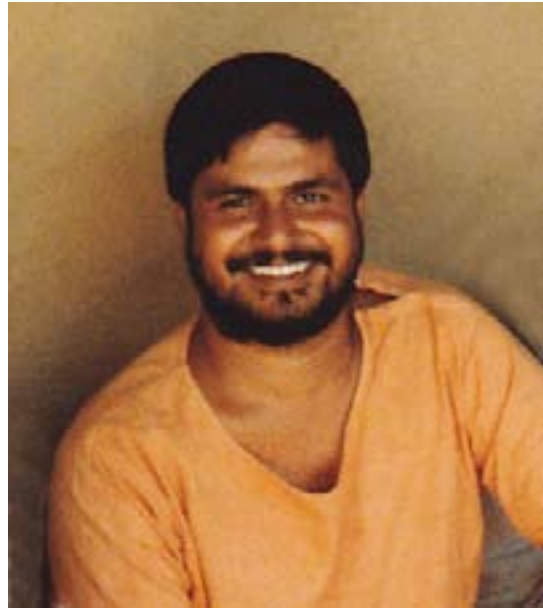




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Swami Paramananda, Banagram, Bengal, India 1984. Photo: BP.

IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

MY EXPERIENCES WITH
SWAMI PARAMANANDA

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI IN THE WEST

BJØRN PETTERSEN

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Bjørn Pettersen

and

Mt.Tron University of Peace Foundation
2560 Alvdal
Norway

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THE ART OF MEDITATION

Mental communication

On the second day after Asgeir, Glenn and I had arrived at Paramananda Mission, I asked Paramananda about our duties in the ashram during our stay there. From Rishikesh I was used to daily work and duties, and as an ashram is a collective where it is necessary and natural that all the members give their share of help according to their ability, I was prepared to contribute mine. But Paramananda said there were no such tasks allocated to us – we should spend our time in meditation, conversations and discussions. He said that first a good conception of spirituality and spiritual life is important, then perception would be possible.

After seven days he called me to his hut at midnight and taught me intimately “the art of meditation”, as he called it. Though I had already meditated for several years, I had never really learnt meditation. What Paramananda taught me about meditation was refreshingly natural and simple, and never before or since have I come across a similar

method. Compared with all the techniques of meditation which are used in the West and which was known to me, this was something entirely different - much more direct with a much deeper dimension – and I understood that those techniques I knew or had heard about were, in fact, only more or less complicated preparations for meditation, not really meditation in itself. Paramananda said that meditation is complete “non-doing” – one is only a passive witness to one’s own mind and everything that happens there, without becoming involved in anything. He said that we are used to saying that “it is my thought” and “my feeling”, etc. – everything is “mine” (and therefore not ‘me’), but who or what knows that? That is the great question! And this question is answered by practicing meditation as “non-doing”, as a completely passive witness. Paramananda was always so clear and logical, and wonderfully natural in everything he said and did.



Paramananda with young girls from the Banagram village underneath the big banyan tree in the Ashram, November 1984. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson.



Paramananda with some of the Ashram’s orphan boys together with boys from the village. Just behind Paramananda stands Pradip, the very first orphan boy in the Ashram. Banagram, November 1984. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson.

In these first days I always used to greet him in the Indian way with my hands raised up to my face every time I passed by him at a little distance, as he, as usual, sat before the entrance to his hut and talked to visitors and listeners from the village. I felt like I could not just pass him without turning towards him and greeting him, even if it was from a little distance. Still, it was not for the sake of politeness but because I felt a great respect for him. And as soon as Paramananda spotted me doing so, he also turned towards me and did exactly the same. This happened every single time and after a while I had to stop because I started to feel shy about it. I felt shy that he should greet little, insignificant me in the same respectful manner as I greeted him and that in doing so he had to interrupt his satsanga every time. For us, used to the social democracy of Western countries, this behaviour may seem unremarkable but those who are familiar with the Indian tradition in this field will, I think, appreciate the greatness shown by Paramananda. The so-called “great” yogis and spiritual heads who I met in Rishikesh, would never have returned my greeting or even have given any recognition to me. They would have considered themselves and been considered by others far too important and exalted for that.

