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Swami Paramananda at Rondane, Norway, 1993. Photo: Torleif Sund.

IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

MY EXPERIENCES WITH SWAMI PARAMANANDA

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI IN THE WEST

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and

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THE UNIVERSITY OF PEACE AT MT. TRON

Picnic on the Ganges

But before Paramananda would come back to Norway yet another time, it was time for me to visit him again in India. In the middle of November, therefore, another India-journey ensued, and this time I travelled together with Tripti Ma from Norway. We arrived in Calcutta at midnight on November 14th 1994 and met Paramananda in Banagram the next day. Already there were five other Norwegians there: Anders from Alvdal, Reidun from near Trondheim, and Kari Ada's parents, Hans-Petter and Marith, and her little sister, Lise, all from North Norway. Except for Anders, who I had spent much time with during summer and autumn in Alvdal, and who was an outsider to Alvdal just like me, all of them were new acquaintances.

Otherwise, in Banagram, there was a whole new generation of *brahmacharis*, about ten to fifteen years younger than the first generation to which I belonged. Among them were, for example, Sobbo's younger brother Nachiketa from Singur, Bankim from Burdwan, Joydeep from Calcutta, and my good friend Saurabh from Lucknow. I quickly got to know Joydeep as he stayed in a room next to me and spoke very good English. Moreover, he was very good at telling stories and had a very good sense of humour, besides being a sincere truth-seeker, of course.

Paramananda always had a very good sense of humour. At one of the sittings during the first days a very funny incident arose. There were two young and quite cute identical twin girls named Ruma and Jhuma. When I first met them I was not able to see any difference between them and I thought that they had to be the most identical twins I had ever seen. At the sitting the talk turned to twins and Paramananda talked a lot about this phenomenon, and about how difficult it sometimes would be to tell twins apart. Just then Ruma and Jhuma asked in chorus if he could make out the difference between them. "Oh yes, that is very easy", Paramananda replied in a convincing tone, and then pointed to each of them in turn: "You are Ruma and you are Jhuma", while deliberately switching them. "NO!", they chorused, simultaneously, both shouting loudly, while the rest of the audience burst into laughter, enjoying the priceless moment!

In Banagram a rapid development had taken place during those four years of my absence, and if I compared to that time when Asgeir, Glenn and I was there exactly ten

years earlier, the development was phenomenal. Now there were so many people, buildings and activities, with the main activity centered around the hostel and school of about 250 orphan boys at that time.

During the last week of the month I visited Dharampur Ashram in Bankura District – another of Paramananda's ashrams, one I had not visited before. I went there via Tapaban Ashram in Raina, and the journey took a long ten hours by train and bus from Burdwan town. There Swamis Akhandananda and Abhayananda were heads of this Ayurvedic centre, where they collected and prepared all the medicines themselves. The ashram was situated in a desolate, sparsely populated area in a huge, open landscape. At some distance there was a small village and there was a minor river running by. Just close to the ashram was a fine grove of cashew nut trees, but in the far distance was thick jungle with wild elephants. A natural, small and desolate place with very few people – completely according to my taste! Here my very good friend Tarun had spent his last days before his young life ended all too soon, and I visited the place of his cremation.

Three days later I was back in Banagram where Bryan had now also arrived, and the two of us together experienced unforgettable nights with Paramananda in his hut. Otherwise I spent much time with all the Norwegians who experienced India for the very first time and had lots of questions about most everything.

One afternoon during one of Paramananda's *satsangas*, as I passed by with my camera intending to take photos of the ashram I felt an irresistible urge to preserve for posterity the completely timeless image of Paramananda sitting by his simple, yet very beautiful hut and talking to the attentive and truth-hungry people about the art of life and other deeply spiritual topics – just like it has always been in India since time immemorial. As I knew that in general Paramananda was not in favour of surprise photography and at the same time I didn't like to interrupt or make any disturbance by asking his permission, I quickly stole a couple of snaps from a distance, partly hidden behind a tree, almost as if it were wild birds or animals that I aimed at. As a foreigner from the West, naturally I was more interested in having authentic 'action pictures' than the more boring and arranged pictures, preferably with glasses worn, which all Indians used to be so particular about. Immediately I was arrested by Paramananda:

Pakhi, what are you doing? We are not birds here!

