayi's early life and the events leading up to her naming, though it all happened long ago, one still gets a lively impression of a group of people drawn together by a particularly powerful urge to assimilate to this "original whole". Each individual participates vicariously in the immersion through the sheer intensity of mystical identity. The experience is so complete, even though at one remove from actual physical entrance into the little *vedi*, that no interpretation of the symbolism is needed. Here is the real thing: oneness with the Source.

No word other than "Anandamayi", no verbal comment, either by Anandamayi herself or by anyone else, was called for, other than her sibylline utterance there of mantras. She herself is the body of the temple as a goddess would be in a traditional context; her utterances within the *vedi* are essentially cryptic, but nevertheless imply the intelligible structure of the world emergent from that Source.

What "happens" in the *vedi* serves to structure otherwise inexpressible intuitions about the origin, meaning and destiny of the human world. The participation of so charismatic a personage as Anandamayi guides the behaviour of all the other participants, as well as their spiritual effort.

The plethora of symbolic objects - a hole in the ground, the central point where the energy beyond emerges into the realm of manifestation; a termite nest and sacred earth; an altar surrounded by a fence within a shrine within an ashram - merely serves that divine energy entering the world through the mediation of Anandamayi.

By now we are in a better position to appreciate why Anandamayi did not have recourse to the *vedi* for long. The subtle messages she conveyed directly to the hearts of her followers through the language of the Siddheshwari symbols would, with time, inevitably grow weaker. What once had reshaped the lives of all participants in that ashram would lose its compelling immediacy.

Not only would Anandamayi move on, but the enactment of the hierophany would give way to expository discourse, albeit both more comprehensive and considerably more explicit. But for as long as it continued, Anandamayi's recourse to the *vedi* to all those who

witnessed it, served as a reminder that it was possible for each individual to find the way back to the hidden oneness.

And for those who can now only imagine what it must have been like, it remains a compelling image of the essential oneness of the individual with the universal, of the manifested reality with its source -indeed, of the constant flow between the unmanifest and the manifest.

Words of Anandamayi: Short Communications 4

There is a time for everything. No one can come to me until the time is ripe.

Question: How can I know which is the true path?

Answer: If you sit with all doors and windows closed, how can you see the path? Open the door and step out; the path will become visible.

Visitor: I have no spiritual aspirations; I am happy as I am.

Answer: That is good; we also are talking of happiness. If you have found the secret of happiness why do you make this statement instead of being in this state for all to see? She smiles, the visitor laughs and acknowledges that it is so.

To be with God is true happiness.

The multifarious kinds of beasts, birds, men - what are they all? What are these varieties of shapes and modes of being, what is the

essence within them? What really are these everchanging forms? Gradually, slowly, because you are rapt in the contemplation of your Beloved, He becomes revealed to you in every one of them; not even a grain of sand is excluded. You realise that water, earth, plants, animals, birds, human beings are nothing but forms of your Beloved.

Some experience it in this manner; realisation does not come to everyone in the same way. There are infinite possibilities and, consequently, which for any particular person is the specific path along which the Universal will reveal itself in its boundlessness, remains concealed from most individuals.

Question: Is it ever possible to bribe God?

Answer: By cheating, you yourself alone will be cheated.

God is everywhere, He pervades everything.

He, whom you think you have sought in vain for so many years, is not apart from you. Just as a man cannot be without bones, blood, flesh and skin, so the One is present everywhere, at all times, interwoven with everything that exists.

God is one's very own Self, the breath of one's breath, the life of one's life, the Atma. Not until his true Self has been revealed to him may a seeker ever relax his search. By seeking, one will find the Self is within one's own grasp. To feel fatigued, exhausted, because one has not found Him is a very good sign indeed.

It indicates that one is nearing the purification of one's heart and mind.

In dreams all kinds of things can be seen: things, which the mind has been busy with and, also, things which have not been thought about but which have occurred in the past or will come about in the future.

In any case every thing that happens belongs to the realm of dreams.

There are instances when one loses consciousness while sitting in meditation. Some people have found themselves swooning away, as it were, intoxicated with joy, remaining in that condition for quite a long time. On emerging they claim to have experienced some sort of divine bliss. But this is certainly not Realisation. A stage exists in meditation where intense joy is felt, one is as if submerged in it.

But who is it that gets submerged? The mind, of course. At a certain level and under certain circumstances, this experience may prove an obstacle. If repeated time and again one may stagnate at its particular level, and thereby be prevented from getting a taste of the Essence of Things.

If after coming down from the state of contemplation you are capable of behaving as before, you have not been transformed.

When one has become established in a state of tranquillity, one has become still.

Only then, the activity of nature, which continues at every moment in sleep and in waking from birth to death, this and the thinking mind become caught in that Stream and eternally remain floating in it.

Ever to keep the mind poised in the Self wide-awake in the current of Reality, where the Unfathomable, the One-without-end is ever revealed in His infinity - this must, with the intensity of a possession, be your one and constant endeavour.

CHAPTER 4

Bhava and Samadhi

Receiving Anandamayi's *darshan* the blessing of her presence as distinct from listening to the discourse of a sage or the instruction of a Guru, was to remain the main source of her attraction for many years yet. All the firsthand descriptions show how particularly strange and compelling a drama her *darshan* on occasion could be.

There were several great spiritual personalities alive at that time in India, but none remotely like her in this particular respect. Well-attested examples from the past describing exalted trance in any detail are hard to find, but the two usually cited for the spectacular quality of their spiritual rapture are both Bengalis: Chaitanya and Ramakrishna.

When Nirmala was in her twenties, disciples of the latter great 19th-century mystic were still alive. Through a devotee of hers who was a disciple of Ramakrishna's wife, Nirmala and her companions were to meet Gauri Ma, the last living disciple of Ramakrishna himself and other great Vaishnavites in Navadveep.

For these dignified and venerable religious elders, the most respected in the community, ecstatic trance was a phenomenon of recognized spiritual significance. In fact, by this time in her life, Nirmala herself had become the centre of attention amongst the older generation of distinguished Bengalis who were steeped in the spiritual traditions for which the province had been renowned since the mid-19th century. These people were knowledgeable; they had long experience of judging the qualities of spiritual personality and at once recognized in Nirmala great holiness.

Bhava, while seated or lying in the *vedi*, was of focal significance for Anandamayi in her new Siddheshwari ashram. It should be said that the single most important activity of her followers was to look at her, to pay the utmost attention to everything she said and did. There was no rule about this - they *wanted* it that way; it was voluntary, spontaneous and unanimous. Bhajji wrote of one occasion:

"All the devotees sat around in silence, absorbed in their own thoughts. Her body gradually shrank so much in size that everybody had the impression that only her sari was left on the *vedi*. Nobody could see her. All were wondering what would happen next. Gradually, there was an increase of movement within the cloth and very slowly and gently a body took shape and she emerged, sitting straight up. For nearly half an hour she looked up at the sky with a steadfast gaze and then said: 'For your life's work you have brought down this body'."

This is an example of what is called *bhava*. The word is an inclusive term, which encompasses a multiplicity of meanings. For our purposes, a *bhava* reveals an inner disposition towards and absorption in the Supreme Being. It is, at its lightest level, an intense spiritual mood, but it is an emotional state, which can deepen into spiritual ecstasy, yet it carries connotations of aloofness and apartness, of being withdrawn from ordinary waking consciousness.

However, it is not the same as the spiritual condition of *samadhi* where there is a complete cessation of consciousness. In the case of Anandamayi, *bhava* has an extravagant, endless variety of moods, and could last for a fleeting instant or up to several days. As with all her manifold states, she says she remained always the same, in an unbroken continuum of *bhava*, one with the Source.

Only to the eyes of the beholder did she seem to pass through a succession of diverse intensities. The dazzling variety of mood and changing physiognomy which she would manifest in the course of a single hour, and which I to some degree could record photographically, nevertheless bears out her assertion of sameness, for such diversity would surely be impossible unless it were deeply anchored in a single Source.

There is an account of a very curious *bhava* which seems to carry some kind of hidden or secret meaning, perhaps of an initiatory nature. It is described by one of the seven protagonists, Didi, but in such a deadpan style that it is impossible to tell whether the enactment of this odd little tableau was a solemn occasion or one of

bizarre hilarity. That it took place on a serious festival day, Sivaratri, suggests that the mood was serious.

"On the afternoon of Sivaratri, Mataji took Bholanath, my father, Virendra Dada, Nandu, Maroni and myself to Siddheshwari. On reaching there, Mataji immediately went and sat in the pit. A little later she came out of it and asked Bholanath to sit there. As soon as he sat down, Mataji sat on one of his knees and made Maroni sit on the other. Then she asked Father to sit on her lap. He did so. Father was then asked to get up and Mataji made Virendra Dada sit on her lap. Subsequently Virendra Dada was made to get up and I was asked to sit on it. Then after Mataji made me get up, Nandu was asked to sit on her lap. Then everybody stood. This *lila* was performed secretly. Nobody else knew anything about it."

There was a fascinating ambiguity about Anandamayi's *lila*, not so much because there may have been, occasionally, some doubt as to whether something was to be taken lightly or with due solemnity but because it might appear so wayward or so arbitrary. Mataji would suddenly make or cancel a decision, issue new and perplexing instructions, break off, interrupt or upset elaborate arrangements - or perform some notably dramatic act with the most paradoxical meaning.

Life was like that the whole time - and it continued in this particularly volatile state for at least 30 years. It was a crucial feature of Anandamayi's *lila*, just as paying close attention to her every move was a major feature of her disciples' *sadhana*. Unpredictability was of the essence; everyone was kept on their toes; nobody was ever allowed to slide into torpor or become stuck in grooves of mindless repetition.

There was always a meaning or a message in the most bizarre of Mataji's initiatives and rules; sometimes it took a while for participants to fathom the meaning, and sometimes it was so cryptic as to remain a mystery. Her ways were indeed mysterious and the

quality of life around her correspondingly full of magical enchantment - often disorienting, at times unnerving.

Life away from this ambience would come to look flat and colourless - life within it was full of hidden depths and could open up endless possibilities for psychic and spiritual development.

In the midst of the prevailing "anarchy" partly a misnomer, for the word means "without rule", whereas the whole point of Mataji's methods was to make and break rules all the time, serious devotees would be taken aside by Mataji for private instruction and given tasks, more arduous discipline, tighter and tougher *sadhana*, and sent off to accomplish missions more challenging than they had ever had to face in their lives before. Instruction, Mataji said, was for the individual alone and not a matter to share with others.

Among the many different kinds of discipline followers had to accept was looking after Anandamayi's more strenuous states of *bhava*. While she, since childhood had frequently fallen into *bhava* in the privacy of her own home, the first public manifestation occurred during a solar eclipse on Pausha Sankranti day, in January 1926 just before the inaugural Vasanti Puja. Gurupriya Devi wrote a most vivid account of this event in her diary:

"Many people decided to gather that day at Shahbagh and perform *kirtan* in Mataji's presence. *Kirtan* started as soon as the eclipse began and Mataji sat with the men in the circular room. . .

Suddenly her body started swaying. Her sari slipped from her head, her eyes closed and her entire body shook to the rhythm of the *nama kirtana*. She rose, still swaying. It seemed as if she had left her body and that some invisible force was controlling the movements just beginning.

It was obvious to us all that there was no will motivating her actions. She was so oblivious to herself that even her sari was slipping down. At that time she never wore a blouse. She wore her sari in such a way that her shoulders were never visible.

So the women now tied a sheet tightly round her body. Then she started to fall, only to pick herself up just before touching the floor. It seemed as if her body had no weight and was fluttering in the wind.

Now she started moving round the extent of the whole room, as if intoxicated by some strange source of inebriation. It was not exactly like that though - words cannot describe what we saw. I had never seen anything like this in my life, although I had read about such exalted states in the lives of Chaitanya and Ramakrishna.

Witnessing such a state now with my own eyes, I was enraptured. The same person who had been engaged in so many menial tasks only a little while before on that day was now transported, one knows not where. . . . Moving around in this manner, she joined the *kirtan* singers and began to revolve in their midst. Her eyes were turned upward without a flicker of the lids, her face shining with a supernatural glow, and her body became suffused with a red effulgence.

Suddenly, as we were watching her, she fell on the floor from a standing position, but it did not seem to hurt her in the least. As I have said, it was as if her body were moved by the wind. It seemed to have been blown down and as she fell her body started rotating fast, just like a leaf or a scrap of paper blown about in a gale. We tried to hold her body but it was impossible at that speed. After a while Mataji became still and sat up.

Her eyes were closed and she maintained a yogic posture, steady, grave, motionless. A little after this, she began to sing, at first softly, then loudly and clearly:

"Hare Murare Madhu Kaitab Hare Gopala Govinda Mukunda Saure."

She started wandering around again now singing only this verse. What a beautiful voice it was! To this day, the hairs on my body stand on end at the memory of it. Everything she did was new.

Everyone was witnessing this *bhava* for the first time, so long had it been kept secret. She had never before appeared in this manner during *kirtan* in front of everybody. Now she sat quietly for a while, but then her body keeled over. No pulse could be felt, her breathing was very faint and slow. The eclipse was over."

Not long after this *bhava*, Didi relates, she observed Mataji in another one, quite different from the first, of a more violent character, as if she had assumed terrible goddess Kali, who is widely worshipped in Bengal.

Yet, strangely, the occasion was the more sedate and non-violent Saraswati Puja,

" became engrossed in *bhava*. Various kinds of yogic *kriyas* began manifesting in her body.

That day, for a few moments she assumed a wrathful posture with upturned eyes, as if she were holding a sword and battling with someone. With the onset of this mood, her tongue protruded for a few seconds and again there was a change of mood. She now assumed a very serene aspect.

Then it seemed as if she was seated on a mat performing worship - worshipping herself. Sometimes touching her feet with her forehead, she prostrated and then became limp.

Now she revolved with great speed and rolled on the floor, then became very still, lying on her back. Her breathing was such that it seemed as if waves were coursing through her body from navel to throat. Then again she would lie inert.

I then sat with her on my lap. With her whole body cold as stone, saliva started pouring from her mouth and my clothes were drenched.

She shed such profuse tears that her dress too was now soaked through. But then, suddenly, her body became lifeless, her fingers and nails turned black, and her face turned yellow like that of a corpse. One could not make out whether her pulse was beating or not, nor were there any signs of breathing.

We were extremely alarmed now, but remembered that Mataji had earlier told us to perform *Nama kirtana* in such an eventuality.

'If this body is to recover it, will do so only because you do this'."

Bhaiji, who found *bhava* such as this almost impossible to describe, has left us vivid accounts none the less. For instance, he described

how, at moments during an ecstatic dance, she rose on her toes, her head arched over backwards until it touched her back. This is exactly the pose of the choribanthos, depicted on a thousand ancient Greek bas-reliefs.

Here is one of his accounts of *bhavas*:

"Her exalted states found expression in so many ways that it is impossible to describe them in words. When her body rolled on the floor, it sometimes stretched out to extraordinary length; at other times it shrank to a very small size; sometimes her body rolled about like a ball; on other occasions it seemed boneless, or bounced like a rubber ball as she danced.

But her movements could reach the speed of lightning, making it impossible for even the keenest eye to follow them.

During this period we felt convinced that her body was possessed by divine powers making it dance in countless beautiful ways. It appeared so suffused with ecstasy that even the roots of her hair swelled, causing it to stand on end.

Her complexion turned crimson. All the self-initiated range of divine rapture seemed compressed into the confines of her frame, manifesting the Infinite in a multitude of graceful and rhythmic ways.

But she looked like one who was far away, completely detached from all these feats, untouched by the thrill of executing them.

They seemed to enter her body from some lofty plane.

She told us: 'A light of such brilliance was emitted by this body that the space surrounding it was illuminated. This light gradually seemed to spread out, enveloping the whole universe'.

In that condition, she would cover her body completely with a cloth and for a long time retire to a solitary corner of the house and stay by herself. The places on which she would then sit or lie became extremely hot.

She would sit in one posture for several hours at a time without the slightest movement, or fall into silence in the middle of a sentence. In this condition, inert like a statue, her eyes unblinking, gazing upwards her appearance was delightfully sweet and serene. She felt neither hunger nor thirst, nor extremes of heat and cold.

Even when physical consciousness dawned once more following the state of absorption in the divine, she took a long time to regain her normal state."

The resemblance between details of her *bhava* and those of Ramakrishna and others, and the likeness between her own accounts of her mystical and yogic experiences and the well-known phenomenon of the activated *chakra* system, point to the existence of verifiable structures experienced within the bodymind by all mystics with a similar spiritual outlook.

