Sri Anandamayi Ma, 20th Century Mystic
Category : April/May/June 2008
Published by Anonymous on Apr. 01, 2008

BIOGRAPHY

Sri Anandamayi Ma, 20th Century Mystic

The God-intoxicated Bengali saint spent her life absorbed in the Divine

Six months before Sri Anandamayi Ma's Mahasamadhi at age 86, a young Chinese-American, Stephen Quong, had a private meeting with her. He adopted the name Umananda. Now a Vedic Astrologer deeply immersed in Hinduism, he wrote the following account for Hinduism Today.

I first read about Sri Ma Anandamayi in 1970 in Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahamsa Yogananda. That initial contact with her words, her picture and her inspiring life story touched my soul deeply. I was fascinated and wistfully yearned that someday I could meet someone like her.

In the years following, I had many inner experiences which I attributed to the unseen workings of Sri Ma Anandamayi--receiving guidance and inspiration in meditation through darshan visions with specific instructions. While these experiences were of immense benefit, I yearned for an outer confirmation of the inner guidance. I was still seeking the relationship with the incarnation of the satguru, which I felt was indispensable for spiritual progress.

Then one day in the summer of 1981, I heard from friends that Sri Ma Anandamayi was still alive in India. I wrote to her immediately, not really expecting a reply. I asked her questions about my sadhana, my life direction, etc. To my great surprise, I soon received an aerogramme reply: "Your questions are too personal to be answered by correspondence. If you ever have a chance to come to India, I will answer them in person."

I was thrilled and elated to have received such a message from Sri Ma, but I felt uncertain about financing a trip to India. However, fate was about to help me--in a very unusual way.

In November, 1981, I was involved in a automobile accident. My car was crushed like an aluminum can in a head-on collision with a truck. The entire front end of the car was smashed beyond recognition except my personalized license plate lettered "JAI MA." I was knocked unconscious and almost died on the spot. While in a coma, I had the vivid experience of Sri Ma's blissful darshan (sight), and clearly heard the voices of brahmin priests chanting in Sanskrit this famous verse from the Bhagavad Gita: Sarvadharmaan parityajya maamekam sharanam vraja. Aham twaa sarvapaapebhyo mokshayishyaami maa shuchaa. It translates, "Abandoning all of your duties, take refuge in Me alone. I will liberate you from all of your misdeeds; grieve not!" Blissful at receiving Sri Ma's darshan and the words of Lord Krishna, I was totally content and prepared to depart my mortal frame.

Instead, I regained body consciousness. By Ma's grace I had a miraculously quick recovery from the injuries. Off crutches in only two weeks, I was soon flying to India, with costs paid for by the insurance settlement. I came face to face with Sri Ma Anandamayi in February, 1982, in Vrindavan, India.

Our meeting confirmed a precognitive vision which I had had in the summer of 1981, after receiving Sri Ma's letter. Just as in my vision, we met on the roof of her ashram shortly after sunset. One of her senior brahmachari disciples translated her Bengali into English for me. Two other women attendants were present. Sri Ma had just returned from a journey, and was taking rest. I was brought before her for a short private interview, but was warned not to ask her for mantra initiation; such a request could only be made after one year. I tried to distill years of questions into a few essential words. In the process, I realized that all of my questions could be answered by asking her just one.

Thus, to the utter dismay and consternation of the translator, my first and only question to Sri Ma was "May I have mantra initiation?" My reasoning was that the answer to this question would provide the answer to the other ones, such as: "Who is my guru?" "What is my sadhana?" and "What should I be doing with my life?" Sri Ma did not seem surprised or perturbed by my request. After a few questions about my family background and spiritual practices, she consented to give me mantra initiation on the next auspicious date. I was stunned. Was all this a dream? How

could it be so easy? Did I really deserve to be her disciple? Sri Ma saw my transparent thoughts and with a gracious nod and smile, she indicated her complete, unconditional acceptance of me at that moment as I was. She confirmed our inner relationship, her wish to accept me as a disciple. I belonged to her and she belonged to me; until the end of time, we would never be separate.