He didn't say any more, but just continued talking to the others from where he had left off. Still the effect was total on me – I felt like paralyzed and embarrassed, so embarrassed that if I could I would have just sunk into

the ground and hidden myself. Luckily it soon passed and Paramananda never mentioned it later, but it was definitely the last time I took any photo of him that way. Still, in retrospect, when I look at these unique photos, I do not regret even for a second that I snapped them that Saturday at New Moon on December 3rd 1994!



Paramananda holds satsanga outside his beautiful, one roomed, little clay hut with arched straw roof of good height, built in the traditional rural Bengal style. Here he sits facing east. The main entrance with a veranda in front faces south. This is an almost timeless scene, going on for thousands of years in India. Paramananda usually gesticulated a lot when he talked, and made use of his whole body (top picture). Both photos: BP.



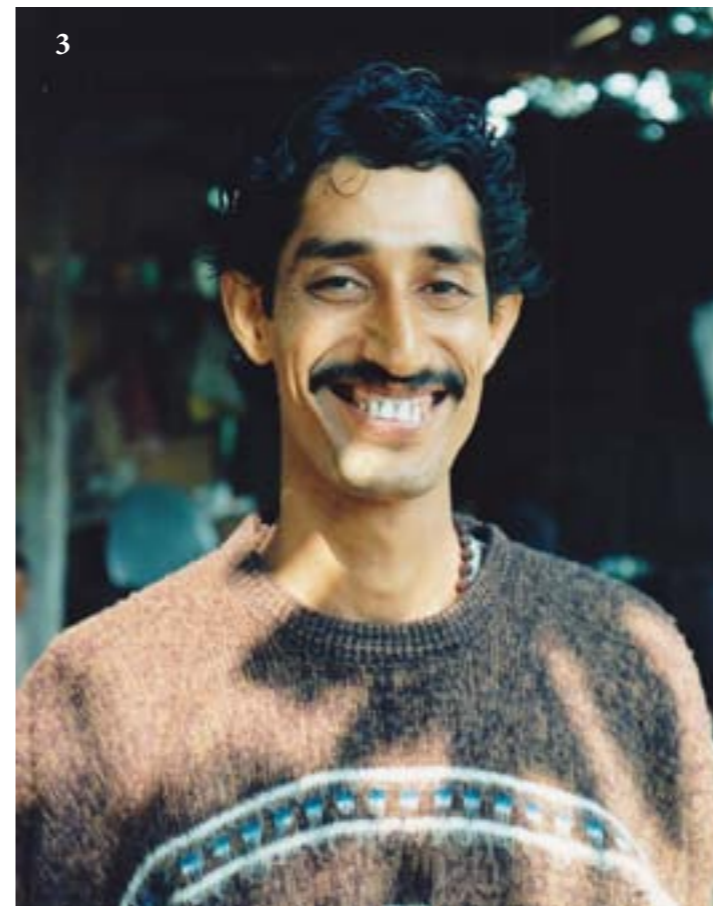
Above, left: Banagram ashram's eminent homeopathic doctor and acupuncturist, Swami Boomananda, also called Dipti Maharaj. Top, right: Swami Swarupananda, who, together with Sobbo, was the first to receive the author when he first visited, in 1983, has been in charge of the ashram's printing and publishing department, and editor of the Bengali magazine Charaiveti, throughout. Above, right: Swami Sahajananda, also known as Hari Maharaj, younger brother of Dipti and Tapi Ma, has partial charge of the orphan boys. Below, left: Swami Keshabananda, also called "Mama" ("mother's brother"), editor of the English edition of Charaiveti, throughout. Below, right: Swami Devananda or simply "Keshab", cousin brother of Dipti, Hari and Tapi Ma, who performed the temple service in Banagram. All photos: BP.



1. The big pond, with no fence at that time, looks very idyllic. 2. The kitchen in the traditional rural country style, here with dining children in front, was situated just north of the pond and in front of the guest house. 3. The new Sadhana Bhawan or guest house. 4. The childrens' school building beside the big banyan tree and the open yard had already existed for several years. 5. The children also lived in the classrooms and at that time the youth hostel was not yet built. Here, together with Swami Chitbilasananda (Madhan Maharaj), who was in charge of all the children. 6. Happy orphan boys in Banagram ashram! 7. The big cow shed was new at that time, the cows provided plenty of milk for the children as well as biogas for the kitchen. 8. A new, much larger kitchen was under construction in the ashram's south-east corner. All photos: BP.