On the analogy of mathematicians who share their specialist knowledge of, say, the theorem of Pythagoras, only with other mathematicians, and from whose number the layman is excluded, so we are touching here on phenomena whose specific characteristics can only be fully understood by other spiritually trained adepts.

Bhaiji reports some remarks made by Anandamayi about her inner experiences from which we can conclude that her *bhavas* and *kriyas* belong to the universal repertoire.

For example:

"On enquiry, we learnt from her that while she was in that condition her breath deep and prolonged, her whole body suffused with languor and fatigue, she would feel a fine thread-like current of energy flowing upwards from the base of the spine right to the topmost centre of the brain.

Along with it, a thrill of joy would course through every fibre of her body and even through the pores of her skin and hair. At that time

she would feel that every particle of her physical frame danced, as it were, with infinite ripples of bliss.

Whatever she saw or touched appeared to her to be a vital part of herself while her physical body gradually ceased to function."

The state of *bhava* should not be viewed as an isolated event. One has to envisage these states as part of a whole ongoing process which, as Anandamayi herself made clear, was not for the benefit of this body but for the benefit of all, drawing them like a magnet ineluctably forward on their path to perfection:

"This body is always in the same state, without any change whatever, our attitude just leads you to consider any particular phase as either more or less extraordinary. But the Universe is a Divine Play you have a desire to play, so naturally you interpret all the playful antics of this body, with its laughter and fun, according to your lights.

Had this body assumed a solemn guise you would have steered clear of me. Learn to merge yourselves in the Divine Joy in all its manifestations and you will reach the final goal of all play."

The following account of Anandamayi in *bhava*, by a great devotee, Girija Shankar Bhattacharya, perfectly exemplifies just the kind of attitude she was proposing among her followers.

It is a beautiful description of the first time he ever saw her, at Siddheshwari in 1928. After he had watched Bholanath perform *puja* of Kali the day he walked in, she suddenly went and sat in the *vedi*:

"Mataji sat on the platform and the change that came about her person was simply astounding. Her whole body, seemed afire - but it was a fire that emitted the sweetest, the most comfortable, cool rays that you could imagine.

She shone gloriously, but did not cause any pain to our vision. To this day I have a vivid recollection of this transfiguration - and probably to the end of my days I shall have it. . . .

She called, one by one, the four or five persons who had then gathered. . . .

She had, I should say here, not yet come out and very few people had any knowledge about her. I remember Mataji called Jai Bahadur Mukherjee first. . . .

The next person to be called was myself and Mataji in a deep-toned voice said to me, I know but One. Then she launched into a mystical utterance the like of which used to gush forth from her on many an occasion in those days.

It as not possible to follow her in it, so rapid ,as the stream of words welling forth, but it was clearly understood that she was speaking of the Unity of all things, and I seem to remember the word diversity occurring in it.

Thus even at the beginning of my acquaintance with her. Mataji spoke of the Unity in Diversity - truth, which has been forcibly borne upon me by her utterances and conduct subsequently.

To me it seems now that unless we learn this lesson from her, we shall have learnt but little. Her conduct and conversation are all eloquent of this truth - the supreme and basic truth. To me, she seems to be a shutterless window wide open, through which you can have a glimpse of the Infinite.

She calls forth the Divine in us, lying hidden beneath untruths.

It is clear to me that even when Mataji seems to be in the ordinary wakeful state, like all people around us, she is really merged in the Universal Soul and her acts therefore are like *lila*, they do not proceed from any *samskara*, psychic traces from previous lives, nor do they create any. She is eternally free in the only real freedom - that is, in the freedom of the Infinite."

Fortunately the author of this account includes a word which Anandamayi used and which I have crudely translated from the Devanagari script as "diversity":

Abrahma-stamba-paryantam.

This is a marvellous example of her poetic use of extreme compression, to which the Sanskrit language is peculiarly well suited. She has joined three words together in a perfect triptych. They together mean "from Brahma to the roots of the grass",

implying the unity of all that exists - animate and inanimate - in the total area of space and time.

To the materialistically inclined, no doubt Anandamayi, steeped in the bliss-generating womb of the *vedi*, indicates regression to the infantile state where no difference exists between subject and object. It is nothing of the sort. The infant does not transcend subject and object, for it cannot differentiate them in the first place.

The mystical adept, on the other hand, is perfectly aware of the conventional difference between subject and object; but what, in addition, he also realises, as most of us fail to do, is that there is a larger background identity which unites them. In the infantile fusion state the baby is merely undifferentiated from the outer world; it is not a total personality integrated at all levels and united with all higher worlds.

The contrast between such reductionist confusion and the certainty with which Anandamayi speaks of her own state of mind in infancy is most striking. She went so far as to say that, from her very birth, she was aware of what she had ever been and what she would always continue to be and that there was no possibility of a deviation from her self-conscious stature for a single moment. This startling assertion does in fact neatly encapsulate the essentials of her whole spiritual stance, what in the vernacular might be termed her "signature tune":

She claims to be herself alone, nothing more and nothing less.

"Where the distinction between the attainable and the unattainable does not arise is That Itself"

This body has no desire, no intention or set purpose - everything occurs spontaneously:

Self-initiated, she experienced Divine Grace without the mediation of the Guru and without striving towards the attainable. In other words, there was direct transmission of Divine Grace.

Her most eminent and learned interpreter, Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj, in his essay on the nature of her true identity; puts it this way:

Thus Grace acts freely and immediately in the case of souls which are not clogged with material vestments. The mere fact that her knowledge did not originate from the Guru does not take us very far into its mystery...

She played the role of a *sadhika* in her earlier years, no doubt, and during this period she seemed to have passed through all the stages of a real Sadhika. In this play, she started with ignorance and proceeded through various austerities, observing silence, regulating diet, practising *japa* and yogic exercises and performing *puja* and other similar rites. Dawn of knowledge formed also a part of this play. A sense of agony and dryness of the soul followed by the bliss of union had their own places in this self-enacted drama. The whole affair was an imitation of *sadhana* and it was so arranged that it had all the air of naturalness in it. Her self-knowledge fortified in its unshakeable purity, stood behind this play of self-assumed ignorance and the dramatic impersonation of an ordinary *sadhaka* in quest of supreme realisation.

One should not take it as an illustration of divided self and of its activities - it is rather the outcome of an eternally vigilant and self-conscious Will playing the double part of impersonation of a *sadhaka*, passing through the shadows and lights of a disciplined life and of the still, Witness, observing and directing its own play on the stage.

The Siddheshwari hierophany contains implicit links with the cosmogony. For purposes of explication, the cosmogony has been presented earlier in its mythical terms. But it is not merely as a relic of a bygone age that this reference has been made. The cosmogony is also an eternal spiritual truth about the perfection of beginnings.

Anandamayi in the cosmogonic *vedi* is in a state of right relation with that one Source that is, *Ananda*.

Today we are more concerned with investigating how the cosmogony came about, how the universe was created, rather than trying to put ourselves into right relation with it. Even this very day, as I am writing this, the newspaper carries on its front page a ten-day-exposure photograph from the camera of the Hubble space telescope of galaxies which exploded into existence at the creation of the universe. In any real sense, the scale here is experientially as immeasurable to us as are the ants within the coagulated mud of the Primordial Mound.

These are metaphors: the fullness of *Ananda* in the Primal Source is eternal truth within the Siddheshwari hierophany.

"Why the One becomes the many, why the primal Unity, Being and Power divides itself into infinite varieties in creation, why the subject itself becomes the object of its own action, or why the Ineffable splits itself into subject and object, is a mystery which defies all attempts at interpretation," wrote Gopinath Kaviraj.

All that we can say, in the case of Anandamayi, is that her oneness with the Source throughout the multitudinal diversity of her manifestation is itself an act of the Ultimate One.

This act she called her *kheyala* which elsewhere has also been called *lila*, or Will, or the Divine Word, or the Logos, or the Will to become - but in reality there is neither any will nor any becoming.

The expression *kheyala* as used by her covers all these senses. "What Mataji calls *kheyala*", the Pandit muses, "is really an upsurge of Will in a particular direction which is undoubtedly free and not indicated in the plan of things. . . . No law governs this region and there is no interruption in its freedom of activity. . . . It has all the freshness of a playful and apparently unpurposive act holding within itself incomprehensible possibilities."

It takes an awful lot of words to interpret the marvels, which occurred during Anandamayi's *lila* at Siddheshwari! Gopinath Kaviraj himself used to laugh ironically at the leaden pace, as he saw it, of his own intellect when dealing with the flights of Anandamayi's thought and her effortlessly "lilaic" action. Bhaiji's response to seeing her in the *vedi* - "We shall call Ma by the name of Anandamayi" - sums it all up and points to the central meaning of her life. *Both* names of Mataji encapsulate her qualities: Nirmala means "Taintless", "prior to Defilement"; Anandamayi means "Pervaded by Divine Bliss".

Both names speak of a state of primal unity prior to the emergence of all dualities - "before the Fall" as Christians would say. Where there is the Divine Bliss of Ananda all contradictions and conflicts lose their strength of opposition and become one with the One. At the personal level, those who contemplate the image of Anandamayi in the *vedi* are offered a glimpse of Perfect Felicity. The individual, identifying with the primal source of life, can enter into the plenary condition of the cosmogony and regain the perfection of the Beginning.

It could be said that the paradoxical state known as *samadhi* is a return to the undifferentiated completeness of pre-creation, the primordial Unity. But that is also too many words with which to describe something which is truly ineffable!

Since Anandamayi went into *samadhi* quite frequently, we should at least try to describe its effects as they strike the outward eye. Like Ramakrishna, without prior warning she would suddenly fall into this state for anything from a few minutes to as long as twelve hours, or even on one occasion five days.

In the classic ancient texts it is described as the final result and the crown of all an ascetic's spiritual efforts and exercises, but we can put aside this aspect in Anandamayi's case. However, in view of her frequent, instant "takes" on a person's inner nature, it is interesting to note that *samadhi* of the elementary sort is a recognized form of thought for grasping the essentials of an object or person directly

without background knowledge or imagination; *samadhi* makes for extremely acute intuition.

Observed in deep *samadhi*, Anandamayi was completely closed to stimuli, her body immobile and extremely cold. There is a classic Indian distinction between *samadhi* and *viksipta*, the provisional concentration we call hypnosis. It is also said that in certain kinds of *samadhi*, only a spot at the top of the skull remains warm, while the rest of the body is lifeless and cold. The mind is either completely concentrated on its object of contemplation, or ceases to function; only Pure Consciousness remains, revealing Itself to Itself.

The only time I personally saw Anandamayi in *samadhi* was during her 59th birthday, at the Patal Devi ashram, Almora. She was lying down and completely veiled, and remained in this state for a number of hours. In common with most other observers, I found the most interesting aspect was the manner of her re-emergence into normal waking consciousness.

She had to be helped, and took some time to adjust to the brilliant sunshine. The ethereal beauty of her expression was breathtaking. But she very soon began to move away to her private quarters, at a pace swift even for her.

Indeed she moved so quickly that, for once, the shutter of my camera was not fast enough to freeze the action entirely. She looked extremely delicate, indeed vulnerable, much softer than usual, with a misty look not just to her eyes but to her whole face, as if her head were enveloped in a very fine vapour.

There was such an ineffably sweet quality to her person that it seemed as if she might evaporate into thin air. She glided as if on a light gust of wind over the rim of an immense mandala, which had been painted specially for the occasion on a tiled courtyard, and disappeared into her room.

But here is a much closer observation of Anandamayi in *samadhi*, as experienced by a devotee in 1929, the period, when such states were frequent:

I came to learn that Anandamayi had passed into a deep samadhi some time during the night and there was no sign of her regaining normal consciousness soon. I observed her for a long time, in the company of a doctor friend. She appeared to be in a deep sleep, but she was not sleeping, for her eyes were half open and drawn within.

They seemed to have lost all lustre and to be wholly oblivious of the world of the senses. The outer form was lying there and the inner spirit detached from its garb seemed in holy communion with the world-spirit.

Hours passed. The sun crossed the meridian. It was about 1 pm.

All felt hunger, but even Anandamayi's aged father did not take anything without first feeding his divine daughter.

He began to utter divine names loudly; close to her ear.

No response for about 15 minutes.

Four or five of us, including Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj, were in the room. The chanting of divine names continued and now a slight change could be noticed in her features. Her eyes began to show signs of life and she wept profusely.

Her face was bathed in a radiant glow. At once I thought of the *satvic* signs:

ashru - tears, *pitak*- joy, *kampa* - trembling,

and I said in an undertone to Kavirajji that the next thing to manifest could well be *kampa*. No sooner said than Mataji began to shiver violently.

All these states appeared and reappeared one after another. Then commenced a sort of tug-of-war between the sensuous and the suprasensuous aspects of her life. No sooner had physical consciousness dawned in the body than it withdrew and she was again lost to the senses. The process continued till outer consciousness reasserted itself. She opened her eyes and tried to speak, but failed. Some eatables were placed before her, not so much for her as for the sake of others, as they wanted her *prasada*.

With great effort she could utter a word or two expressing her inability to eat anything. Then she lay quietly for some time.

I had seen others in *samadhi*, but never before had I witnessed a *samadhi* of this type. Such a long period of supraconsciousness - no sign of life, so to speak - and above all, the wonderful states that accompanied the regressive process of climbing down to normalcy. I have seen the snow-clad Himalayas touching the sky, the source of the sacred Ganges babbling over pebbles and the sun rising from a blue sea, but I have not seen a sight so touching in its majesty as Anandamayi's *samadhi*. I may forget everything else, but I can never forget what I saw at Hardwar in 1929. It was sublime. It surpasses everything.

Words of Anandamayi: Short Communications 5

Question: Is it necessary to renounce the world

Answer: No, why where is the place where God is not? The natural way of life itself could be transformed into the spiritual way of life. In fact, there is nothing which can be "other" to God; so properly speaking, to live in the world is to be on the way to Self-realisation.

If one does not arrive at a state of stillness, the agitation of one's whole system will manifest through every nerve and fibre of the body and render one inefficient. If one's energy is not retained, the harmonious functioning of this energy in perfect tranquillity is not possible. Interest in the Supreme Quest and practices performed in search of Truth naturally have a calming effect. The preservation of energy is essential.

A person who expects this body to be always super-normal in its dealings with the world, will be disappointed.

One must not allow oneself to be caught by the lure of supernormal faculties. Suppose one has acquired the power that whatever one utters becomes true or whatever one desires is fulfilled. What of it? This is only a stage. By using such powers to destroy or improve people one may become arrested on that level instead of progressing towards the ultimate. To get entangled on the level of these powers is a waste of energy. Having acquired them one must not lose sight of the supreme Goal of human existence, but strive unceasingly after Self-realisation.

Failing to do so will create obstacles and may result in a fall.

Everyone has his own path.

In God's creation the possible becomes impossible and the impossible possible at all times.

Question: If Mataji has found peace why does she keep wandering about?

Answer: If I stayed in one place the same question could arise, could it not? Pitaji, don't you know I am a very restless little girl. I cannot stay in one place. This is one answer. From another point of view; I

might say it is you who see me travelling. In reality I do not move at all. When you are in your own house, do you sit in one corner of it? Similarly, I also walk around in my own house - I don't go anywhere - I am always at rest in my own home.

I am not going anywhere: I am always here. There is no going or coming - all is Atma.

Question: What do you think of all these new people coming to see you almost daily?

Answer: Nobody is new. They are all familiar to me.

You and I are two persons and yet you and I are one; and the gap between the two of us this also is myself: there can be no question at all of duality. Attachment and hate arise out of the sense of duality.

Everybody's satisfaction is my satisfaction.

Everybody's happiness is my happiness.

Everybody's misery is my misery.

Become drinkers of nectar - all of you - drinkers of the wine of immortality.

Tread the path of immortality, where no death exists and no disease.

When you feel power within yourself, when new light dawns on you from within, the more you can keep it concealed in utter calm and stillness, the more it will grow in intensity. If the slightest opening appears, there is always the fear it will escape.

Sustained effort ends in effortless being - in other words, what has been attained by constant practice is finally transcended, and then spontaneity comes.

CHAPTER 5

The Fullness of Her Powers

At the age of 31 Anandamayi left Dhaka and began to travel extensively. There were marked changes in her life: well-educated individuals and families of position now began to gather round her.

The start of a lifelong tendency to attract some of the most solid and cultured people, who would then remain devotees and disciples for the rest of their days. And a way of life distinctive to her ashrams was beginning to take shape to accommodate the very large numbers of visitors that were arriving from extraordinarily diverse walks of life and all religious persuasions.