It was on one of these very first days that Paramananda called me and said: “Bjørn, it is not necessary much talking, by mind we shall communicate.” I looked at him with great wonder – did he really mean that we should read each other’s thoughts, I thought. This was something en-

tirely new to me, and never before had I even thought of the possibility of such a form of active and conscious communication. I had no idea how it should happen but I did not ask him and we never ever talked about it. I just nodded my head in the affirmative and then nothing more was mentioned about it. At that time I didn’t understand much of how such a communication could take place or what Paramananda had really meant, and so for me it was almost like a big question mark hung over it.

But as the years passed by, conscious mental communication proved to be the very cornerstone of my relationship with Paramananda. It started with him showing me clearly that he knew what I was thinking about. Whenever I came to him in India, when we were alone, he would smilingly remark: “Oh Bjørn, when you were in Alvdal you had so many questions! You used to think that ...”, and then he would mention exactly those questions I used to struggle with, followed by saying: “Okay, I shall explain to you.” And then I received very precise and satisfying answers to all my questions. At other times, in Banagram ashram, he would call me at night when everybody else was asleep. I always used to sit up at night in meditation or contemplation on philosophical issues. Suddenly I would hear Paramananda’s voice from outside calling: “Bjørn? Bjørn!” And when I would come outside of my room on the 2nd floor of the Sadhana Bhavan and, looking down to the open yard below, I would see Paramananda standing there alone in the soft moonlight, looking up at me, while

I, with wonder and some hesitation, would say “Yes?” “Did you think something?”, he would continue, and I would answer in the affirmative. And then he would ask me to come down and join him in his hut where again he would say, smilingly: “Oh, you thought about this?” And immediately he would continue by telling me exactly what I had been thinking about, followed by the most fulfilling answers to all my questions. This happened not only once or twice, but often.

Eventually I understood that he was able to feel my mind just as I used to feel it myself, with my sense impressions, memories, feelings, thoughts and all. When this fully dawned upon me – I think it was on a train journey alone between Calcutta and New Delhi some years later – I decided that I could just as well start talking to him consciously in my mind. I began with commenting on incidents that I observed through the train window and about co-travellers in my compartment. Of course, at the same time I realized that I would not be able to share his mind in the same way as he could share mine – that my ‘receptor’ would not be anything near the quality of his – but that did not really matter, because I enjoyed greatly the liberating feeling it was to be able to talk to him whenever I wanted to and at the same time know with absolute certainty that he heard me! On the other hand, I soon learnt to trust my own intuition. If at any time I would mentally ask Paramananda concrete questions I would there and then immediately receive an answer through intuition. All of this only increased in intensity during the years, without any difference or change after Paramananda left his body in November 1999. We are always living intimately together.

But long before that became a reality – about a month after we had arrived in Banagram in October 1984 – I was seriously tormented by brooding on one major philosophical problem to which I could not find any solution. It was the old problem of whether man has free will or not. It had been made current, naturally, as a consequence of observing the guru-disciple relationship which reigned in the ashram. I had understood that Paramananda did not look at himself as a guru in the typical ‘guru role’ (“I do not feel that I am guru”), and that everyone was free to look at him and address him in whatever way they wanted. This was a fact, and Paramananda himself showed it in every way, both in speech and in manner. Still, it was the traditional guru role that most of the ashram inmates and the visitors from outside wanted him to maintain, and everybody, including myself, called him “Guruji”, both by address and by reference. But my questions revolved around the idea that perhaps he was manipulating our lives clandestinely because mentally and spiritually he was far more advanced and quite superior to us, or that everything was predestined and that we, as individuals, actually had no influence over our own lives. There and then those questions felt very painful, which, psychologically, had appeared in

me, because my own little world was about to open up into a much, much larger and “unknown” one. After three days of ceaseless brooding and negative feelings, when we were assembled at night in Mukherjee’s yard in the village, and after Paramananda had finished eating his supper, I finally took courage and put the question to him. He at once answered with a liberating and very simple counter question: “How can the will be free when man himself is not free?” That was all he said about this that time, and it made me immediately think of how unfree we are as humans – how slave-bound we are to our own thoughts, feelings, wishes, desires and habits, and that it was exactly the reason why we had come to Paramananda to have his help and inspiration to get rid of just this slave-relationship and instead become free humans. Of course, how could our will be free when nothing else about us was free – it seemed obvious there and then, and my brooding disappeared completely. Many years later, when Paramananda visited Norway for the first time, he explained all about it to me in depth.