Above, left: Swami Nishkamananda, (Murari Maharaj), the secretary of the ashram board. Above, right: Swami Chitbilasananda, (Madhan Maharaj). Below, left: Tripti Ma at the entrance of Paramananda's hut. Below, right: Swami Tapeswarananda liked to work in the flower garden. Bottom, right: Some of the ashram's mothers – from left: Anju, Tapi Ma, Jogu Ma, Tripti Ma and Reba Ma (cousin sister of Tapi Ma, Dipti, Hari and Keshab). All photos: BP.



1. Joydeep in his room in Sadhana Bhawan, Banagram ashram.
2. Saurabh in Banagram ashram, winter 1994.
3. Babu Chatterjee, usually known as 'Azim Ganj Babu', in Banagram ashram, winter 1994.
4. Anders from Alvda, Norway, sitting underneath the small banyan tree in the field north of the ashram, where Paramananda's very first little hut was situated.
5. The ashram as seen from this small banyan tree, i.e. north facade. To the left is Sadhana Bhawan; in the middle the office building, to the right, toilets and cowshed.
6. Hans Peter and Marith Gjaever from Lyngseidet, Norway (Kari Ada's parents), enjoying the winter sun on the veranda of Sadhana Bhawan, the guest house in Banagram ashram, December 1994. All photos: BP.



Top: Swami Purnananda in Tapaban Ashram, Raina, winter 1994.
 Above, left: A section of the ashram, which is situated beneath the shadow-giving crowns of many trees – hence the suffix 'ban', meaning 'forest'.
 Above, right: Boys from Banagram ashram when older attend high school at Tapaban Ashram.

Below, left: Swami Abhayananda, or just "Amullu", who is an expert on Ayurvedic medicine.
 Below, right: The ashram in Dharampur, Bankura, established by Amullu with Swami Akhandananda. All photos: BP.



Six days after that Paramananda was to leave for his ashram in Azimganj in connection with his annual birthday celebration there. As we were several Norwegians who were also going there, it was decided that Anders, Reidun and I should go by private car together with Paramananda and a driver. At that time the area was unusually dry because not a drop of rain had fallen there for months, and everywhere there was a 10-15 cm thick layer of fine dust on the ground. So when the car started with us all inside and the windows wide open because of the heat, thick clouds of dust poured in and all held their hand before their mouth and nose, with eyelids pressed half-closed and holding their breath, as one usually does in these situations. We were all very visibly feeling uncomfortable, except for Paramananda. He turned to me, smiled broadly and said:

Oh Bjørn, how wonderful – touch of the earth!

Once more he wanted to turn a predisposed, negative habitual attitude into something spontaneously positive which could be enjoyed. And again he proved with this statement that he was able to enjoy anything.

After arriving safe and well at the Conscious Spiritual Centre ashram at Azimganj, the next day I visited my friends, the Das family, who lived not much more than a stone's throw away. I had visited them during autumn 1990 when I stayed many days in the ashram and was visited almost daily by the two teenage sisters Rupali and Chaitali, who used to bring me home made sweets and who invited me to their home. They were an unusually hearty and devoted school teacher family consisting of three adults and four children who lived packed extremely tightly together in a tiny clay shack by the roadside. The first time I visited their incredibly hospitable home we ended up singing devotional songs – *bajans* – together, the whole night until early morning, and a bond of eternal friendship was tied there and then. Actually, I had already met Rupali and Chaitali ten years

earlier in Banagram, when they were only eleven and nine years old, sitting on each of Paramananda's knees underneath the big banyan tree, with me sitting beside. Already then we had felt a certain nearness to each other, even if they were only kids and called Paramananda 'Daddu' – grandfather. I had also spent a few days together with these two sisters and their family in a nearby place called Lalgola, that autumn in 1990.