They formed that brotherhood of which Cohn Turnbull wrote in 1961 - a network of warm, friendly, family loyalty spread across widely scattered communities. While the focus was always upon Mataji, this brotherhood-and-sisterhood wove together the intense spirituality of permanent ashram residents the *sadhakas* with the joyousness, the heartache and the sorrow of innumerable highly distinctive, seasoned, regular visitors.

It was a good life, enriched by the unfolding human drama and spiritual endeavour of the devotees as they strove to develop and perfect themselves over the years. They watched each other and watched *over* each other in families where three, sometimes four generations had focused their aspirations upon Mataji.

Subtle, profound, even extraordinary changes were visibly wrought upon them by their *sadhana* and by the ever watchful presence of the figure at their head. The ashrams were putting down roots deep into the social and spiritual fabric of India.

The whole scene miraculously careered along, particularly in the germinal phase, the 1930s, at the pace set by Anandamayi - more or less spontaneously, with no thought-out structure. With a core of doughty companions, her life veered between extremes of public exposure and the secluded life of the hermit.

During her visits to urban areas, fame was already having an effect. Having made herself accessible to all, she would from now on attract unmanageably large crowds. After one glimpse of her, nobody wanted to leave. In 1928, on a visit to Varanasi, Benares, for the first time she sat in open assembly and answered questions. Hitherto, she had never sat in this manner and enlarged on profound topics to a large group of listeners.

Accustomed as they were to high-flown expositions on spiritual topics larded with complex Sanskrit terminology and framed within the terms of scripture, her learned interlocutors - theologians, Sanskrit scholars, senior monks and university professors were astonished, as the learned always are when confronted not with intellectual brilliance but with the living Truth. They were less surprised by her lucidity in argument or her expository skill than the position from which she developed a statement.

While their own Position was conditioned by a *striving towards* clarity, she coasted effortlessly on a current of *prior* knowledge, a position of unshakeable certainty with no reference to the authority of the scriptures. What she said in no way deviated from the doctrine which had been laid down for millennia in texts they had pored over all their lives; she had never read a word of these texts yet had complete command of the doctrine contained within them!

Her first appearance in Varanasi has been described as her "coming out". But the fact is she had never been in, so there was nowhere for her to come out from!

After the tumultuous visit to Varanasi, Anandamayi's life became ceaselessly peripatetic; she would spend very few days in any one

place, save for one period of six months when she lived like a hermit in the Himalayan foothills with only Bholanath and Bhaiji as companions. Even then, she would often be surrounded by village women.

It seems as if her habit of fleeting residence was just one way of manifesting her detachment and aloofness from every conceivable tie and link with ordinary life, with any kind of possession or ownership. She no longer stayed in people's homes but only in ashrams, pilgrim hostels, hermitages, or temporary shelters put up specially for her. She slept very little - and mostly in the daytime if it could be called sleeping- and was most active at night, talking or moving about or going for walks.

As she got older she appears to have become more conventional with regard to sleeping, although at no time did she ever sleep very much. She usually dictated letters at night and was up at dawn to meet the crowd of early callers before they had to go off and do a day's work. She always sat on the floor, but never on an asana mat until her middle years. When she lay down, which was quite often and for long periods, she would just lie where she was, apparently quite indifferent to her comfort.

She seemed to be at ease with neither cloth nor pillow, in all weathers, in the cold, on damp ground or dust, or outdoors in pouring rain.

She would also fall ill - quite frequently, in fact - and this called for constant attendance, quite apart from the problem of having to feed her the little she ate. She never complained about these illnesses and said she welcomed them just as she welcomed all her visitors - as manifestations of the One.

There were also countless stories of her healing the sick or taking the illness of a devotee upon herself while the devotee at once recovered. She would let all her illnesses run their course with complete equanimity, and possessed the ability to know beforehand on exactly which day they would come to an end.

The skill and loving care with which people like Bholanath, Didi and Bhaiji attended her, often under quite appalling conditions, was truly

impressive. Detailed accounts of her life are replete with the intricate details and cross-currents of continuous mutual concern among the band of followers.

She constantly poured out a stream of highly practical instruction to everybody, with meticulous care for the fine detail, and somehow possessed the uncanny ability to know and to keep track of every individual and where exactly each person was on his or her particular path. She also retained a "photographic" memory concerning the *sadhana* of devotees she might meet only at long intervals. The devotees numbered several hundred initially, but grew to many thousands later in life.

Each person was made to feel uniquely individual, his or her particular situation with its griefs and hopes wholly distinct from any other. Anandamayi's capacity to retain all this appeared so inexhaustible and unfailing, so minutely precise, as to call in question one's very notions of perception, memory and human insight. Whatever the nature of this gift, it afforded those who observed it at close quarters an opportunity to develop their own sensitivity through her example.

For 30 years Atmananda acted as interpreter in hundreds of private interviews for foreigners and for Indians who could not follow Mataji's Bengali or Hindi.

'I, thereby, got a unique opportunity to witness many private interviews with people of greatly varying backgrounds. This enabled me to get first-hand experience of the great universality of Mataji's teaching, of its innumerable aspects and facets.

I could see for myself how she modified it to appeal to each person's nature, conditioning and need of the moment - and yet she never stepped it down.

Translating private conversations, moreover, gave to me the chance to get to know intimately *sadhakas* from various countries, to get an insight into their problems their approach.

Fellow-travellers who meet on the way, often learn from one another'.

In this century there has been an enormous change in the way the great Indian spiritual teachers work. In the forefront, unquestionably, Anandamayi pioneered the immense change in scale and extent of the traditional teacher's role:

she did not like to be called a Guru,

she did not confine her teaching within the frame of existing doctrine,

she came into direct contact with an amazing diversity, of people,

she, probably, travelled more extensively than any previous teacher in Indian history.

We can see how all this developed in the first decade of her travels. By 1938, after the deaths of Bholanath, Bhairji and her father, every aspect had fallen into place. But while her ceaselessly peripatetic life followed the ancient tradition of the wandering Indian teacher, a new style was gradually emerging.

Between 1929 and 1935, according to Gurupriya Devi's diary, she made well over a hundred moves from one place to another, often a thousand miles apart, and this does not include a similar number of smaller changes of location within a particular district. Transport was mostly by train, but in the course of time devotees got into the habit of placing motorcars at her disposal. Other means of transport, such as boats and bullock-carts, were also used.

Ma left Tarapeeth accompanied by 20 or 25 bullock-cartloads of devotees. It was a moonlit night and the path was through deserted countryside. We left after 9 in the evening and reached Kampurhat station around 1.30 am. This midnight journey of Ma and her devotees was an exquisite experience. Bhramara began to sing *nama kirtana* to the accompaniment of the harmonium atop a bullock-cart. Soon all the devotees joined Ma in singing the beautiful name of God.

Ma was in *bhava* leaning on me and walking slowly.

She was taken in a carriage to the temple of the royal palace of Jaidevpur, and many people walked alongside. She was being photographed while still in *samadhi* and arrived at Prafulla Baba's house in that condition.

Much *kirtan* was performed in that house.

Ma was in great *bhava*.

At night, while she was lying down, there was an earthquake and she was carried outside.

To start with, she confined herself to moving to and fro all over Bengal, then moved beyond that to various places in North India, especially in the Himalayan foothills, before undertaking two long journeys through South India. On the first of these trips she moved from place to place down the eastern side of the subcontinent as far as Cape Comorin, and then northwards as far as Gujarat.

The party stopped at all the great temple-cities of the South and, since Anandamayi was completely unknown in this region, there were many extraordinary scenes as local people, who shared no common language with her, greeted her as one of their own.

They showed her some of the most secret and carefully guarded of their mysteries and treasures which were hidden away in these immense temple complexes.

At the southern cape, where the temple of the Goddess Kumari Devi (in the form of a little girl) is situated right on the seashore, the little daughters of the temple guardians would move round Mataji in a circle every evening to sing the *arati* hymn.

In Bengal, Anandamayi was known as Manush Kali, the "living Kali".

In Madurai she was hailed as the Goddess Minakshi by surging crowds who waited hours for a glimpse of her.

In the Punjab she was given the same place of honour as the Holy Granth Sahab.

On the shores of the sacred river Narmada she was greeted as Devi Narmada.

The simple highland women of Almora would say to her, "Now that we have you with us, we do not need to visit the temple."

A Christian devotee remarked, "Now we have a Face to put on God."

Bithika Mukeiji says that an Irish journalist asked her, "Am I right to believe that you are God?" and Mataji replied, "there is nothing save He alone; everyone and everything is but a form of God. In your person also He has come here to give *darshan*."

On her peregrinations there were no fixed plans, no arrangements were made beforehand, particularly in regard to accommodation. Frequently she and her companions started off without money or other necessities. Sometimes she would go to the station and simply board the first train which happened to arrive. The foothills to the north of Delhi - the area of cultural focus in the Indian Himalayan region - was much favoured by her, and she began to be a familiar figure among the hill people.

Bhaiji describes how it all began:

....I went on leave for four months. In need of a change, I was on the look out for a hill station. In the meantime, on the 2nd of June 1932. At about 10.30 in the evening Mataji called me through Brabmachari Jogesh and asked if I could accompany her.

But I wanted to know where she intended to go. Her reply was, "Anywhere I choose." I kept silent. She asked me why I was silent. I mused over the fact that I could not inform anybody about all this. So under the pull of the world I said, Well I'll have to pick up some money from home."

So she said, collect from here, whatever you can find."

"Alright," I said with my lips but I could feel my wife and son calling to me from within my heart, 'Where are you going, leaving us all like this-?'"

However, with one blanket, one coverlet, one durrie and one loincloth, I set out with Mataji and Bholanath. On reaching the station she said, "Buy tickets right up to the terminus of this line." So we booked through to Jagannathgunge. On reaching there next day she said, "Cross the river to the other side." From there we left for Katihar. I now had only a few rupees left, but quite unexpectedly, I met an old friend who could spare me a hundred rupees and plenty of fruit and sweets. From there we took the train to Lucknow; halted at Gorakhpur and then boarded the Dehradun Express.

On the following day after arriving at Dehradun, we rested at a *dharmasala* pilgrim hostel. It was a new place to me. All the people were strangers and everything appeared new to me. Mataji said, "I find everything old!"

Where we should go next was not clear.

In the afternoon Bholanath and I went to have a look round and came to know that there was a Kali temple nearby.

So we went there and were told that some three or four miles away in the village of Raipur stood a Shiva Temple which was quite solitary and a fit place for a secluded life. By drift of circumstances a temple guardian from Raipur met us. We talked to him and then accompanied him to Raipur next morning.

Bholanath liked the place. When we sought Mataji's opinion, she said, "You settle it yourselves. For me all places are good."

From the morning of Wednesday, June , 1932, Mataji and Bholanath began living in the temple.

Bholanath devoted himself to his *sadhana* wholeheartedly, writes Bithika Mukerji, while Bhaiji tried his hand at rendering such services which so far he had received from his own servants. To sweep and clean, wash clothes and cook primitive kinds of food was hard work for him. Sometimes Mataji helped him out, but generally she wandered around alone or sat surrounded by the village women.

Mataji established her main ashram since Dhaka at Kishenpur in 1936 and three others in the Dehradun area later, with further ashrams in the foothills at Almora and Solan. Through Bholanath's initiative another was set up in Uttarkashi, where he was to spend three years in intensive *sadhana* away from Mataji.

In 1937, she took the pilgrim route for Mount Kailash across the frontier into Tibet, with Bholanath, Bhairji, Didi and Didi's father.

By any standards, this is one of the most arduous of all trekking pilgrimages. Published accounts relate how the little band of pilgrims was seized by a mood of intense exaltation, yet shadowed by hints of impending trouble.

Not far from this great focal point of Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage, beside the shore of Lake Manasarovar, Bhairji, now in the terminal stages of tuberculosis, was overcome by a spirit of supreme renunciation.

In response, *sannyasa* mantras spontaneously issued from Mataji's lips.

But Bholanath had to restrain him from throwing himself into the sacred waters of this enchanted, high-altitude lake. With Bhairji's strength failing fast, the party was forced to return to Almora, where he died beside the Patal Devi temple.

The following year, Bholanath, that great bulwark of reliability and tender concern, was also to die. The relationship between the couple is a remarkable tale in itself. He displayed great generosity of spirit, kept a watchful eye on Mataji's health, proved indefatigable in times of crisis and earned the respect of her followers.

Each in a manner of speaking acted as a parent to the other, yet each also served the other with devotion and humility. Just before his death at Kishenpur, Bholanath openly called her "Ma" and asked for her *prasada*. Up till then only consideration for appearances had kept him from acknowledging himself a child before his "mother".

The proximity of death broke down all barriers. A few moments before he died she blessed him thrice by passing her hands over his body from head to foot. He died with the word "Ananda" on his lips, her hand resting on his head. Four months later, while her father lay dying, he also finally cast aside parental formality and called out to her, "Ma! Ma!"

Kamala Nehru, wife of the future prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, became a great devotee in 1933. Mataji was then staying at a small temple in Dehradun, while Pandit Nehru was incarcerated by the British in Dehradun jail. Kamala would visit Mataji after nightfall and leave before dawn. She used to go into deep meditation in Mataji's presence, her body becoming quite stiff, ants crawling over her.

Later, Mataji took her to the Ambika temple in Rajpur, where Kamala performed a three-day *yajna*, a fire sacrifice, according to Mataji's instructions.

However, in 1935 she became very ill and Mataji went to see her twice in hospital. Shortly afterwards, Kamala was taken to Switzerland where she often had waking and dream visions of Mataji. She gave to her daughter Indira the rosary which Mataji had given her. After Kamala's death in 1936 both Pandit Nehru and Indira subsequently visited Mataji on numerous occasions. Mahatma Gandhi came to hear of Anandamayi through Kamala; initially he sent his trusted aid, Jamnalal Bajaj, to see her and then he in turn became a devotee.

After Jamnalal Bajaj's unexpected death, Mataji went on the long journey to Wardha and gave Mahatma Gandhi consolation. Gandhi was fascinated by her power to attract so large and diverse a following regardless of caste or creed. This was a matter she often discussed with others; according to Gurupriya Devi;

She once told her mother laughingly:

In reality I have not the slightest tie or relationship with anyone. Look if there were even the tiniest difference in my attitude towards

you as compared to all others because of being related, I would have left you all and gone away long ago.

I have the same attitude towards all people regardless of whether they are related to this body or not. Since I have no feeling of difference, I remain with everybody.

Whom shall I abandon and whom shall I retain? Everyone is alike to me.

The nature of Anandamayi's ministry was based upon this fundamental equality of all who came to her. But of course what she saw was an equality of "uniqueness" as much as an equality of status; it encompassed much more than a mere "fairness" of favours or a refusal to make distinctions between, for example, saint and sinner.

This comprehensive detachment would have amounted to not much more than cold aloofness or bogus sentimentality were it not for its most remarkable corollary: an acuteness of perception and memory as to exactly what, at any time, each seeker's spiritual situation comprised - from where it had developed and in what direction it was heading.

This instant recognition of an individual's uniqueness was, no doubt, a spiritual inspiration to all its beneficiaries, but it was also a profoundly emotional experience above all, an experience of immeasurably stirring love.

Even the simplest of her words in answer to questions had immense and reverberating potency for the recipients.

There was good reason, no doubt, for Mahatma Gandhi's desire to find the secret of Anandamayi's mass appeal, with its overtones of egalitarian universalism embedded in a context of Hindu spirituality.

Her aims were by no means counter to his own, although their spiritual roots were much deeper than those the Mahatma himself had put down. What is remarkable about this aspect of Anandamayi's status as a "public figure" however laughable that label would seem to those closest to her - is the completeness of her

detachment from worldly affairs and everything with which the peoples of the world have been so preoccupied in the course of this tumultuous century.

The Indian struggle for independence, two world wars, the Holocaust, the rise and fall of Communism, the Scientific Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Feminist Revolution, the power of the media, the crisis of values - all has occurred within the poignantly "oblivious" lifetime of this unscathed woman.

With the floodtide of materialism already an ominous threat to the Indian way of life, the moment in history when the matter of this book took its course looks almost a miracle of timing. Anandamayi's ministry was so firmly established in the truth which subsists under all conditions and in all eras that her position at the apogee of spiritual culture confounds all fashionable pessimism.

To put it crudely - she's the last sort of person one would expect in our deplorable times.

"That God is as much present in the world given over to scientific research as in the age of mythology;" writes Bithika Mukerji, "we may say, is the 'Message' conveyed by her sojourn on earth."

