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Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1992

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In and among the thatched huts and wheat fields of rural Bengal. Nirmala Sundari grew up. She lived half in another world - talked to tree spirits, withdrew into deep reveries and sometimes transfixed, stared smilingly into a blue sky. Villagers liked her but suspected she was retarded. No one saw in the young girl the giant spirit that would later emerge as one of India's greatest mystics. Anandamayi Ma sought out by the Prime Minister for spiritual advice.

Her father rose at 3:00 AM and inundated their tiny home with Vaishnav kirtans. Unschooled, she was married at age 13, lived in her husband's family home, worked hard and was happy. She undertook potent sadhanas. Slipping through narrow kundalini passageways into deeper chakras, she ascended the 1,008-petalled Golden Sun sahasrara.

Much like Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna. Anandamayi Ma's life continued as a live spectacle of the Divine dancing inside a mortal frame. Her palpable, almost tangibly luminous presence eventually magnetized as expanding orbit of Self seekers. Six months before her Mahasamadhi at age 86, a young Chinese-American, Stephen Quong, had her darshan. He wrote the following account for HINDUISM TODAY.

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

In the following years, 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 more outer confirmation of the inner guidance. I was still seeking the relationship with the incarnation of the satguru, which I felt 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 elected that I had received a message from someone as great as Sri Ma, but also felt uncertain about financing such 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, and clearly heard the voices of brahmin priests chanting in Sanskrit the 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.

But 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 flying to India only weeks later, paid for by the insurance settlement. I came face-to-face with Sri Ma Anandamayi in February, 1982, Brindavan, India.

Earlier, in the summer of 1981, after receiving the letter from Sri Ma, I had a precognitive vision of my future meeting. It proved accurate. 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 a disciple of her? 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.

She was nearing ninety, in poor health, and suffering from intestinal parasites. In fact, she left her body six months later, 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 moods. 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 sahaj samadhi. Many claim to have achieved that state, but in Anandamayi Ma, its attainment was indisputable.

Sri Ma's realization embraced all opposites. Though distinguishably 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, often disregarded all religious convention. This generated serious concern among the strict brahmin community.

So in the last years of her life, she acquiesced and let the brahmins enforce strict observances of caste regulations - especially toward foreigners - in the ashrams established in her name. However Sri Ma always told her non-brahmin devotees and disciples that the regulations for the sake of the orthodox did not compromise her samadrishti, equanimity of vision. For her, everybody was an incarnation of God; the diversity of human expression was a continuing source of wonder, joy and delight to her.

Saivites called her a Saivite, Vaishnavites claimed her as a Vaishnavite. 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.

Formerly, 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."

There is only one all-pervading Atma, naught else except the One."

Whenever you have the chance, laugh. Laugh with your whole countenance, with your whole heart and soul, with all the breath of your life."

It is a state beyond all conscious and supraconscious planes - a state of complete immobilization of all thoughts, emotions and activities." (Her response when questioned about what it was like remaining in unbroken Samadhi for 5 days.)

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