Now Paramananda had chosen these two sisters, led by their elder sister, Shyamoli, and with the assistance of the rest of the family, to run a new centre of his after a new concept: helping destitute women to self-reliance, called The Satavisha Social Welfare Society. The Centre was founded on January 5th 1993 with everyday running taken care of by the three sisters. Its aim was to teach needy women a variety of handicrafts so that they would be able to run micro industries and manage themselves and their families. The Centre thus helped the women with exhibitions and sales of their products, and otherwise a whole range of practical services, governmental applications and so on, to make them independent and self-sufficient. The name 'Satavisha' was taken from a star in the constellation of Aquarius, from where Paramananda had said he had taken his physical body. It was illustrated by five rays or beams, like a 'five-armed' star, symbolizing the five physical elements, our five body sheaths, five senses of knowledge, five senses of action, five fingers, five toes, and so on. In Satavisha Chaitali and Rupali showed me beautifully embroidered saris, shawls, table-cloths and other useful items that the women connected to the Centre had made.

The next day I went with Paramananda and Bryan to yet another ashram nearby, which I hadn't visited before. That was a small ashram just beside the small village of Rasberulia, far out among the endless stretches of paddy fields in Bengal. There Swami Krishnananda was the head at that time and rendered his free services to the local people. I stayed there for three days before travelling back to Azim-

The two teenage Das sisters Rupali (left) and Chaitali (right), who, together with their elder sister Syamali Das, established Satavisha Social Welfare Society for destitute women. Here in Azim Ganj, winter 1994. Both photos: BP.