When the village simpleton, Harakumar, her devout neighbour, presciently divined Nirmala's true nature and called her Ma, he could not possibly have guessed what would become of her. As she became more widely known outside India, one can't help wondering how she would have surmounted the minor handicap of a title which, for Europeans has vulgar associations with pantomime dames and pejorative male slang.

Of course, 'Ma' has the highest connotations in India, as in the mantra-like vocable for the Mother Goddess, the Great Mother, Shakti, the Devi, but it is also a term of deep respect and affection for everything maternal and all aspects of the divine in its feminine aspect. When the anthropologist Colin Turnbull was first invited by a colleague to visit Anandamayi, "my Western ways of thought and conduct", he wrote, "revolted against the idea of a *woman saint*"(my italics).

Since this revealing admission great changes have occurred in attitudes towards women and towards the issue of female spirituality; but even in global terms (India must be included here), the image of Anandamayi as, precisely, a *woman saint*, has not been easily accepted. Yet unless we address this issue we miss a quality that is absolutely central to the whole nature of Anandamayi's unique and special *lila*.

If for a moment, we cast a somewhat analytical eye on this *lila*, it is obvious that important aspects of reality, such as we might expect of an account dealing with her life and the institutions bearing her name, have not been mentioned until now. What about the financing of all that incessant travel, all those expensive ashrams, all those costly *yajnas* and *pujas*?

What about Mataji's detachment from the Indian independence movement which raged throughout the first half of her life? How did she face up to the issues of a materialist world dominated by technology?

What did she do to help the poor? And so on . . . important matters, no doubt, but posed in a way which precludes and forestalls substantive answers because they all ignore the prior commitment of Anandamayi herself to the absolute primacy of her only concern; the One.

She built her life on the predication that this and this alone matters.

If this is not placed at the very centre of any review of her life then nothing she achieved will ever fall into focus.

As author of this book, I made the decision to follow Bhaiji, her first disciple, in simply calling her Anandamayi. No Ma, no Ma Anandamayi or Anandamayi Ma, no politically correct Sri, no Sri Sri and, above all, no quaint retro-anglo-phonetic spelling, as in Shree Shree Anandamayee.

Anandamayi is a beautiful titular name in its own right and it says everything that can possibly be said about her in a single word, including honour and reverence. Those close to her called her Ma with deep love and devotion, just as those close to Gandhi called him

Bapu. Implicit in the meaning of her name is her greatest, most effulgent quality: *Love*.

No other person in the India of her day incarnated love so purely, so magnificently, so comprehensively, as Anandamayi.

However much love she kindled in the hearts of others, her own exceeded even the totality of that prodigious sum. It is next to impossible to write about this, but there is one aspect of the phenomenon, which does call for comment, although I have never heard or read any instance when the matter was referred to openly. It cannot have escaped the reader's notice that here was a woman of radiant beauty and physical allure for whom any kind of sexual expression was quite out of the question. She also retained her youthful looks for a great many years.

It may be noticed that the biographical narrative in this centenary celebration stopped at a date some 4 years before Anandamayi's ministry ended with her *Mahasamadhi*. There are several reasons for this, and they tell us much about the character of that ministry.

At the point where the narrative ends in the present book, *description* necessarily replaces the conventions of biography; and the most vivid description of Mataji's later life that I can offer is the collection of photographs assembled here.

Her life was her ministry -there was absolutely nothing else whatsoever that she did. It is important to emphasise this, however obvious it might seem, for most of us lead somewhat compartmentalised lives, divided at the minimum, into "work" and "leisure". Mataji never, at any point in her life, did that - not even for a day. Her life was so completely taken up with her attention to others that there is no tale to tell.

Not, at least, a tellable tale.

Her incomparable gifts were absorbed into the lives of all who came to her. It is *their* life stories, which became hers. In fact, nothing so perfectly proves the correctness of her own assertion "I am always the same", as the fact that there is *no story*, for a story, as we all know, has a beginning, a middle and an end.

That I, and others, have found the thread of a story is the consequence of the nature of certain events, all of which point towards the central pivot of everything we can relate about Anandamayi's life: her perennial union with the *Source*, that mystical zero-point of maximum potential. Indeed, on a number of occasions, when children approached Mataji with open autograph books, she would inscribe just one dot in the middle of the page, saying: "Look carefully, for in this dot everything is contained."

With narrative here shifting to the molecular level of the spiritual quest undertaken by each individual seeker, the story, such as it is, becomes primarily a matter of burgeoning ashrams and an annual calendar of festivals, retreats and occasional visits to these institutions by Mataji herself. Underlying what were experienced as kaleidoscopically varied convergences of inner spiritual movement with yet further manifestations of Anandamayi *lila*, were deep levels of commitment.

It should not be forgotten that the life of the dedicated *sadlhaka* inevitably entailed the disciplined surmounting of severe hardship and the endurance of profound difficulties as well as exhilarating moments of sheer joy.

Atmananda, who dedicated a great many years to elucidating Mataji's teachings for others, also knew from firsthand experience how it felt to take up the challenge of that teaching and act upon it:

Mataji does not often give orders and probably only to those who by intuition, discrimination and experience have established in themselves implicit faith in her unfailing wisdom.

But when she does command, obedience without asking for reasons is the only way.

Together with the task she sets, Mataji transmits the power to carry it out. But often it is not easy. It is a common experience that to obey Mataji's orders quickens intelligence and develops initiative.

It requires great vigilance and concentration - in fact it is as if ingeniously calculated to draw out to the utmost one's capacity courage, forbearance and power of endurance, as well as to bring to the surface one's weaknesses and shortcomings, so that they may be eradicated.

To place one's life in Mataji's hands is to become free bit by bit from dependence on people, things and ideas.

To be released from all kinds of fear, such as the fear of insecurity of what people might say, the fear of failure, pain and death.

Anything may be lost, Mataji remains.

With a manifestation as rich, diverse and visually arresting as Anandamayi's, the important thing is not to lose the whole in the detail. As this text has sought to make clear, the focus of her life has been as consistent as it has been persistent. When she no longer had the strength to answer people's enquiries, she had but one injunction: "Bhagavan ke niye thako!" - 'Live in God's presence.'

If that is the irreducible minimum of her teaching, she herself provides us with a summary of her own life:

At Puri a lady once asked her: Ma, you have a feeling of duty towards your husband. You regard him as your Guru.

Are your husband and all others alike to you?"

Bholanath was seated nearby Mataji smiled and replied, "If I give a truthful answer to this question, Bholanath will be angry with me."

Saying this she began to laugh loudly. Then she said "Everyone is alike, yet, wherever it is necessary for a particular mode of behaviour to be enacted, it happens. In childhood my parents were my gurus. Then they introduced my husband as the Guru. At that time there was a strong feeling of *Gurubhava* towards my husband.

Today I see the entire universe as my Guru.

You also are my Guru. Everything is but His form.

There is nothing other than the One.

It is commonly said that physical death is the ultimate union with the Source of Life, or that we return to the Ground of our being. For Anandamayi there was no separation from the One, so therefore leaving the body was *nothing special*, which was possibly why she said that she would leave it in "the most ordinary of ordinary manners".

Early in 1982, aged 86, she had made the strenuous journey from Kankhal near Hardwar in the western Himalayan foothills to Calcutta and back.

While in Bengal she visited Agartala, not far from her birthplace. But she appeared to be in poor health when visited by His Holiness Sri Shankaracharya of Sringeri Math in July of that year. When he earnestly begged Mataji to get well soon, she replied: "Baba, this body has no illness at all. What is happening is due to the pull of the Unmanifest. All that you have noticed is due to that."

Some days later the prime minister, Indira Gandhi, accompanied by her son Rajiv, daughter-in-law Sonia and grandchildren, paid a short visit. Mataji sat up for a few minutes, but this was the last time she did so with visitors.

On her last full moon day, she gave *diksha* for the last time, saying, "this body gave itself *diksha* on this very day," on 3 August 1922.

On the morning of 27 August attendant girls heard her utter "Narayan Hari" several times in a whisper. These were her last words. That afternoon she suddenly opened her eyes and gazed with full attention for about a minute. At about 7.45 pm she opened her eyes and gazed upwards. Within a few minutes she took her last breath.

Mataji's body was taken to the front verandah of the ashram and a vast crowd arrived for *darshan*. People came from all over India, by air, train, bus and car, some walking most of the day and night. Her body was then taken on an open vehicle from the Kishenpur ashram to another at Kankhal. From Hardwar onward crowds lined roads and rooftops for a last *darshan*, which continued throughout the night and next morning at the Kankhal ashram.

Mataji had left no instructions or even any hints about what should be done with her body. Although she was not a *sannyasi*, the rituals

connected with her *Mahasamadhi* were performed according to the unanimous wishes of all eminent heads of the religious orders who had assembled in conclave for the occasion.

The scriptural injunctions when a *sannyasi* leaves his body were strictly adhered to.

Mataji's body was placed inside the *samadhi* lined with white marble slabs in a sitting posture.

Five hundred pounds of rock salt were put into the cavity and a marble slab was placed on top as a cover. A large gathering of dignitaries was present for the last rites, headed by Prime Minister Gandhi.

Subsequently an elegantly tapered white marble shrine has been built over the *Mahasamdhi*.

CHAPTER 6

Discourse and Dialogue of Anandamayi

A large lotus was growing in a pond. A wanderer passed by, who had never before seen a flower of this kind. Struck by its beauty, he stopped to admire it.

He noticed that a frog and fish were swimming in the water just below the lotus. "What is that wonderful plant right above you?" he asked the frog.

"Well," was the answer, "what should it be? It is nothing very special, just an ordinary thing," and he turned away to hunt for insects.

Disappointed, the man addressed the fish, who replied "Have you not heard what my friend the frog told you? It is just a common everyday thing, nothing special." At that moment, the wayfarer saw a bee flying swiftly towards the lotus. He tried to stop it in order to find out more, but the bee cut him short, "I have got no time right now, wait a bit."

So saying, the bee plunged right into the heart of the blossom, drinking its nectar for a long time. Then he flew over to the man again: "Now you can talk to me." The wanderer repeated his question and added: "tell me, what were you doing there for so long?" "Don't you know?" said the bee joyfully, "this is a marvellous flower, full of delicious nectar which I have been drinking so that I now feel completely refreshed."

It is possible to live for a long time in close proximity to sadhus and mahatmas, sages and saints, without being able to recognise their true quality. Whereas one who is inwardly prepared and ready for such a contact, may come from a great distance and within a minute know the great and holy for what they really are, it depends on one's capacity to penetrate to the essence of things.

Question: We listen to so much that is beautiful.

Answer: Beautiful? As long as you make a distinction between beautiful and ugly, you have not listened.

Question: . . . and some we understand .

Answer: "We understand" that is useless, for he who understands and what is understood have remained separate.

Question: . . . and some we forget .

Answer: Forget? Forget the forgetting; death must die.

Question: . . . and some we remember . .

Answer: remember? That means you keep it in your mind. Throw it away; lay it at His feet. What I say is: keep *satsang*. *Satsang* in reality means the realisation of What Is. Remain in the shade of "trees" trees meaning Mahatmas, seekers after Truth, those who do not call anyone, or send anyone away.

Listen to them.

Who can tell when you will learn how to "listen" and when you will hear the Eternal Sound, so that there will be no more listener and no listening.

A similar thing holds good for what is called "*darshan*," - the blessing of presence. People come, have "*darshan*" and go away again.

But real *darshan* means that one can never again be apart from the vision.

A young woman wanted to know the remedy for the fainting spells she had experienced since childhood, and which used to seize her

whenever she heard *bhajans*, attended *puja*, or concentrated on the statue of Sri Krishna in her house.

Anandamayi questioned her closely and for ten minutes gave her a full explanation of the import of her complaint, and finally exhorted her to practise self-control. "As you remain unconscious during these spells," she argued, "and as they have all this long time caused you no spiritual progress, nor furthered your *sadhana*, you should consider them unfavourable, and you should therefore make an effort to steady yourself when-ever you feel the impulse to faint.

Take *to japa* and strengthen your mind by repeating God's name."

Then, placing her hand on the shoulder of the young woman, she said, smilingly and with extreme tenderness: "You have had *darshan*," and Anandamayi folded her hands before her in salutation, which made everybody laugh.

The young woman shed abundant tears of joy.

At this point, a voice asked:

Question: What is the easiest way to God?

Answer: Profuse tears.

Question: And if tears do not come...

Answer: Then you should seek the company of those who shed tears, namely in *satsang*. This is the easiest way to God, through love and devotion.

Question: We often hear you say: "think of God."

But surely God is unthinkable and formless.

What can be thought of must have name and form and therefore cannot be God.

Answer: Yes, without doubt, He is beyond thought, form and description, and yet I say: "think of Him!"

Why?

Since you are identified with the ego, since you think you are the doer, since you say: "I can do this and that," and since you get angry, greedy, and so forth, you therefore have to apply your "I-ness" to the thought of Him.

True, He is formless, nameless, immutable, unfathomable.

All the same He has come to you in the form of the Eternal Sound or the descent of God in the form of the Word, or in the form of an Avatar. These also are - He Himself and consequently, if you abide by His name and contemplate His form, the veil which is your "I" will wear out and then He, who is beyond form and thought, will shine forth.

You think that you are engaging in *sadhana*, but actually it is He who does everything, without Him nothing can be done. And if you imagine that you receive according to what you do, this is not correct either, for God is not a merchant; with Him there is no bargaining.

Question: People are asked to worship God, to sing His praise in hymns, to perform *puja*, to repeat constantly His name, and they do all this without knowing what God is. Will you please explain?

Answer: God is all-knowledge, and one cannot know His true nature till one attains Self-Realisation. Then one will find Him to be none other than oneself, the only *Atman*, the only Self there is, and that He is with form as the world and without form as *Chit*, Pure Consciousness. In the meantime, prayers, worship and meditation have to be performed.

Question: How *can* our minds be free for prayer and meditation. When we are so burdened by work and family responsibilities? What should we do in that case?

Answer: Let the work be done of its own accord, without strain. Work without the feeling that it is you who are working. Take it as if

it is God's work, done through you as His instrument. Then your mind will be at rest and peaceful.

That is prayer and meditation.

If you are ill, go and consult the very best doctor. If you put yourself into the hands of the greatest, you may then remain free from worry and feel: "Whatever happens is all right, I have done my utmost." But to approach the greatest is difficult, and it costs so much, one has to give, one has to give! When approaching God, one has to give everything, all one possesses.

But people say: "How am I to give up my pride, my anger, my self-importance; how can I bear insult without a murmur?"

Flowers and fruits come into existence only because they are potentially contained in the tree.

Therefore, you should aim at realising the One Supreme Element which will throw light on all elements.

This world is itself but an embodiment of want; hence the heartache due to the absence of fulfilment must needs endure. This is why it is said that there are two kinds of current in human life:

one pertaining to the world in which want follows upon want,

the other of one's true being.

It is the very nature of the former that it can never end in fulfilment; on the contrary, the sense of want is perpetually re-stimulated. On the other hand, the latter aims to bring to completion the activities of man's true being, to establish man in his divine nature. Thus, if he endeavours to fulfil himself by entering the current of his true being, this current will eventually lead him to the perfect poise of his own true being.

An earthen jar that had been given 'Prana Pratistha' by a Mahatma, related the story of its life.

"At first", it said, "I was part of the earth.

I was happy and at perfect peace. But one day a man came with a spade and dug me out. Oh dear, it hurt terribly.

Then he carried me away and left me in a heap in a corner. Then I thought I would be left in peace. But how badly mistaken I was! Early next morning I found that he had brought a hammer to crush me into fine powder. What dreadful suffering I underwent!

However, having become powder, my hopes rose high. Now I shall surely be left in peace! But no, more pain was in store for me. The next day; I was mixed with water and stamped on. When this ordeal was over I truly expected to have found lasting peace. In vain - is there no end to misery? I was put on a potter's wheel and turned round and round at a maddening speed till I was formed into a jar.

Now I felt quite certain that thereafter I should be left alone. But again I was wrong, for a new kind of torture was to be my lot. Every day I was exposed to the scorching rays of the sun and every night stored away in the house. This went on for some time, only to end in even worse luck. Oh Hari, one fine morning I was put into fire and baked. Feeling sore all over, I comforted myself: What more can they do to me? This no doubt marks the end of my tribulations and henceforth I shall enjoy undisturbed peace.

Far from it! Lo and behold, I was subjected to a new kind of trial.

I was taken to the market and many people came and banged on me to see whether I was without a hole. Finally, someone bought me and took me home. He filled me with Ganges water, placed me on a pedestal and performed 'Prana Pratistha' and this is how I am able to speak now.

When in this manner one has matured and been made perfect, one will be filled with the Ganges of wisdom and awakened to Divine Life.