At night, after this incident, I meditated very well, and after going to sleep and having slept for a while, I was woken by all of my body shaking intensely as I dreamt about a huge king cobra rising up in front of me. I felt threatened and tried to escape from it, but found that I had completely lost all sensation in both of my legs and then also in all the rest of my body. The last thing that happened before my waking consciousness fully brought me back to my five senses was that I looked straight into the eyes of the huge cobra. This was still another symptom that my *kundalini* was awake and active, and that spiritually I was on the right path. ‘*Kundalini*’ (lit. ‘coiled up’ – in India symbolized by a raised cobra) is the Sanskrit term for the original and central power in man, which, after having created the foetus in the womb, sleeps in the abdomen of every human being and performs all the autonomous functions of the body, but which also, by the direct influence of a realized being, reverses and rises up through the spine to reach its source at the crown of the head.



Paramananda at the Mukherjee family home in Banagram village, November 1984. Photo: BP.



Tapi Ma, Mana and two other women washing the dishes after lunch by the big pond in the Ashram. At this time the pond was still not cleaned of vegetation and bricked in, but had many different nesting water-birds. However, here are two domestic swan-geese. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson, November 1984.

Even if Paramananda didn’t feel like a guru or regard himself as a guru in the ordinary sense, he took his expected role as a guru with the highest degree of seriousness. For example, he would never tolerate even the least show of any form of ego or selfishness. Once, as we were sitting together underneath the big banyan tree he asked me about my schooling. I answered smilingly with a faint touch of pride that I used to hate school, whereupon he immediately arrested me: “That is vanity!” After these forthright words we were silent. He hit the target and I realized my fault.

On one of the last days of the month Paramananda invited Asgeir, Glenn and me to accompany him on a tour in Bengal. Purnananda, Hari (Brahmachari Sahajananda) and Achut Barua also came along. We first travelled to the village of Kamarpukur where Paramananda had many devotees. Kamarpukur is famous because it is the birthplace of Sri Ramakrishna. The many hours long journey started in the evening of November 28th involving ordinary buses on the extremely bad roads of West Bengal. It became a very tiresome, bumpy, dusty, cramped and noisy journey, especially for us foreigners who were not used to this. During most of the journey a place had been arranged for me in which I was sitting back to back with Paramananda so that we kind of supported each other. The bus was so full and so packed that it was the only option for us. To me it felt like a mixture of fear and privilege to sit that close to

Paramananda – fear because I was afraid to cause him any disturbance of any kind. My mind and activity of thought was at its peak level during all of the tiresome journey, which was more like a long torture, but I thought that, in spite of all that, together with Paramananda I would be able to endure anything. When, after several hours journey and close to midnight, we finally reached our destination even Paramananda was tired. He looked at me and a bit resignedly said: “Bjørn, you think too much!” I understood that involuntarily he had taken part in the activity of my mind and immediately I felt a bit embarrassed.

The next morning many of us were bathing in the same pond as Ramakrishna used to bathe in in his youth. The water was terribly dirty and we foreigners, who had never before been bathing in a Bengali pond, were really sceptical. But when the ones who had urged us to come with them for a bath asserted that the water was very holy as Ramakrishna had been bathing there, we jumped in, now true believers in the exalted quality and excellence of the water, and we were swimming and diving wholeheartedly. Afterwards, when we came back to the family where we stayed and, filled with enthusiasm, told Paramananda that we had been bathing in the same pond as Ramakrishna used for bathing, he exclaimed: “Oh, but that water is so dirty and horrible!” I think that all of us laughed a little inside because the situation was really funny.



Asgeir together with Hari outside the entrance to Sarada Ma's birthplace in Jairambati, where Asgeir experienced Ma darshan, near the end of November 1984. Photo: BP.

Later the same day we visited the nearby village of Jairambati where Ramakrishna's wife, Sarada Ma, was born, and spent some time there. Asgeir, who was a great admirer of Sarada Ma, sat in meditation for an hour on the veranda outside the simple clay hut where she had grown up. He didn't say anything to any of us afterwards, but from Paramananda we heard that he experienced 'Ma darsan' there – he had been blessed by the vision of Sarada Ma.