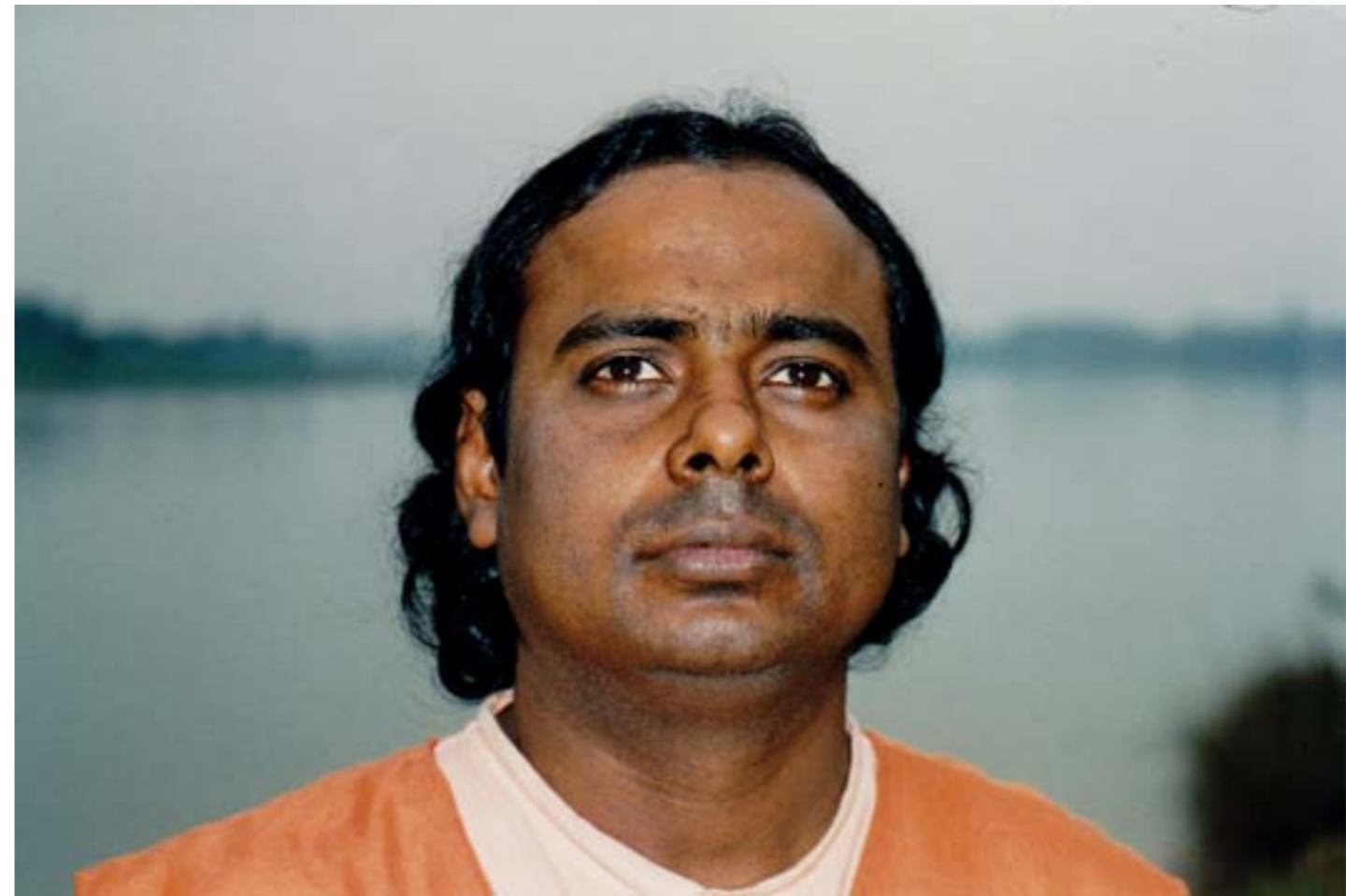




Here Reidun and Anders are sitting in the small, pretty Rasberulia ashram which lies on the outskirts of a small village. Photo: BP.



Top: Paramananda's hut at Conscious Spiritual Centre. Photo: Per Gilb, possibly 1997. Above: Mihir – Swami Prajñananda. Photo: BP.



Mihir – Swami Prajñananda – by the Bhagirati Ganga outside Spiritual Conscious Centre, Azim Ganj, December 1994. He was possibly the very first of Paramananda's closest disciples to leave his body after Paramananda. Photo: BP.

ganj and then on to Calcutta early next morning on an errand for Paramananda. A whole week was spent in Calcutta where Tripti Ma and I took Kari Ada's family sight-seeing. A visit to Dakshineswar followed by a boat-trip on the Ganges across the river to Belur Math, was, naturally, one of the visits. While we were in the boat I remembered the first time I took the same route, many years before. Then we saw a small baby's corpse floating in the water, which must not have been there for long as it was perfectly intact. Perhaps it was stillborn, but in India such things suggest a lot of possibilities and speculation and the suspicion of terrible tragedies is never far away.

On Friday December 23rd I left by train from Sealdah Station in Calcutta for Azimganj together with Mihir, who had come down from Baniketh in the Himalayas via a stay in Delhi to join in the celebration of Paramananda's birthday. When we arrived at the ashram Anne Kristin had also arrived from Norway, on her very first visit to India. During these annual celebrations friends and followers from all over Bengal and the rest of India gathered and participated in a variety of programmes every day. Of course, there was always lots of song and music of various kinds, and the performance of *baul*-singers was certainly essential. This ashram was comparatively small and intimate, and one always had to live in cramped quarters during these festivals here. Therefore, during

the first three days, Mihir and I stayed with Babu's family in Azimganj. There were two brothers, Babu and Mana, and two sisters, Chhaya and Tul-Tul, all of them Paramananda's *brahmacharis* – only the two elder sisters had married and established families of their own. So their home was just like a small ashram and we could have good rest there without lots of people and noise around. Besides, Mihir got to eat as much fish as he desired!

However, on the third day of Christmas we moved back to the ashram and got the room just next to Paramananda. As most of the visitors had left, we had the room completely to ourselves. But the joy was short lived in my case as Mihir snored so loudly and noisily that I could not sleep the whole night. So the next morning I complained to Paramananda:

“Mihir is not snoring, he is roaring!” “Yes,” Paramananda concurred, with a low and somewhat resigned voice, “Mihir snores very loudly.”