Then one will be able to speak.

Once when the *satsang* was over, an old man was taking leave. "It is getting late," he said, "I must be going home." "Late indeed," agreed Anandamayi, "there you are right; but go to your real home, not to the *dharmasala* pilgrim hostel."

"I am not staying in any *dharmasala*, I have my own house here," he replied.

She shook her head and smiled: "Do you call that home? You won't be able to stay there for ever. Your days are numbered and when your time is up you will have to leave.

I call it *dharmasala*.

There are rules and regulations; you may remain for a while but then you have to quit. This body tells you to find your real home from which nobody can drive you out, which is not of this world. Dig deep and unearth your real wealth, find your real home in God, who is your own Self."

When you wash your clothes, you have to apply soap.

It is, of course, true that the clothes will not be clean unless the soap is rinsed off again. But can dirt be removed without soap? The thought of God is the soap that in the end has to be washed away by the purifying waters of the Ganges of Supreme Knowledge.

Don't worry about results.

In business, you give and you get something in return. This is called a bargain, but it is no real gain. If you adopt this sort of mercenary attitude, you will not get anywhere. Never leave off your practice until there is Illumination. You must be adamant in your pursuit. The remembrance of God is like a flame. In whichever direction it is blown, it will burn up whatever lies in its way.

According to your actions you will reap the fruits. No effort is ever wasted. Good works and bad works will yield their harvest in great abundance - for He is extremely generous. Perhaps you will argue: "I want to be a king, but my wish is not granted." You get exactly what is due to you - nothing less and nothing more.

When a pitcher full of water has a hole, however small, all the water will leak away. This is how it is with you: your concentration is never complete, there is a break in it, you do not want anything with your whole being.

Creation, preservation and dissolution are constantly in process and all are within you. Try to fathom the end of yourself, if you can!

You exist, and this is why the universe exists: the whole universe is within you. Past and future, this world and the next - indeed, everything is contained in you. Therefore, in as much as you are free - with the entire universe held within yourself - the fact of your eternal freedom stands revealed and any question of being in bondage no longer arises.

You exist, so the universe exists.

An eternal relationship exists between God and man. But in His Play it is sometimes there and sometimes broken, or rather appears to be broken, but it is not really so, for the relationship is eternal. Again, seen from another side, there is no such thing as relationship. Someone, who came to meet this body, said: "I am a new comer to you". He got the reply: "Ever new and ever old, indeed."

The light of the world comes and goes, it is unstable.

The Light which is eternal can never be extinguished. By that Light you behold the outer light and everything in the universe; only because it always shines within you, can you perceive the outer light. Whatever appears to you in the universe is due only to that great Light within you, and solely because the Supreme Knowledge of the essence of things lies hidden in the depths of your being is it possible for you to acquire knowledge of anything.

As she was moving from ward to ward of a hospital, she remarked:

"this also is a temple with God's images.

It is He who manifests in the shape of disease as well.

In every one of these temples the gods and goddesses are giving *darshan*.

The sense of want, of emptiness and one's true being are in exactly the same place - in fact, they are That and That alone. What is this sense of want and what is "true being"? He and nothing but He. For the simple reason that there is one single seed, which is the tree as well as the seed as well as all its various processes of transformation - truly the One alone.

You attempt to appease want with want; hence want does not disappear, nor does the sense of want. When man awakens to the acute consciousness of this sense of want, only then does spiritual inquiry become genuine. You must bear in mind that only when the sense of want becomes the sense of the want of Self-knowledge, does the real Quest begin. Whether you call it the One, the Two, or the Infinite, whatever anyone may say, all is well.

Whenever you have the chance, laugh as much as you can.

By this all the rigid knots in your body will be loosened. But to laugh superficially is not enough: your whole being must be united in laughter, both inwardly and outwardly. Do you know how this is expressed?

You literally shake with merriment from head to foot, so that it is impossible to tell which part of your body is most affected.

What you usually do is laugh with your mouth, while your emotions are held in check. But I want you to laugh with your whole countenance, with your whole heart and with all the breath of your life.

"Nothing has happened" - to be able to understand this is very fortunate.

If you can understand that nothing has happened, you have indeed been blessed with inner vision.

One morning at Hardwar in 1953, Anandamayi said: "Anger is also one of His beautiful modes of being."

Question: Why then should anger be avoided?

Answer: Because it is very painful for the one who gets angry and for no other reason.

Question: So then if one could recognise anger as one of His beautiful modes of being, there would thus be no need to overcome it?

Answer: Long before a man can reach this stage, he will have become incapable of anger.

Question: What about the ancient *rishis*? We are told that some of them did at times get very angry!

Answer: That is on a different level altogether. One who has the power to create also wields the power to destroy. Besides, the state of a *rishi* is also a stage.

Atmananda relates the following discussion.

Taking up a bougainvillea twig, Anandamayi said:

"How beautiful!

Look, the leaves are *gerua*!" (the colour worn by *sannyasi*, Indian monks.)

"In my country all leaves become *gerua* in autumn."

"In your country? Which is your country?"

- "Where I used to be before I came to India."

"Before? What does it mean? And before that where were you?"

- "With you!"

"With me? How do you know?"

- "You know!"

"How do you know that I know?"

- "I don't know!"

"How do you know that you don't know?"

- "I don't know anything, I am a fool!"

"How do you know that you are a fool?"

- "Now I shall have to become silent!"

"And what will be the use of this silence?"

- "Idle talk and nonsense will remain unsaid."

"And to what good?"

- "I don't know."

"You don't know? Again you repeat that you don't know? Has one who does not know anything the right to become angry? One who knows gets angry because this or that is not as it should be. But a fool cannot be angry, since he does not know how things should be. Always remember that you are a fool and that therefore you cannot become angry. It is "I" that gets angry and it is the "I" that has to be dropped. Then the fool, *buddhu* may perhaps become enlightened *buddha*.

Anyway, bear in mind that you know nothing and therefore there is no rhyme or reason in getting angry. Then the "I" will go and "Atmananda" may become revealed."

Be very careful whom you accept as your Guru. Do not be in a hurry. Take your time over it and use your intelligence. But once you have

accepted a Guru, it is irrevocable and you must surrender completely.

If you fail this, I maintain you have not accepted your Guru.

Several years ago, some Westerners came to Anandamayi and had a discussion with her, which throws an interesting sidelight on this question. One of them asked:

"How can I achieve Self-realisation?"

"He is Self-effulgent, it is not you who can bring it about."

"still, should we not make an effort?"

"Yes, the Self is hidden by a veil, you have to wear it down by your own exertion."

"What is the process by which this can be accomplished?"

"Do you really want Self-realisation?"

"Of course I do!"

"then you are prepared to do exactly as I tell you without letting your judgement interfere?"

Here the gentleman became thoughtful and hesitated.

He evidently was feeling uncomfortable.

She smiled at him encouragingly.

At last he said:

"I regard Ramana Maharshi as my Guru, but I have not met him as yet. I intend going to Tiruvannamalai shortly."

"then you must do exactly as he instructs you, but do you really want Self-reMization?"

"Certainly; have I not come all the way to India for this purpose?"

"For this and nothing else?"

"For this and nothing else."

Three times she repeated the question and three times the response was the same. She became very serious. Her voice was definite and powerful when she spoke:

"If this be so, if you want Self-Realisation and nothing else, it does not matter whether you do as I tell you. If you really want this one thing only you will find a way, there is no doubt about it."

One evening a *sannyasi* told Anandamayi that some Punjabi women had approached him and asked some questions. He wished to know whether she approved of the replies he had given them. He said:

'the first question was as follows, "What should a woman do in the case of a family dispute? Should she side with her husband, her father or her father-in-law?"

I told them that it was a wife's duty to support her husband always and under all circumstances. Was right?"

"Well, yes, but on the other hand her father-in-law is her husband's Guru, and her own father is her elder and has to be respected. Therefore, whichever side God within the woman's heart prompts her to take, that is right for her."

"Then the woman told me that they were so unfree, so dependent in every respect. What were they to do to improve their lot? I explained to them that it could not be helped, that everyone is dependent on something or other.

We *sannyasis* depend on the Guru, on the *Dharma*, moral code. Every human being is in bondage. Surely, this is correct, is it not?"

"No, dependence is due to fear. As long as you are afraid, you will be bound. But the moment you are fearless, you will be independent and free. The householder is bound by rules and regulations, but the *sannyasi*, who is not afraid of anyone or anything, is free."

A young Englishman, Cohn Turnbull who subsequently became a celebrated anthropologist, visited India to study philosophy and to

practise *sadhana*. About to return to Britain, he asked Anandamayi many questions. One of them was as follows:

Question: When I get home I shall no doubt be asked to give talks on India over the radio, in clubs and societies. Should I respond to such requests or keep quiet?

Answer: Most certainly you should respond. Before starting your discourse, mentally prostrate before God and pray that you may be a pure instrument to be used by Him. Then tell your countrymen that, just as in the West many ways and means have been devised to train people in various professions so that they can earn a livelihood, so India has since time immemorial devoted her energies to the discovery of the innumerable paths that lead to the Supreme Goal of human life, which is Self-Realisation.

Question: Will man ever destroy this world and himself?

Answer: Man has certainly not got the power to create, preserve or destroy.

In Him, whose Play all this is, all possibilities are contained. The destruction of one's own self virtually amounts to the destruction of the universe.

Where this self is, there the world exists.

To be destroyed lies in the very nature of that which is of the world and therefore perishable; it has ever been destroyed, it is being destroyed and it will be destroyed. But where He is and He alone, who is to destroy whom?

There the question of destruction cannot arise.

Where is He who is That Self? Find out!

The Self is not subject to destruction. The ceaseless endeavour to know That Self is man's bounded duty.

Some men have gone to bathe in the sea. They have made up their minds to swim ahead of everyone else and, consequently, they will have to look back. He whose one and only goal is the ocean has nothing else to look at and nothing else to consider, and then, what is to be, will be.

Give yourself up to the wave and you will be absorbed by the current - having dived into the sea you will not return. The Eternal Himself is the wave that floods the shore so that you may be immersed.

Those, who can surrender themselves to this end will be accepted by Him.

But, if your attention remains on the shore, you cannot proceed - after bathing you will return home. Aiming at the Supreme, at the ultimate, will lead you on through the movement of your true nature.

There are waves that carry away and waves that bring back.

Those who can give themselves up, will be taken by Him.

In the guise of the wave,

He holds out His hand and calls you: come, Come, COME.

One night at Brindaban, a most animated discussion was in full swing when one of the *bhaktas*, a learned old *sannyasi* who as a rule took a very active part in all argument, fell fast asleep and was snoring peacefully, quite oblivious of what was going on around him.

Anandamayi called out to him once or twice without any response. Everyone was highly amused. At last someone by way of a joke dropped a *rasa gula*, a juicy Bengali sweet, into the half-open mouth of the sleeping man.

Even this did not have the desired effect, nor did the hilarious laughter that followed.

But when the sweet syrup began to trickle down his throat, he could not help waking. As so often happens, Anandamayi made this playful episode an occasion for pointing out a moral. She spoke about *rasa*. It is difficult to translate what she said for the Sanskrit word *Rasa*

means any juice from water to nectar, essence, pith, as well as delight of every kind, gross and subtle - also Supreme Delight.

There is no equivalent in English. This is what she said:

Unless *bhagavad rasa* is instilled into man, unless the nectar of the Divine penetrates deep within him, his slumbering soul does not awaken.

Vedanta is also *rasa*, just as *bhakti* is *rasa*; why should Vedanta be described as dry?

It is a well-known fact that poison neutralises poison. Similarly, when transcending nature's delights, which are fleeting man tastes the delicious flavour of his true being, (*Svabhava rasa*), and of Supreme Delight, (*param rasa*);

then the excruciating anguish of the poison of mere worldly enjoyment is destroyed.

Beyond bodily pleasures, such as eating, sleeping, moving about and so on, lies Joy Supreme. Don't you recite "Brahmanandam Paramasukhadam", Absolute Bliss, Supreme Happiness- He is Happiness Itself.

Happiness is His very essence.

Earthly happiness has its opposite - sorrow. But where happiness is in its essential form, unconditioned, the opposites - joy and misery - find no place;

where there is solely *rasa*, there can be no question of *a-rasa* - a sense of dryness or emptiness, of the anguish of God's absence.

He is the Fountain of joy - Joy and Joy alone is His Being.

A state exists in which there is only Bliss, Beatitude, Supreme Felicity.

At your level, joy has its opposite; you speak of the joys of heaven and the torments of hell.

But where there is Eternal Bliss - Bliss in its own right cannot be expressed.

It is entirely beyond such words as "what is or what is not?"

To speak means to float on the surface.

What language can express that which is neither floating nor diving deep?

Man's duty - especially for those who have made the Supreme Quest their one and only aim - is to work joyfully for the uplift of the world, with the conviction that all service is His service. Work done in such a spirit helps to purify the mind and heart.

There was a young man who experienced various supernormal states and had many kinds of visions. He would, for example, prostrate before the deity and remain in that posture for hours without raising his head, tears streaming down his cheeks. He said he saw and heard Sri Krishna teaching Arjuna, as described in the *Gita*, and that he had many other visions and auditory experiences of the kind. This body told him that if a seeker could not maintain firm control over his mind, he would be liable to see and hear many things, both illusory and genuine, all mixed up. He might even fall a victim to the influence of some 'spirit' or power. Such occurrences, far from intensifying pure divine aspiration, would hinder rather than help.

Moreover, to see someone in a vision or to hear him address you, may well become a source of self-satisfaction or egotistic enjoyment. To lose control over oneself is not desirable. In the search after Truth, one must not allow oneself to be overpowered by anything, but must watch carefully whatever phenomena may supervene, keeping fully conscious, wide awake, in fact retaining complete mastery over oneself. Loss of consciousness is never right.

As there is a state of Supreme Knowledge, likewise there is a state of perfection at the zenith of the path of love. There one finds the nectar of perfect love, identical with Supreme Knowledge. In this

state there is no room for emotional excitement; indeed, it would make it impossible for Supreme Love to shine forth. Be mindful of one thing: if when following a particular line of approach, one does not attain to that which is the consummation of all *sadhana*, namely the final Goal, it means that one has not entered the Stream. At the supreme summit of Love, exuberance, excessive emotion and the like cannot possibly occur. Emotional excitement and Supreme Love are not to be compared at all, they are totally different from one another.

Whilst absorbed in meditation, whether one is conscious of the body or not, whether there be a sense of identification with the physical or not - in any case, it is imperative to remain wide awake - unconsciousness must be strictly avoided.

Some genuine perceptivity must be retained, whether one contemplates the Self as such or any particular form. What is the purpose of this type of meditation?

It opens up one's being to the Light, to that which is Eternal. Suppose the body had been suffering some pain or stiffness - lo and behold, after meditation it feels perfectly healthy, with not a trace of fatigue or debility. It is as if a long period of time had elapsed in between, as if there had never been a question of any discomfort. This would be a good sign. But if tempted, at the first touch of Bliss, to allow oneself to be drowned in it and later declare: "Where I was I could not say, I do not know", this is not desirable. As one becomes capable of real meditation - and to the extent that one contacts Reality - one discovers the ineffable joy that lies hidden even in all outer objects.

On the other hand, when in the course of meditation one loses oneself, as it were, and lapses into a kind of stupor and afterwards claims to have been steeped in intense bliss, this sort of bliss is a hindrance. If the life-force seems to have been in abeyance -just as one has a sense of great happiness after sound sleep this indicates stagnation.

It is a sign of attachment and this attachment stands in the way of true meditation, since one will be apt to revert to this state again and again, although from the standpoint of the world, which is altogether different, this state would seem to be a source of profound inward joy and therefore an indication of spiritual progress. To be held up at any stage is obstructive; it simply means one has stopped advancing.

When engaging in meditation one should think of oneself as a purely spiritual being, without any touch of materiality, as Self-luminous, poised in the Bliss of the Self. And, according to the Guru's instructions, try to concentrate on one's Chosen Deity.

The young man who had many visions was intelligent and therefore able to understand this sort of reasoning. As a result, the spectacular experiences ceased and he attends now to his meditation and other spiritual exercises in a very quiet and unobtrusive manner.

A state of being exists where it is immaterial whether He assumes a form or not - what is, is He. In this case what is there to express in words? Furthermore, at a certain level the Self may reveal Itself to Itself. At the same time He does not reveal Himself at all: to whom is He to reveal Himself?

When there is neither form nor quality, what is to be put into language? Where nothing is excluded, how can Oneness be obstructed? In this state of complete poise nothing at all is any longer apart from Him, what is, is the Thing Itself. So what can be said or left unsaid, since it is entirely beyond words?