At that moment, Sri Ma was nearing ninety, in poor health and suffering from intestinal parasites. In fact, she left her body six months later, on August 28, 1982. Yet even at that age, her spiritual radiance was undiminished, immense, awesome, almost mythical in proportion. It had almost no relationship to her joyous manners; instead, it was the radiance of the light of the Atman shining through the illusion of her physical frame. She had a titanic spiritual presence about her that transformed everything within hundreds of yards into bliss. Wherever she went, she carried a portable Devaloka. All who came near her felt the ocean currents of Satchidananda coursing through her. Because of this, her foremost disciple, Bhaiji, titled her Anandamayi Ma, "bliss-permeated Mother."

Sri Ma never appeared like an ordinary human being to me. I never related to her as an Indian woman, or even as a Hindu saint, or incarnation of the divine Mother or as a satguru. She was a personification of Absolute Reality, dwelling always in a state of cosmic consciousness, the natural state of sahaja samadhi. Many claim to have achieved that state, but in Anandamayi Ma its attainment was indisputable.

Steeped in the all-encompassing broadness of the Sanatana Dharma, firmly established in the experience of absolute oneness, kaivalya, and brimming over with intoxicating bliss, Anandamayi Ma personified the highest ideal of Hindu spiritual achievement. Since her early years, when she had the spontaneous experience and fulfillment of yogic, Vedantic, tantric and devotional sadhanas, she had the capacity to answer any and all questions without premeditation or hesitation.

During over 60 years of spiritual instruction, the eternal wisdom of the ages flowed from her lips in an endless stream. Speaking in her native Bengali tongue, Ma revealed the deepest mysteries of life in quaint, pithy phrases potent with mystical implication. Her words echoed the Upanishads: "There is only one all-pervading Atma, naught else except the One. You yourself are a barrier unto yourself in the form of samskaras (impressions). The destiny of every human being is to destroy the veil that hides his own Self."

A keynote of Ma's teachings was remembrance of God through repetition of the name of God. Whether evoked through mantra japa, kirtan or congregational singing of devotional songs (bhajan), the name of God was the sure solution to all of life's problems."If one loses one's being in the contemplation of the Divine Name, one can merge oneself in the ocean of Heavenly Beauty. God and His symbolic names are one and the same."

Saivites called her a Saivite, Vaishnavites claimed her as a Vaishnavite and Shaktas, a Shakta. Smarta Vedantins saw their highest philosophy pulsing alive in her. Christians and Muslims approached her without reservation. She was a Vedic muni, a sarvagya, blessed with the quality of omniscience. She never left India, never wrote a book, spent years in mauna (silence), had no guru, no lineage, belonged formally to no tradition, yet flooded forth a resounding nada shakti that originated in the Self and today continues to ripple around the world enigmatically empowering the spiritual search of many thousands. She said, "Sound used to rise up from my navel. I felt that the sounds touched every part of my body, and then worship would take place in every pore of my body. This sound would rise into my head and transform itself there into the mantra Om."

Sri Ma was an enchanting singer, her vibrant voice captivating, transcendental, magical in its power to elicit the deepest feelings of devotion to God. This feeling of the immanence of God was emphasized in temple and Deity worship: "Worship is not a ritual; it is an attitude, an experience."

She stressed purity: "It is the pure, undefiled flower that finds a place at the feet of the Lord and nowhere else. Take great care to spend your life in spotless purity. Speak about Him, meditate on His Glory, try to see Him in everyone, Him who is the Self, the breath of life, the heart of hearts."

Sri Ma was ravishingly beautiful, in a completely wholesome and spiritually uplifting way. Unforgettable. For her, true darshan was: "See That which, when seen, the wish to see anything more vanishes forever; hear That which, when heard, the desire to hear anything else does not awaken."

Often asked whether she was Goddess, a Divine Incarnation, a siddha (yogi with powers) or a tantric sadhaka (kundalini yoga adept), she would usually be silent or

deflect the question. But once when she was asked "Who are you?" she said: "Purna Brahman Narayana!" (the Infinite God Eternal).

Later she added, "I am what I was and what I shall be; I am whatever you conceive, think or say. But it is a supreme fact that 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 wanted it and you have it now."

On the nature of the guru, Ma said: "The guru actually emerges from within. When genuine search takes effect, his genuine manifestation is bound to occur; it cannot possibly be otherwise. The One, assuming for Himself the shape of the guru, of his own accord brings about His manifestation." Once the relationship to the guru was established, then surrender and obedience are essential."Carry out without arguing whatever I say, but be certain that it is for your best," Ma directed.