The following night, therefore, I took care to have a deep spiritual discussion going on with him so that he would not fall asleep. Mihir was very intelligent and spoke English very well, and it was always most refreshing to discuss philosophical or scientific topics with him. We therefore continued conversing throughout the night. In

the early hours we were still conversing, laying close in a resting position and looking into each other's eyes. And while lying thus I suddenly recognized the eyes of Paramahansa Yogananda, as I knew them from the photos of him and from a dream I had had about him. When I later told Paramananda about my experience, he only said:

“Yes, but don't say anything to Mihir because he does not know himself yet.” “But how is it possible,” I protested, “because everybody who has read the famous autobiography of Yogananda knows that he left his body in *nirvikalpa samadhi*!?” And again Paramananda replied in exactly the same manner and even with exactly the same words as when he spoke to me at Shantibu when we talked about the same situation for Anandacharya: “Yes, I could just have given him a little push that time and it would have happened.”

Again Paramananda opened up enormous perspectives in my life, and this time of my life as part of a timeless brotherhood with others who were in exactly the same situation as me. From the very first moment I had felt an indescribable relationship with the ‘inner circle’ round Paramananda – it was an inexplicable, immediate intimacy even though I hadn't known them before in this life, and it pertained to some in particular more than others. Mihir absolutely belonged to those in particular, but

without me thinking much about it or at all about these things. But now my previous feelings were confirmed together with an affirmation of my own life's nature.

The next night it simply fell out of me, and I told Mihir everything about my discovery and Paramananda's confirmation about him. Then Mihir reacted with anger, not because he reacted on the same ground as I had done that time in Shantibu when Paramananda told me about the identity of my previous life, but because he already had notions about his previous life as another identity. However, I had broken my promise to my guru of not revealing anything of this to Mihir, so I toddled rather crestfallen and sheepishly into Paramananda's room the next morning and told him what had just happened. But Paramananda was completely calm and only said: “OK, ask Mihir to come here.” Rather excited about what was possibly going to happen next, I fetched Mihir from the neighbouring room and brought him to Paramananda's room. As soon as we were inside and he had closed the door behind us, Paramananda opened his cupboard and took out loads of food – a great variety of delicious dishes given to him as birthday presents by a large number of devoted housewives. Mihir immediately sat down on an *asan* and started eating with great appetite, and did not stop until everything was gone, while Paramananda, Tapi Ma, who was then also present, and I, sat on

Paramananda's bed and watched him. That was all. Not a word about Paramahansa Yogananda or anything of what had happened the night before. Mihir was visibly satisfied after the sumptuous meal, so then all were satisfied with the situation!

An annual entertainment in connection with Paramananda's birthday celebrations was a picnic by boat on the Ganges. A branch of the Ganges, named Bhagirati, flows by a couple of stone-throws from the ashram and this year as many as five boats were hired for the purpose. They were very simple wooden motor boats with a platform of bamboo sticks laid out on the entire surface of the boat, of the type that is used as a river crossing ferry for people and cattle and a huge variety of vehicles. This kind of picnic is extremely popular and the boats, loaded with food, cooking utensils, eating equipment, musical instruments, party-minded people and *baul*-singers, were on the water the whole day and stayed close together. I was lucky to be in the same boat as Paramananda, and it was a lovely day in the open on the river with lots of music, song, dance and fun – a day of pure enjoyment with Paramananda and good friends! At night Paramananda presented me with a beautiful calendar with photos of Indian birds, which he himself had been presented with on his birthday, but which he had put aside for me immediately. That was also one of the characteristics of Paramananda – he never



owned anything, but all kinds of items given to him just passed through him to others, usually a little later, and he loved presenting people with gifts. The following night was New Year's Eve, and consequently more song and music ensued and lasted the whole night into the New Year of 1995.

Bryan had already gone back to England on December 17th on account of his work, and Anders went back to Norway on December 28th, but Kari Ada's family did not return to Norway until March 26th. Tripti Ma and I returned on January 23rd after having spent the last days in Banagram and Karimpur. The very last night was spent with the Datta family in Salt Lake in Calcutta, and on the day of departure Paramananda phoned me to tell me off. As soon as I held the phone to my ear he said in a loud and clear voice:

“You are soaring high now, *Pakhi!*”, and continued in the same light ironic tone with a distinct accusing undertone.