Obviously each individual speaks from the level at which he finds himself and whatever is uttered are His words, His song, addressed to Him. In the Supreme State nothing whatsoever can possibly be an obstacle: if it is, then ignorance has survived. In Reality there is only He - He alone and nothing but He.

To prepare yourself for the revelation of That which eternally is, there are injunctions, numerous paths. But do you not see, every path must come to an end; in other words, you should concentrate upon that imagination which will sweep away all other imaginations, which means when you have gone beyond all imagination there is the revelation of That which you really are.

Man's very nature is to desire the Real, Supreme Wisdom, Divine Joy - to return home when the play is over. The field of the play is His, the play His as well, and so are those who take part in it - friends and fellow-beings. All is He alone. Ignorance, surely, is not what you seek. To aspire to Immortality is man's true nature -or is death desirable? The world is concerned with the knowledge that is ignorance.

To long for the cessation of want is your very nature and to explore and penetrate to the root of whatever you perceive. When you buy clothes, you choose durable material, which will not wear out quickly; even this is an indication of your innate tendency to seek the Everlasting. It is your nature to crave for the revelation of That which Is, for the Eternal, for Truth, for limitless Knowledge. This is why you do not feel satisfied with the evanescent, the untrue, with ignorance and limitation.

To yearn for the revelation of "What You Are" is your true nature.

When people talk about the vision of the Self, *Atma Darshan* and Self-Realisation, it is only from hearsay; still it is necessary to find a way to such firsthand knowledge. Thus we have to adopt any means or method that may help us to attain it.

You can see for yourself-just think: there is air and without air our body cannot keep alive. Grasp this: does not the air pervade everything, plants, minerals, animals - in fact all creatures? You differentiate between the earth, water, fire, air, the sky and so forth, do you not? Viewing them each separately helps you to understand them. It is said that in essence there is Truth-Consciousness-Bliss *Sat-chit-ananda*. Only when Consciousness is rooted in Truth can there be Bliss. From our worldly point of view we everywhere

perceive animate or inanimate things; but in reality He who is Truth, He who is Consciousness permeates them all; only this cannot be realised by the average person. As soon as the mind understands the fact of His immanence, then just as when an image is to be worshipped, life has first of all to be instilled into it through the rite of *Prana Pratistha*, so he becomes as it were active within us, at first through the vehicle of the breath, which is an expression of the life-force *prana*.

The word "within" has been used only because we think in terms of "within" and "without". This is why we speak of "I" and "You", of God "with form" and "without form".

Be ever aware of the following:

what is called life-breath is really an aspect of an universal, all-pervasive power that functions continuously.

It is He in one of His forms; He who is Truth-Consciousness reveals Himself in this mode.

If with the help of a mantra received from the Guru, we can remain concentrated on the breath or at times when we have no mantra, we can simply keep on watching the movement of the breath - this will help to steady the mind and may also be an aid in our search for Him, who is the Life of our life, who is the Whole - the Eternal One.

The vision of the Eternal Play of the Supreme Being whose essence is Consciousness and Bliss is impossible unless we have seen His delight in His own universality and Self-sufficiency and find this joy repeated within us in union with and as part of the Whole. Until the senses have been mastered and passion transcended, how can we become identified with the Supreme Self?

The ever-moving breath changes its rhythm according to what we do, feel and think with the precision of a clock's pendulum, which works without a break, although it may at times go fast or slow. With a similar constancy, endeavour to concentrate on the breath; this will provide a check for the mind that will prevent it from wandering away to outer objects.

When a restless child is caught hold of, taken inside the house and given a toy, he will, for a short time at least, remain quiet and absorbed. In order to calm our restlessness it is necessary to keep but one single end in view. Divine thoughts and aspirations are the essence of *satsang*; to the degree that we foster these, the craving of the heart will be fulfilled and the mind stilled. With the help of your intelligence and individual capacity, try to unite the mind with the breath. Do you know what is the essential thing? To realise that the unbroken current of aspiration itself is a revelation of Him, who is the indivisible Whole.

Question: When speaking about visions that one has during meditation, you have said that these are not Visions of Reality, but a mere 'touch'.

Answer: Yes, viewed from the level where glimpses occur, this may be said; in other words, there is no transformation despite the experience, but it is attractive to you and you can even express your feelings about it in words that is, you delight in it. Therefore it is a mere "touch". If it were a state of Being you would be unable to enjoy it in this way.

In the state of Pure Being, there can be no relish.

Question: The self *Atman* and the Supreme *Brahman* are only differentiated by way of limitation. The realisation that comes through constant meditation on "I am Truth-Consciousness-Bliss" is Self-Realisation. Since there is no realisation of the Supreme, it must therefore be a partial realisation. Is this correct?

Answer: If you think there are parts in the Supreme, you can say 'partial'. But can there be parts in the Supreme? As you think and feel in parts, you speak of "touch" but He is whole, That which Is.

Question: Are there grades, *krama*, in spiritual knowledge?

Answer: No. Where Knowledge is of the Self, there can be neither diversity nor grades. Knowledge is one, when it is of the Self.

"Gradualness" *krama* refers to the stage where one has turned away from the pursuit of sense objects and one's gaze is entirely directed towards God. God has not yet been realised, but the treading of this path has become attractive.

Along this line are meditation, contemplation and Divine Ecstasy, or *samadhi*. The experiences of each of these stages are also infinite. Where the mind is, there is experience. The experiences of the various stages are due to the thirst for Supreme Knowledge.

When do the visions that one gets in meditation cease? When the Self stands Self-revealed.

Question: Does the body survive when the mind has been dissolved?

Answer: One has to ask oneself, how then does a Guru give instruction? From the state of ignorance? If this were so, the mind would not have been dissolved; the threefold differentiation of the knower, the knowing and the knowable could not have been merged. So what would he be able to give you? But there is a stage where this question does not arise. Is it the body that is the obstacle to Supreme Knowledge? Is there even a question of whether the body exists or not? At a certain stage this question is simply not there.

On the plane where this question arises, one is not in that state of Pure Being and one thinks this question can be raised and also replied to. But the answer lies where there is no such thing as questioning and answering - where there is no "other", no division.

How then can there possibly be any approach to the Guru to receive instruction?

Likewise, studying the scriptures has then become equally useless.

This also is one way of seeing it.

To say "stage by stage", as if one were studying for a university degree, is presenting it from the point of view of *sadhana*.

Where Self-illumination is, questions cannot arise. On the other hand, where there is personal effort like meditation or contemplation, it will certainly bear fruit. But in the state of Self-illumination there can be no question of fruit or fruitlessness: there is result in resultlessness and resultlessness in result - just like that.

Some say a last vestige of the mind remains. At a certain level this is so; again, there is a stage beyond, where the question of whether a trace of the mind remains or not, does not exist.

If everything can be burnt up, cannot this last vestige be consumed too? There is no question of either "yes" or "no."

What is, is.

Meditation and contemplation are necessary, because one is on the level of belief and disbelief.

The aim is to go beyond accepting and rejecting.

You want a support, do you not?

The support that can take you beyond to where the question of support or supportlessness no longer exists, that is the supportless support. What is expressible in words can certainly be attained.

But He is *That* which is beyond words.

Question: I have read in books that some beings say they have to *descend* in order to act in the world. This seems to imply that, though one is established in Pure Being, one has to get help from the mind when attending to work. Just as a king when acting the part of a sweeper has, for the time being, to imagine he is a sweeper.

Answer: In assuming a part, surely there is no question of ascending or descending. Abiding in His own Essential Being, He himself stages a play with himself. But when you speak of ascending and descending, where is that state of Pure Being?

Brahman is one without a second.

Though from your angle of vision, I grant, it does appear as you put it.

Question: You have explained this from the level of ignorance. Now please speak from the level of the Enlightened-one!

Answer: (Laughing)... What you say now, I also accept. *Here* (pointing to herself) nothing is rejected. Whether it is the state of enlightenment or of ignorance - everything is all right.

The fact is that you are in doubt.

But *Here* there is no question of doubt. Whatever you may say and from whatever level - it is He and He and only He.

Question: If this is so, is it of any use to ask you further questions?

Answer: What is, is. That doubts should arise is natural. But the wonder is that where That is, there is not even room for different stands to be taken. Problems are discussed, surely, for the purpose of dissolving doubts.

Therefore it is useful to discuss. Who can tell when the veil will be lifted from your eyes? The purpose of discussion is to dissolve this ordinary mode of seeing. Such vision is no vision at all, for it is only temporary.

Real vision is that vision for which there is no difference between sight and seen. It is eyeless - not to be beheld with these ordinary eyes, but with the eyes of wisdom. In that vision without eyes there is no room for "di-vision".

Here (pointing to herself) there is no question of giving and taking, or of serving. On your level they exist; from there these topics arise.

Question: Can you explain the following statement: "through the observance of silence one attains to Supreme Knowledge"?

Answer: How is that? Why has the word "through" been used here? To say "through silence He is realised" is not correct, because Supreme Knowledge does not come "through" anything - Supreme Knowledge reveals Itself.

For destroying the "veil", there are suitable spiritual disciplines and practices.

Question: What are the benefits to be derived from *hatha yoga* - and what are its drawbacks?

Answer: What does "*hatha*" mean?

To do something by force. "Being" is one thing and "doing" quite another. When there is "being", there will be the manifestation of what is due to be manifested, owing to the *prana* functioning in a particular centre of the body.

But if *hatha yoga* is done merely as an exercise in physical gymnastics, the mind will not be transformed in the very least.

By physical exercise bodily fitness is enhanced. One hears quite often of cases where the leaving-off of the practice of yogic postures *asanas* has resulted in physical disorders. Just as the body grows weak from lack of adequate nourishment, so the mind has need of suitable food. When the mind receives proper sustenance, man moves Godward; whereas by catering to the body he only increases his worldliness. Mere gymnastics is nutrition for the body. When the physical fitness resulting from *hatha yoga* is used as an aid to spiritual endeavour, it is not wasted.

Otherwise, it is not yoga but *bhoga*, enjoyment.

In effortless being lies the path to the infinite. Unless *hatha yoga* aims at the Eternal, it is nothing more than gymnastics. If in the normal course of the practice His touch is not felt, the yoga has been fruitless.

One comes across people who, by engaging in all sorts of yogic exercises like *neti*, *dhauti* and others of this kind, have become seriously ill.

A competent teacher, who understands every change in the movement of the disciple's *prana*, accordingly either speeds him up or holds him back - just as a helmsman steers a boat with the rudder held firmly under control all the time. Without such direction *hatha yoga* is not beneficial.

He who would be a guide must have direct knowledge of everything that may occur at any stage, must see it with the perfect sharpness of direct perception. For is he not the physician on the path to the Supreme? Without the help of such a doctor there is fear of injury.

Everything becomes smooth once the blessing of His touch has been felt. Therefore, it is detrimental if this 'touch' is not experienced. One must enter into the rhythm of one's true nature. Its revelation acting as a flash of lightning will attract one to it instantaneously, irresistibly; there comes a point where no further action is needed. So long as this contact has not been established, dedicate to God whatever inclinations or disinclinations you may have - devote yourself to service, meditation, contemplation, to anything of this kind.

Question: What is the significance of the saying in the Bible:

"Knock and the door shall be opened to you"?

Does it refer to the opening of the door of the ego?

Answer: What is your opinion?

Of course one has to break up one's own ego.

Question: When the walls that make up the ego have been demolished, what happens?

Answer: On what foundation do those walls rest..?

Questioner: On everything that shuts out the Light of the Self

Answer: Now you have yourself given the answer!

Question: But what actually is the ego?

Answer: You imagine that you are the doer of your actions - this indicates the existence of the ego in you. "*Duniya*" (world) means "*di-niya*" (based on duality).

Here the cause of the conflict lies in the idea that the ego is the doer of actions. Duality breeds conflict, problems, the separate "I" and its activities. In the imperfect "I" the ego is present, while the realisation "I am the Self (*Atma*) is of the perfected "I". The result of egotism is

blindness. In the attitude of mind expressed in "I am the Lord's eternal servant", there also seems to be duality, but the worldly "I" no longer survives.

Not until the "I" is perfect - in other words, not unless "Aham Brahmasmi" (I am the Supreme Being) has been realised - will the roots of the ego be destroyed.

Question: Which of the two is better - to break down the door and enter, or, having broken down the ego, to remain lying in the doorway?

Answer: In the first instance the ego still has confidence in its own power and capacity, while in the second it is a case of self-surrender - and therefore He is sure to let you see the Light Eternal through the open door.

Question: Am I right to believe that you are God?

Answer: There is nothing save Him alone, everyone and everything are but forms of God. In your person, also He has come here now to give *darshan*.

Question: Then why are you in this world?

Answer: In this world? I am not anywhere. I am myself reposing within myself.

Question: What is your work?

Answer: I have no work. For whom can I work since there is only One?

Question: Why am I in the world?

Answer: He plays in infinite ways. It is His pleasure to play as He does.

Question: But I, why am I in the world?

Answer: That is what I have been telling you. All is He, He plays in countless forms and ways. However, in order to find out for yourself why you are in the world, to find out who you are in reality, there are various *sadhanas*.

You study and you pass your exams, you earn money and enjoy spending it. But all this is within the realm of death, in which you continue for life after life, repeating the same thing again and again. But there is another path too, the path of Immortality; which leads to the knowledge of what you really are.

Question: Can anyone help me in this or must I find it out for myself?

Answer: The professor can teach you only if you have the capacity to learn.

Of course he can give you help but you must be able to respond, you must have it in you to grasp what he teaches.

Question: Which is the best path to Self-knowledge?

Answer: All paths are good. It depends on a man's *samskaras*, his conditioning, the tendencies he has brought with him from previous births. Just as one can travel to the same place by plane, railway, car or cycle, so also different lines of approach suit different types of people.

But the best path is the one that the Guru indicates.

Question: When there is only One, why are there so many different religions in the world?

Answer: Because He is infinite, there is an infinite variety of conceptions of Him and an endless variety of paths to Him. He is everything, every kind of belief and also the disbelief of the atheist. Your belief in non-belief is also a belief. When you speak of disbelief, it implies that you admit belief. He is in all forms and yet He is formless.

Question: From what you have said, I gather that you consider the formless nearer to Truth than God with form?

Answer: Is ice anything but water? Form is just as much He as the formless. To say that there is only one Self and that all forms are illusion would imply that the Formless was nearer to Truth than God-with-Form. But this body declares that every form and the formless are He and He alone.

Question: What have you to say about those who insist that only one religion is the right one.

Answer: All religions are paths to Him.

Questioner: I am a Christian .

Answer: So am I a Christian, a Muslim, anything you like.

Question: Would it be right for me to become a Hindu, or is my approach by the Christian way?

Answer: If you are fated to become a Hindu, it will happen in any case -just as you cannot ask: "What will happen in case of a car accident?"

When the accident occurs, you will see.

Question: If I feel the urge to become a Hindu, should I give way to it or is it right to suppress it, since it is said that everyone has been

born where it is best for him?

Answer: If you really felt the urge to become a Hindu you would not ask this question, but just go ahead with it.

Yet there is also another side to this problem. It is true that you are Christian, but something of a Hindu is in you as well, otherwise you could not even know anything about Hinduism. Everything is contained in everything. Just as a tree yields seed and from a single seed hundreds of trees may develop, so the seed is contained in the tree and the whole of the tree is potentially in the tiny seed.

Question: How can I find happiness?

Answer: First tell me whether you are willing to do as this body bids you to do?

Questioner: Yes, I am.

Answer: Are you really? Very well. Now suppose I ask you to remain here, will you be able to do that?.

Questioner: No, I will not. (Laughter...)

Answer: You see, happiness that depends on anything outside of you, be it your wife, children, money, fame, friends or anything else, cannot last. But to find happiness in Him who is everywhere, who is all-pervading, your own Self, this is real happiness.

Question: So you say happiness lies in finding my Self?

Answer: Yes. Finding your Self, discovering who you really are, means to find God, for there is nothing outside of Him.

Question: You say all are God. But are not some people more God than others?

Answer: For him who asks such a question, this is so. But in actual fact God is fully and equally present everywhere.

Question; Is there no substance to me as an individual? Is there nothing in me that is not God?

Answer: No, even in "not being God" there is only God alone.

Everything is He.

Question; Is there no justification at all for professional or any other mundane work?

Answer; Occupation with worldly things acts like slow poison. Gradually, without one's noticing it, it leads to death. Should I advise my friends and my fathers and mothers to take this road? I cannot do so. This body says; "Choose the Path of Immortality, Take any path that is according to your temperament, and it will lead you to the Realisation of your Self."