Resolute dedication to the path of enlightenment, without compromise, was her constant admonishment: "How much more time will you spend at a wayside inn? Don't you want to go Home? How exquisite It all is. One is in his own Self the wanderer, the exile, the home-coming and home. One's Self is all that there is."

Ma advocated the practice of surrender and equanimity as universal keys to spiritual development: "In whatever circumstances you may be placed, reflect thus: Ã It is all right. This was necessary for me; it is His way of drawing me close to His Feet;' and try to remain content."

Sri Ma was often lost in bhava samadhi and other forms of trance-like ecstasies. Once she stayed in samadhi for five days without any response to outside stimuli. When asked about it, she replied, "It is a state beyond all conscious and supra-conscious planes--a state of complete immobilization of all thoughts, emotions and activities, both physical and mental, a state that transcends all the phases of life here below."

In her later years, the bhava samadhis so common in her early life came less frequently. She was stabilized in sahaja samadhi, the natural state of effortless

abidance in the Self regardless of one's external circumstances. When questioned whether she had descended to a lower level, she replied: "Whatever anyone may say is all right. But there is no such thing as higher and lower levels."

Sri Ma's realization embraced all opposites. Though distinguishedly beautiful in appearance and motherly by temperament, she could equally display the more masculine, impersonal aspect of God. In her advanced years, she would still express the lustre, innocence and charm of youth encompassed by an aura of the wisdom of the ancients. She appeared to be in communion with higher deva-beings and higher lokas of existence amidst her activities. She remained unfathomable by the intellect, but immediately accessible through love. She respected the traditional customs of India, yet when in mystical trances, she often disregarded all religious convention. This generated serious concern among the strict brahmin community.

During her transcendental bhavas, she would be oblivious to differences of caste, color, creed, race or even species. There were occasions where she shared food with those of other religions and "untouchables." On occasion she ate off the ground with stray dogs. Later in life, she mysteriously lost the ability to feed herself, and was thereafter hand fed by her attendants for her bodily sustenance. Throughout all these unusual circumstances, Sri Ma displayed indifference to hunger, thirst, heat, cold, pain or pleasure.

Despite her own sometimes unconventional behavior, Sri Ma encouraged her disciples to follow the orthodox codes of conduct. Interestingly, during the 1970's, when hippies flocked to exotic India, there was a Hindu backlash against their immodest dress and un-Indian conduct in ashram environments. The brahmin management of Ma's two dozen ashrams became very strict in their enforcement of brahminical caste rules. Some of Ma's Western devotees, who had adopted Hindu beliefs and practices, were on occasion excluded from entry, worship or residence in her ashrams. But Ma privately assured those mistreated that in their personal relationship to her, caste, creed and nationality meant nothing. She loved them unconditionally.

This East/West clash dramatically brought into focus the question of whether Western-born persons who adopt Hinduism will ever be popularly accepted as legitimate Hindus by the born Hindu. That question is still unsettled, and even twenty years later Westerners find cool welcome at the major ashrams in Ma's name. Their requests to use the guest facilities are politely refused. The centers

themselves are fairly quiet. The pounding din of Ma's God-conscious presence is mostly a treasured memory brought to life a few days a year when throngs of devotees visit her samadhi shrine. Some regular frequenters of the ashrams are wealthy Bengali devotees, businessmen and government officials.

In her later years, Sri Anandamayi Ma was treated like the spiritual queen of India, often visited by Kamala Nehru, wife of the first Prime Minister of India. She became the protector and confidante of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, cabinet members and countless government officials. She was universally revered by millions of sadhus, saints and devotees. In January, 1982, she was selected by the sadhus of the Haridwar Kumbha Mela as their Ishta Devata, or beloved personal form of God, and rode a caparisoned elephant to lead the procession of Naga Babas marching toward the holy Ganga. Gopinath Kaviraj, the great savant-saint of Banares, called her Adya Shakti, the incarnation of the highest Spiritual Energy. And Swami Sivananda, founder of the Divine Life Society of Rishikesh, offered her the ultimate accolade, calling her "the purest flower the soil of India has ever produced."