I cannot remember anything more of what he said, because it immediately so completely hit the mark of my bad conscience that I only stammered something incoherent back to him. At once I understood what he was aiming at and why. The background was this: For quite a

long time I had felt a bit disturbed by the deep-rooted attitude of the Indians that Westerners are not able to have deep spiritual experiences or realizations, which seems to be a “taken-for-granted” attitude with them, and so they are not open to anything else or even have the capability of spontaneously sensing anything, for instance, during a conversation. I wanted to change this, so when an opportunity occurred during a conversation with two of Paramananda's sannyasins, in which they both told something of their deep spiritual experiences and at the same time completely ignored me, I took my chance and in very gentle words and a very careful way hinted something about my spiritual condition or the reality of my spiritual life with reference to my *turiya*-experience in Banagram in 1987, but without mentioning that in particular. However, during my utterances I used the word '*nirvikalpa*', which, of course, was not entirely right, even though it has been said that “in *nirvikalpa* there is nothing but *turiya*”. Thus, a touch of exaggerated self-assertion was there on my side and Paramananda, of course, did not want that at all. Consequently, the stinging rebuke from his side. As usual it left a deep impression...

Back in Alvdal, Tripti Ma and I soon started to make preparations for the coming of Paramananda for a third time sometime during the coming summer.



Both pictures above, from a later year, possibly 1997 are of a picnic on the Ganges in connection with the 25th December birthday celebration of Paramananda. (In 1994 Paramananda's hut, seen in the other photo by Per Gilb, had not been built. Also seen is a Hanuman monkey participating in Paramananda's satsanga!). Both photos: Per Gilb.

Bryan Tovey, from England, at Banagram ashram, December 1994.
I am than immensely grateful to Bryan for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of the English language edition of this book.
Photo: BP.



The author by the Bhagirati Ganga, Azim Ganj, December 1994. Photo: Mihir.

CLARIFICATION

In the previous edition, No. 24 Week 49 2021, in my account of the private air flight locally with Paramananda I wrote a little about how, apparently, individual will could alter The Divine Plan. This was formulated in a way that could be understood as unfavourable for one of the four on board, something that was never my intention and which I regret.

GLOSSARY (simplified)

asan – a square cloth used for sitting on the floor.

ashram – spiritual centre or community mainly for *brahmacharis* and *sannyasins*. See *brahmachari*.

ayurveda – ancient Indian herbal and nature medicine.

bajan – devotional song.

baul – philosophy with man at the centre, physically, emotionally and spiritually; practitioner of the *Baul* Philosophy; wandering, mystical truth-seeker and musician/singer in Bengal.

Belur Math – the institution established by Swami Vivekananda for his brother monks after the demise of Sri Ramakrishna, at Belur, Kolkata, containing the shrine of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Brahmananda and others.

brahmachari – male performer of *brahmacharya*.

brahmacharya – apprenticeship (period of training), or the first of four stages in a Hindu's life; self-discipline, especially in relation to sexuality. See *brahmachari*.

daddu – grandfather.

Dakshineswar – famous Kali-temple outside Kolkata, and site of pilgrimage to the shrine of Sri Ramakrishna.

Mihir – one of the closest male disciples to Paramananda, with the sannyasi name of **Swami Prajñananda**.

nirvikalpa samadhi – that form of *samadhi* which is without any object in mind and which therefore cannot be explained, in contrast to *savikalpa* and other forms of *samadhi*; also known as "opposite *samadhi*", completely different from all other forms of *samadhi*. After complete *nirvikalpa samadhi* there is no more cause for rebirth. See *samadhi*.

Pakhi – 'bird' (Bengali pronunciation of Sanskrit *pakshi*); the author's pet name given by Paramananda.

Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) – one of the most famous and well-known Indian yogis in the West and author of the renowned "Autobiography of a Yogi".

samadhi – 'union' ('putting together' or 'bringing into harmony'); full absorption in meditation; the eighth and last step of Classical Yoga. See *nirvikalpa samadhi*.

Satavisha – a star in the constellation Aquarius, from where Paramananda said his physical body had come; name of an organization in Azim Ganj, Murshidabad, Bengal, inspired and initiated by Paramananda.

satsanga – 'gathering for truth'; a popular type of company with questions and answers, between guru and disciples or spiritual head and audience.

turiya – "the fourth state of consciousness"; the transcendental or super-conscious state, beyond the three ordinary states of consciousness – waking, sub-conscious and unconscious; the "Rishi state" or realized. See *nirvikalpa samadhi*.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.