Question; What is the work of the Guru and what is the work of the disciple?

Answer; It is said that the disciple's task is to efface the ego and become a blank. There is a story of a king who invited the best artists to paint frescoes in his palace. Two painters were working in the same hall on opposite walls with a curtain between them, so that neither of them could see what the other was doing.

One of them created a marvellous picture, which evoked the admiration of every onlooker. The other artist had not painted anything at all. He had spent all his time polishing the wall - and had polished it so perfectly that when the curtain was removed the picture of the other painter was reflected in a way that made it appear even more beautiful than the original.

It is the disciple's duty to polish away the I-ness.

Question; But then the major portion of the work has to be accomplished by the disciple?

Answer: No, because it is the Guru who paints the picture.

A saint is like a tree. He does not call anyone, neither does he send anyone away. He gives shelter to whoever cares to come, be it a man, woman, child or animal. If you sit under a tree it will protect you from the inclemencies of the weather, from the scorching sun as well as from pouring rain, and it will give you flowers and fruit.

It matters little to the tree whether a human being or a bird tastes its fruit, its produce is there for anyone to take.

And last but not least, the tree gives itself. How itself? The fruit contains the seeds for new trees of a similar kind.

So, by sitting under a tree you will get shelter, shade, flowers, fruit, and in due course you will come to know your Self. This is why I say, take refuge at the feet of the Holy and Wise, keep close to them and you will find all you need.

Just as without the help of teachers and experts one cannot become proficient in the worldly knowledge that is taught in universities, so the sublime knowledge of the Absolute does not come without the guidance of a competent Guru. To find him is the problem, whether it be for spiritual progress, liberation, or any other matter, however insignificant it may seem.

To regard the Guru as an individual (body) is a sin.

The Guru has to be loved and revered as God.

It must be made clear that the action of the Guru's power virtually amounts to a functioning of will-power. This so-called will-power may be said to be derived from the power of the Guru. Therefore it is but the One Himself who manifests in both the Guru's power and will-power. Who or what is that One Self? All that is manifest is He and no other. Why then should self-dependence, self-effort, human exertion and the like be classed separately? Of course they may be

differentiated from the rest, so long as one takes into consideration that they are due to the working of the inner Guru.

There are seekers after Truth who are bent on proceeding without a Guru - their line of approach is to place emphasis on self-dependence and their own effort.

If one goes to the root of the matter it will be seen that in the case of a person who, prompted by intense aspiration, does *sadhana* relying on his own strength, the Supreme Being reveals Himself in a special way through the intensity of that self-exertion. This being so, is there any justification, from any point of view; for raising objections to such self-reliance? All that can be said or questioned in this respect lies within the confines of human thinking. Whereas there exists a state where everything is possible.

Thus the line of approach that is through dependence on one's strength and capacity is, like all other approaches, but a functioning of the One Power. Without doubt the very power of the Guru can operate in a special way through this self-reliance, so that there will be no need for any outer teaching. While some aspirants may depend on outer teaching, why should not others be able to receive guidance from within without the aid of the spoken word? Why should this not be possible, since even the dense veil of human ignorance can be destroyed? In such cases, the Guru's teaching has done its work from within.

None can foretell at what particular time circumstances will cooperate so as to bring about that Great Moment for anyone. There may be failure to begin with, but it is the final success that counts. An aspirant cannot be judged by preliminary results: in the spiritual field, final success means success right from the beginning.

After the Guru has given sannyasa, he prostrates himself at full length before the disciple in order to demonstrate that there is no difference between Guru and disciple, for both are indeed one.

There is a stage where one cannot possibly regard oneself as a Guru, nor accept anyone else as a Guru. At another stage there is no way of thinking of the Guru and the disciple as separate from one another. There is yet another stage where those who give teaching or instruction in this world are regarded as Gurus: by promulgating the innumerable methods and forms devised for the purpose of attaining Self-Realisation, they are helping man to advance towards this Goal.

Question: How will Self-Realisation come about?

Answer: By receiving and holding the power of the Guru. What is already within you becomes revealed. A person whose brain is not clear cannot be taught. In a similar way, the inner power to know your Self is realised by engaging in *sadhana*. It is like an electric connection. If it were not within you, you could not discover it. just as some persons - but not all - possess the gift of writing poetry or of elocution and so on. If it be someone's fate the scales will fall from his eyes, the veil will drop away. It happens by itself, another cannot give Realisation; one has to become possessed of one's inner Knowledge.

Everyone is born with his innate tendencies and talents. Just as one can acquire worldly knowledge so also is Reality known by becoming possessed of one's inner power - and then there is Awakening.

The Guru's power is bestowed on the disciples, but only one among millions is capable of holding it. The mantra has a power of its own and its repetition will not be in vain, but the power of the Guru is not conferred upon all.

Question: What actually is "The Grace of the Guru?"

Answer: When the Guru bestows his instructions, together with the capacity to translate them into action - this is his Grace. Grace is being poured out at all times. But it cannot enter because the receptacle is turned upside down. When one becomes receptive, one is able to receive Grace. The means to turn the receptacle the right way up is to obey the Guru's orders to the very letter.

By virtue of the yoga of sustained practice, the veil will be torn asunder and the Self stand revealed - one will advance towards one's real home.

So long as there is craving, one will be born again and again; in other words, physical existence continues due to the sense of want. Through sustained spiritual practice one may be released from it. In order that the fact of man's eternal union with the One may be revealed, the commands of the Guru must be followed.

By so doing, one becomes worthy of his Grace.

The Guru in his compassion points out each one's own path, the path that leads to Self-Realisation.

There are two kinds of grace, namely with and without cause or reason. The first is obtained as the result of one's actions; but when it is understood that one cannot get anywhere by one's own effort, then Grace without cause or reason is received.

From the state of utter helplessness he lifts one up.

Question: Who has the capacity to confer power and who to receive it?

Answer: He who can liberate one from the ceaseless round of birth and death, he is indeed a Guru; it is he who wields the authority to confer power. Just as a child cannot beget until he grows into a young man, there is a stage when one becomes a receptacle and then at the right moment the Guru transmits power into it.

Question: Can the power be conferred no matter what be the nature of the receptacle?

Answer: He can mould the receptacle.

Question: Thus if the receptacle is not ready, does the Guru withhold the power.

Answer: No, when a flood comes it carries everyone along with it.

Question: What is the means of entering the tide?

Answer: To ask this question with desperate eagerness.

Question: How can such eagerness be called forth?

Answer: By keeping *satsang* for a great length of time. Where that which is doomed to destruction is destroyed, there the Beloved stands revealed. For those who have received initiation, it is fitting to devote such time to the repetition of their mantra and to meditation - only then will there be awakening.

Question: Will it be effective if one has found the Guru in a dream?

Answer: Yes, it will. Is not that which is known as the waking state of the world but a dream! The only difference is that the one is the dream of sleep and the other the dream of waking. If one has received a mantra in either of these dreams, there will be no more doubt as to one's having been initiated. However, the mantra that has been received in the dream of sleep must be practised and brought to fruition in the dream of waking.

A young girl aged about 17 approached me. From a very early age she had developed a strong spiritual bent. She had been initiated by a Guru who had a very wide circle of devoted disciples. After her initiation by him, she was so deeply absorbed in prayer and meditation that she hardly had time to have her food and drink. She was of spotless purity.

One day her Guru gave her a mantra to recite: "I am Atma I am Sri Krishna".

Then he explained, "Just as the milkmaids lived with Sri Krishna, you must come and live with me. The milkmaids dedicated body and

mind to Sri Krishna; if you do not do likewise, your accepting me as your Guru is absolutely futile."

This astonished the girl and she said with all humility and innocence, "I don't understand what you mean, Guruji." Then the Guru began to worship every part of her body, dabbing it with marks. She said to him, "I fail to understand what you aim at by such worship."

Then the Guru exclaimed, "Ah, poor girl, everything you possess is now mine. We are both one in Sri Krishna." At this, the girl ran away. She came to me and gave a detailed account of all that had happened. But her mind was absorbed in prayer and she was having visions of the Deity.

I told her, "Wash away all the marks made on your body by your Guru."

"I shall give him up," she replied, "but what should I do with the mantra? It is the name of God. Can there be any taint or sin attached to it?"

I said, "No, go on with the mantra. From now on, look upon Sri Krishna as your Guru."

Here the question arises, was it proper for the girl to cease thinking "I am Atma, I am Sri Krishna"?

Question: Will it not be sinful to violate the Guru's orders and to snap the tie between the Guru and the disciple?

Answer: In this case there was no Guru. If there had been, things would not have taken such a turn. From one point of view the girl was the Guru; she served him with food and drink and performed selfless personal service in a number of ways.

But the relationship of the Guru and the girl, like that between father and daughter, between Guru and disciple, was completely broken. The obedience of an unmarried girl in this case would be tantamount to starting life as a wife. Can such a thing be helpful towards the Realisation of God?

The path is narrow, as sharp as the razor's edge and perilous in the extreme. The idea "I am Atma, I am Sri Krishna" - ever pure and free, having no taint of worldly desire - is a great concept. If you can choose this trend of thought and follow it vigorously, it may help you to rend the veil of *maya*, the One conceals itself and appears as the many, provided He wills it.

But to live a life of pure detachment from all needs of the body, from all desires and longings of the mind, all your actions and thoughts need to be directed towards Him. Always keep alive the sense of discrimination. Reflect thus: "I feel some joy here, but is it of the abiding type called *Atmananda*, the bliss of the Self?"

There must be keen discrimination between that which is fleeting and that which is abiding for ever. Think always about the precept that the Guru has given you: "I am That". While moving about, working or resting, always seek refuge in That. You must read about matters which will develop both introspection and insight into the realities of life; constantly seize opportunities conducive to that end. In all your thoughts and outward actions, your sole aim must be to stick to Him steadily at all times.

Question: Should we not accept the word of the Guru without any critical thought?

Answer: Where the Guru gives a mantra and desires to live with an unmarried girl disciple, he is not a Guru at all. The injunction of the scriptures is that one has to surrender one's whole being - body; mind and heart - to the Guru. To surrender one's body means to surrender one's desires so that they may be obliterated, but not to surrender one's body in the material sense. If it is misunderstood in this way, as occurs sometimes, then this body says that although you may have received *diksha* from him, that person is not your Guru.

You should then purify yourself and make a fresh start.

Although the mantra cannot be defiled, there are instances when it becomes imperative to relinquish even that, if it has become inextricably associated with the memory of the false Guru.

In such cases it is advisable to change the mantra to another.

It is for the Guru to point out the method; he will show you the way to understanding and instruct you as to your *sadhana*. It is for you to keep on practising it faithfully; but the fruit comes spontaneously in the form of Self-revelation.

The power to make you grasp the Ungraspable duly manifests through the Guru. Where the question: "How am I to proceed?" arises, fulfilment has obviously not yet been reached. Therefore never relax your efforts until there is Enlightenment: let no gaps interrupt your attempt, for a gap will produce an eddy. Your striving must be continuous like the flowing of oil - it must be sustained, constant, an unbroken stream.

That you have no control over the body's need of food and sleep does not matter; your aim should be not to allow any interval in the performance of your *sadhana*. Do you not see how, whatever you require in the way of food and sleep, each at its own appointed hour, is without exception an ever-recurring need? In exactly the same manner must you aspire at uninterruptedness where the search after Truth is concerned.

Once the mind in the course of its movement has felt the touch of the Indivisible - if only you can grasp that moment. - in that Supreme Instant all moments are contained and when you have captured it, all moments will be yours.

Take, for example, the moments of confluence - *sandhiksana* -at dawn, midday and dusk, in which the power inherent in the point of conjunction, where coming and going meet, becomes revealed. What you call electric light or electricity in general is nothing but the union of two opposites: thus does Supreme Being flash forth at the moment of conjunction.

Actually it is present at every single moment, but you miss it all the time. Yet this is what you have to seize - it can be done at the point of juncture where the opposites melt into one. Nobody is able to predict when for any particular individual this fateful Moment will reveal itself therefore keep on striving ceaselessly.

Question: You say all moments are contained in that One Supreme Instant. I cannot understand this.

Answer: By the instant of one's birth one's experience of life is conditioned: but the Supreme Instant that is revealed in the course of *sadhana* leads to the completion of action, to the exhaustion of one's karma.

Desirelessness can consume only that which is combustible; Divine Love and Devotion dissolve only that which is soluble.

But the moment in which there is neither burning nor dissolving - that Moment is eternal. To try and seize that Moment is all you have to do.

In reality this is That - all that is perceived is He - how can He be apart from anything? This is so when one has entered the stream, and then present, future and past are no longer separate. Behind the veil lies Reality, but before you is the veil. The veil was not there previously, nor will it be in the future, and hence it does not really exist now. In a certain state it is like this.

The moment that you experience is distorted, whereas the Supreme Moment contains stability, non-stability, everything - yet all these are there and at the same time not there. And then there is a further state in which the question of the Supreme Moment and the fragmentary moment will not occur.

Question. You say there is stability within motion and motion within stability. What does this mean?

Answer: When the seed becomes united with the earth, when the two have mingled, at that moment there is motionlessness. But the process of germination sets in immediately after and this surely implies motion. Motion (or movement) means not to remain in one place. Nevertheless it was in one and the same place.

Why *was*?

It still is.

Each stage in the growth of a tree represents a point of stability, yet is also passing. Again the leaves grow and then fall off, which is not the same state: it is and it is not, for after all it is of the one tree. The tree potentially contains the fruit, this is why it will yield it - "it will" means "it does". No simile is ever perfect in all respects.

In reality there is nothing but the one Moment all along.

Just as one single tree contains numberless trees, innumerable leaves, infinite movement and untold static states, so does one moment contain an infinite number of moments and within all these countless instants lies the One Single Moment.

Look, now, at this very moment there is motion as well as rest.

Why then should you have to concern yourself with the revelation of the Moment? Because, misled by your perception of difference, you think of yourself and of each and everything in the world as apart from the rest.

This is why, for you, separateness exists. The sense of separateness in which you are caught - that is to say, the moment of your birth - has determined your nature, your desires and their fulfilment, your development, your spiritual search - everything. Consequently the moment of your birth is unique, the moment of your mother's birth is also unique, so is that of your father's; and the nature and temperament of each of the three is unique.

Each one of you in accordance with your own particular line of approach, must seize the time, the moment that will reveal to you the eternal relationship by which you are united to the Infinite: this is the revelation of Supreme Union. Supreme Union means the whole universe is within you and you are in it, and moreover there will be no more occasion to speak of a universe, for it will then no longer exist. Whether you say it exists or does not exist, or that it is beyond both existence and non-existence, or even beyond that - as you please: the important thing is that it should become revealed, be it in whatever form.

Having found that "Moment", at that point of time - when it is found - you will know your Self. To know your Self would imply the revelation at that very same instant of what your father and mother - and the entire universe - in reality are. It is that Moment, which links up the whole of creation.

For to know yourself does not mean to know your body only, it Signifies the full revelation of That which eternally Is - the Supreme Father, Mother, Beloved, Lord and Master - the Self.

At the moment of your birth, you did not know that you came into being. But when you have caught the Supreme Moment, you suddenly come to know Who you really are. At that instant, when you have found your Self, the whole universe will have become yours. Just as by receiving one seed you have potentially received an infinite number of trees, by capturing and realising the One Supreme Moment, nothing is left unrealised.

Everyone has his own path. Some advance along the line of Vedanta, but as they progress they find the path of a Seer opening out for them. To others, whose spiritual practice, worship or yoga proceeds with the help of images and other intermediary aids, this same path may also become disclosed. Yet others, guided by voices and locutions from the Unseen, may at first hear only sounds, but will

gradually come to hear perfect language which conveys the full significance of the thoughts and ideas expressed. By and by, it becomes evident that these voices emerge from one's own Self and that they are He Himself manifesting in that particular way. No matter what be your line of approach, in due course the path of a Seer or a similar path may open out for you in some form or manner. But at what time this will occur, and to whom, is beyond the ken of the ordinary person's knowledge.

Well now, suppose a man follows his own specific path, which happens to be the worship of a deity? When he has a vision of it, is it only of the particular deity it represents, or does it not also refer to the abstract form of the Self? It becomes clear that the Supreme is present as much in the abstract form of the Self as in the concrete form of the deity.

Someone who, by the method of Advaita Vedanta has in a natural way become fully merged in the Self, will realise that as water is contained in ice so the Supreme Reality can be found in the image. He will then come to see that all images are really the spiritual forms of the One. For what is hidden in ice, water, of course. Therefore, when we speak of the All, the Universal, there are obscurations, veils, grades of unveiling and so on, like solid and melting ice.

Whereas in the pure Self there can be no question of stages, with ice, even though it may be melting, there is potentially the possibility of its existing as such again, here or elsewhere in future. Consequently for Him, who Himself manifests in the form of ice, there can be no question of the eternal or the non-eternal.

Hence, when one speaks of Dvait-advaita (non-dualism and dualism, at one and the same time), both are facts. Just as you are both father and son. How can there be a son without a father, or a father without a son? In this way one sees that neither is less important than the other and that here there can be no distinction between higher and lower. Each of the two standpoints is complete in itself.

Thus both water and ice partake of the nature of eternity, Likewise, He is as indubitably with form as He is without. When with form, which can be compared to ice, He appears clad in limitless different shapes and modes of being - which are actually spiritual in nature.

Depending on one's avenue of approach, prominence is given to one particular form.

Through every religious sect, He gives Himself to Himself, and the value of each of these sects for the individual is that they each indicate a different method to Self-knowledge. He alone is water as well as ice. What is there in ice? Nothing but water.

On the plane where Dvaitadvaita exists, both duality and non-duality are facts:

expressed from this position, there is form as well as freedom from form.

Again, when saying there is both duality and non-duality, to which level of consciousness does this kind of statement correspond? There is certainly a state where both difference and non-difference exist simultaneously - in very truth. He is as much in difference as He is in non-difference. Do you not see that from that worldly point of view you quite obviously assume that there are differences?

The very fact that you are endeavouring to find your Self evinces that there must be the feeling of separateness in you that in agreement with the manner of the world you think of yourself as apart. From this point of view, difference undoubtedly exists.

But then the world is heading inevitably towards destruction (*nasha*,)since it is not the Self, (*na sva*) , nor He (*na sha*;)it cannot last for ever.

Yet who is it that appears even in the guise of the ephemeral? This implies that He eternally manifests, displaying desire and quality but

also without form and quality; and still further, it infers that there can be no question of attributes and attributelessness, since there is solely the One without-a-second.

You speak of the Absolute as Truth, Knowledge, Infinity.

In pure Non-dualism no question of form, quality, or prediction - be it affirmative or negative - can possibly arise. When you say: "He is only this" and then "He is also this".

You have confined yourself within the limits of the word "also" and, as a result, assume the separateness of the thing referred to.

In the One, there can be no "also".

The state of Supreme Oneness cannot be described as That and also as something other than That.

In the attributeless Absolute, there can be no such thing as quality or absence of quality; there is only the One Self and nothing but the Self.

Suppose you believe that He is with quality, that He is embodied?

You become wholly centred on this aspect of Him; then formlessness does not exist for you - this is one state.

There is another state, where He appears with attributes as well as without.

There is yet another state (these states are not progressive but each complete in itself), where difference as well as non-difference exist, both being impenetrable, and where He is quite beyond expression.

This and all that has been said above is within the Supreme State, of which it is said that even though the Whole is taken from the Whole, the Whole remains the Whole.

There can be no additions and no subtractions; the wholeness of the Whole remains unimpaired. Whatever line you may follow represents a particular aspect of it. Each method has its own mantras, its own ideas and states, its beliefs and rejections. To what purpose?

To realise Him - your own Self.

Who or what is this Self?

Depending on your orientation, you find Him - which is your own Self - as a perfect servant in relation to his master, as a part in relation to the Whole, or simply as the One Self *Atma*. . . .

Very well, the many creeds and sects serve the purpose that He may bestow Himself on Himself along various channels - each has its own beauty - and that He may be discovered and expressed in countless ways, in all shapes and in the formless. In the form of the Path, He attracts each person along the particular line that will guide him in harmony with his inner dispositions and tendencies. The One is present in each sect, even though outwardly there appears to be conflict among them, which is due to the ego-nature being full of doubt.

This body, however, does not exclude anything. If you follow one particular creed or sect, you will have to go right up to the point where all its characteristics will be known to you.

When advancing along one line - in other words, when adhering to one particular religion, faith or creed which you conceive as distinct and in conflict with all the others - you will first of all have to realise the perfection to which its founder points, and then, beyond that, the Universal will of itself become revealed to you.

What has just been explained is applicable in the case of each of the various sects, yet it is of course true that, if one stops short at whatever can be achieved by following one line, the Goal of human life has not been reached. What is required is a realisation that will uproot conflict and divergence of opinion that is complete and free from inherent antagonism.

If it be anything less than that it means that one's inner experience is partial and incomplete. In true realisation, one can have no quarrel with anyone - one is fully enlightened as to all creeds, faiths, doctrines and sects, and sees all paths as equally good. This is absolute and perfect realisation.

So long as there is dissension, one cannot speak of attainment. Nevertheless, one should undoubtedly have firm faith in one's Chosen Deity and pursue with constancy and single-mindedness one's chosen path.

Now, as to the fruit of action: just consider, if one's action is continuous, without a break, and one remains ever conscious of the Goal - who will be revealed by such action? He, the Indivisible One! But even in such action, the Perfect One stands Self-revealed - this is the real significance of each action, of the striving, which is the innate characteristic of the individual.

Man's true nature prompts him to perform actions which are the expression of his true being, and it is natural for him to feel the urge to engage in actions of this type.

Man's true nature is *Sva, Svayam, Atma*; call it by any name, it is the Supreme, I myself.

In response to the recurring spiritual need of mankind, various teachers of spiritual eminence have come to live on our planet. They come from age to age to elevate mankind and to destroy the evil that may have infiltrated society.

Such beings alone may be called *Siddha Purushas* (perfect beings) who, by virtue of their strenuous *sadhana* and intense moral purification and spiritual realisation, attain a state of being which awakens in them cosmic consciousness.

They have no separate will of their own. They merge their individuality in the Supreme Reality and are more guided by it than by their own *sankalpa*.

They are also called Nitya Siddha.

There is no limit to their spiritual insight.

They become not only Ishwara in the course of their spiritual evolution, but Maheshwara and Parmeshwara also.

None but a spiritually-evolved soul can understand or fathom their spiritual depth. To an ordinary soul, the life and activities of such beings appear no better than a mystery. They are capable of doing things which appear impossible to others. Their desire is calmed, their passion eliminated. They are not repelled by anything repellent, nor attracted by the attractive. They come to this world with a pure motive of service to humanity.

**The essentials of Anandamayi's
teaching**

There is only One and there is nothing outside Him.

He is. He is and He is not; and neither is He, nor is He not.

He is with form - all forms are His form, all names are His name -

He is without form and He is beyond form and no-form.

He appears to man as a personal God in order to attract him to Reality, which is man's own Self. Ice and water seem different, but actually they are both the same. The personal God is like the ice and the Impersonal, Immutable, Unmanifest like water. You get in touch with one of His divine forms and one day you discover that it is but the formless, and then you know that He is with form, without form and beyond both.

To realise the One is the supreme duty of every human being.

All other duties are either within this one duty or else imaginary.

Man is a human being only inasmuch as he aspires to Self-Realisation.

This is what human birth is meant for. If man pursues anything but that, he wastes his time and energy he lives his life in vain.

Duality is pain by its very nature.

Duniya, the world is *dikha*, sorrow; that is, the sense of separation is itself suffering. All sorrow is due to the fact that the many are seen where there is only One. As long as there is identification with the body and the mind, there must be pain, distress and agony. It is useless to seek happiness in anything that is of the world. Find out where your real home is. This world is like a traveller's inn - one comes and one goes.

There are innumerable paths - and yet there is no path to the Supreme.

If there were, it would mean that the discovery of the Real depends on the efforts of the individual. The Supreme would not be the Supreme if He were subject to anything at all. He and He alone is at all times. To wear out the veil that occludes the vision of Reality is all that man can do, and that he has got to do.

Summarised by Atmananda

The *Gayatri Mantra* is recited by brahmins every morning. This Sanskrit verse might also be said to constitute the quintessence of themes for meditation by all those under the aegis of Anandamayi. In her explanation of its meaning to Gurupriya Devi, she distilled from its words a meaning accessible to everyone:

He who creates, preserves and destroys,

whose form is Universal,

He Himself inspires our intellect,

He Himself is Supreme Being and the Knower within each creature;

I meditate on His sublime countenance.

Afterword

I conceived this book 35 years ago.

At that time only very few in the West were interested in its subject. Anandamayi was little known outside India and only four Europeans had spent any time resident in her ashrams. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, by Yogananda, in which there is a short but enthusiastic account of her, had become a minor paperback classic in the English-speaking world, particularly the United States.

Jean Herbert had introduced Anandamayi to a limited French public and a documentary film by Arnaud Desjardins had been shown on French television. I succeeded in publishing a few photographs of her in books and magazines, but my efforts met for the most part with indifference.

In 1961 I was invited by the French publishing house, Editions du Seuil, to meet the great world authority on comparative religion, Mircea Eliade. He was on a visit to Paris from Chicago to discuss plans for his new book, *Patanjali et le Yoga*, for which he wanted to use some of my photographs.

We had a long and friendly meeting in the office of the chief editor, a man of high repute who specialised in spiritual matters. He represented a firm regarded as among the most distinguished in France on such topics. Eliade selected a number of my photographs, and this led to further commissions with Seuil.

Taking advantage of my new reputation there, I plucked up courage to show this editor the mock-up of my book on Anandamayi, which I had spent great care and much time preparing. It included most of the photographs in this present volume, along with most of the text translated from Anandamayi's own words. The editor greeted me warmly and opened the mock-up with an air of pleasurable anticipation. He gave it an unhurried perusal in complete silence, pausing here and there to look longer at a particular photograph. Then he looked up and in a hard, taut, contemptuous tone declared, "Elle est ratee!" - she's a dud.

Although I knew better than to take offence - Anandamayi, no doubt, would have been highly amused! - I was, nevertheless shattered. By then I realised that my strong desire to add this book to my list of already published titles on quite different subjects was either misjudged or untimely. I would have to shelve the project.

Yet among my many projects of those years there was no other for which I nursed such affection. I considered it so deeply personal a theme that I could scarcely bring myself to expose it more than occasionally to anyone else, either publishers or friends. And still there were no takers, despite forlorn meetings with editors glazed with indifference. I put it away in a drawer where the paper went brown and the photos faded. My own keenness in the project never waned.

Times have changed. Interest in Anandamayi, both in India and abroad, has greatly increased, along with the emergence of a whole new spiritual mood and awakened sensitivity to the mystical life. With it, a generation of serious non-Indian *sadhakas* has demonstrated insight and determination along the path to real spiritual enlightenment. Together with the shift in Western attitudes towards spirituality, there has been a global reappraisal of everything concerning the situation of women and the nature of femininity.

By introducing the dimension of spirituality into the discussion, by developing a style of commanding authority in organisational matters, and, above all, in her unique marriage and the way she handled her own status first as a married woman and then as a widow for half a century, Anandamayi indicated a need for radical reorientation in this area of life to engage the interest and the respect of women everywhere.

In the birth centenary year of Anandamayi I sense a palpable change in the air; more and more people are finding their way to her.

There is an accent to the image we now have which is often missed, but which has been implicit throughout these pages. By her own example, Anandamayi acted as a guide to all who were prepared to live like her - if necessary, at the furthest edge of life - and as it often turned out, she shared that life with them, braving psychological hardship frequently, physical hardship occasionally, on the very rim of the abyss, to the utmost degree, in a state of luminous poise.

It is this formidable and poignant capability which tempers the priorities in any individual's relation to Anandamayi and which makes so much in our feeble, cosy little day-to-day lives seem mere trivia - at any rate in my own life.

During the time when I spent some three months with her over a span of four years, I had need of only one talk with her. Aware that others had more pressing urgent questions, I also limited myself to one question. What I wanted was clarification on the way I could carry the Spirit into my daily life as a visual artist. For me, this has been the single most important question in my entire life, and remains so.

But I could make no headway at all with her on this and I am probably one of the very few of her enthusiastic admirers who came away dissatisfied!

She was prepared to talk at length about the first half of my question but not the more urgent (at least for me at that time) second half. Yet through her I developed a lifelong interest in the notoriously vexed question of depicting the sacred in the art of our time. It took me most of the rest of my life to figure out why she declined to take up the latter half of my question.

Firstly, her order of priority, as always, was to put first things first and let everything else sort itself out accordingly. And of course, in my case just as much as in everybody else's, the first priority was my immediate relation to the Spirit. What I could not foresee at the time was that, when I did take courage in my own hands and accede to her first priority, it took me to the edge of life and to a completely new perspective on reality.

Much later, I realised there is no question of the artist *seeking* ways to depict the sacred. If an artist is truly in touch with the Spirit then the problem will look after itself, however intractable it might be in an age insensitive to the sacred dimension.

I made headway in my work only when I placed my own small needs and questions in relation to those immensities of life and death which were the common currency of others' private talks with Anandamayi. I have had time to mull over all that I experienced with her so long ago and I have studied the great discourse on the Moment included here. There are many "new" photographs in this book which I couldn't 'see' before among my negatives because the mind is slower than the eye at the instant of pressing the shutter.

I no longer think, as I was presumptuous enough to do so when I started, that I could obtain photographs remotely approaching the

transfiguration implied in Anandamayi's gliding aside: "this body is That".

Where I discarded photographs of her I did so because they did not give even a hint of that elusive transfiguration. I have now tried to communicate the flow of my inner vision with oblique allusions, connections from page to page affinities and contrasts, the gradual aggregation of an interlinked totality, which *evokes* rather than depicts the sacred.

Over the years I put together a synthesis in my mind of memories, impressions, trains of thought *samskaras* of my ashram days. They are now presented as my personal *temoignage*.

I still try to keep true to the quality, which caught my attention in Anandamayi at the outset: the paradox of *nothing special*.

"I am whatever you take me to be."

I was almost too late; when I reached Varanasi in 1954 the astonishing days of her *bhava* and *samadhi* were over. Nevertheless, she still had the breathtakingly youthful appearance and disposition of a woman much younger in years.

When I returned on visits following her 60th birthday there was a marked change, particularly in the scale of her ceaseless accessibility.

The sheer number of people wanting to see her and the multiplicity of ashrams established in her name, imposed an entirely different pace and atmosphere on her life. This presented me with severe problems as a photographer during my concluding workdays.

It was no longer possible to have unhurried and close access to her such as I had enjoyed for days on end at Vindhyachal. The freedom for swift spontaneous movement between herself and others was now hampered by the press of the crowd. The marvellously lambent plasticity in the grouping, the radiant lyricism of Mataji on the Varanasi terrace surrounded by a little group of *kirtanis*, the treasured intimacy on verandahs - these I never saw again.

In response to the multitude, the emphasis now was on the acute insight of her instruction at, so to speak, the molecular level, either in face-to-face private talks or through her mysterious ability to speak straight to each individual seeker within the enormous throng. More than ever, from now on, one had to pierce through the veil of *nothing special* with patient inner sight.

The presence of others around Anandamayi had always been the key to my photography. By far the most exciting thing for me, and

the most difficult, was to "catch" on the wing, moments of revelation when Mataji was in vibrant relation to others.

That was absolutely central to her manifestation, her *raison d'etre*. As she put it in her characteristically succinct style: "For your life's work you have brought down this body."

I must confess I am quite unable to envisage Anandamayi in solitude; she spent her entire life accessible to others. Even though I sometimes photographed her when she was looking up or away from others in the immediate vicinity, only once did I ever photograph her *alone*, not looking at, speaking to, or listening to anybody else but me.

As I described earlier, on that occasion I photographed her looking straight at *me*, not at my camera.

I have been asked many times if I could supply someone with a picture of Anandamayi looking straight at the viewer. All are astonished that I don't have a single one. Perhaps, they are implying, there must be something wrong with me, something in my *samskaras*, which prevented her looking directly at me.

I am happy to say that she often looked at me, but there is a trenchant difference between looking straight into someone's eyes and looking into the lens of a camera behind which the photographer's eyes are hidden.

Be it ever so slight, this strategy of the photographer is dishonest.

There was tacit agreement about this between Anandamayi and myself though we never exchanged a word about my work with a camera.

It was apparent that I never interfered, but got on with the job as quietly and as unobtrusively as possible. It was not that I pretended not to exist, but that everyone was habituated to my presence; I am deeply grateful for being made to feel that I belonged. People conversed with me directly, not with my apparatus.

When we were not conversing, I took pictures of them going about their lives, relating, as they always did, to each other. *Nobody looked out of the picture.* They were fully absorbed in their world in which they, and Anandamayi too, lived and had their being. They were not like flat-earthers looking out over the edge of the world, but moving about within their own sphere.

I happened to be within it too, a participant in the enactment of the mysteries.

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