He also got a *darsan* of Kali Mata herself. That happened a few days later in the home of Purnananda's family in the town of Singur. Many people had come to listen to Paramananda and all were assembled on the roof of the house. As often at such events there was also song and music, and it was while this took place that by chance I came to fix my gaze on Paramananda who was sitting nearby. He stared intensely and most gravely at something, and when I looked in the same direction as he was staring, I saw that it was Asgeir who was the object of his intense attention. Asgeir was sitting a little away from me on the other side, so that I was placed nearly midway between him and Paramananda. He was sitting in meditation with his eyes closed and his whole head almost shone while his face was bathed in tears. It was quite clear that a very intense situation moved Asgeir, and I



Guruji and Hari, front, Purnananda and friend Ananda, arrive by rickshaw at the house of Purnananda's family in Singur, beginning of December 1984. Photo: BP.

thought that he must see a vision. Then I turned my head to take a look at Paramananda who still stared at Asgeir in the same intense way, and I understood that he could see everything that was going on in Asgeir's mind, nay, that it might even be him who was the very cause of it all. When Paramananda became aware of me watching both of them, he lowered his gaze and looked away for a moment. Again I turned to look at Asgeir, who continued as before, and when again I turned to Paramananda he again withdrew his gaze from Asgeir, as if he didn't want me to observe what was going on. When again I saw that he fixed his gaze on Asgeir as I turned my head away, I decided to stop watching and instead pretend that nothing had happened. I rather observed all the people around me who were occupied with listening to the musicians performing songs by Rabindranath Tagore and I don't think any of them had been aware of what was going on between Asgeir and Paramananda. Later I heard Paramananda had told somebody that Asgeir had had the revelation of Kali Mata. Asgeir himself never said anything about it to anybody.

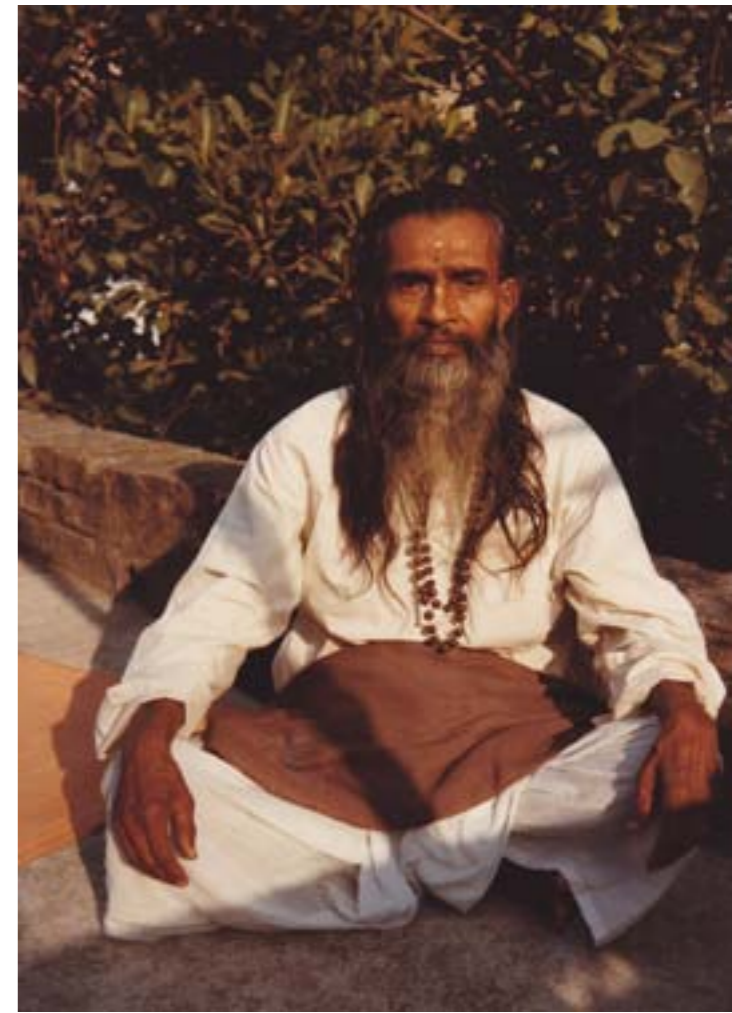
During this trip I got the opportunity to visit Anandacharya's birthplace in Hooghly for the first time. Asgeir, Glenn and I took a day trip from Singur, and Sobbo, who



Sobbo with his daughter Lymme, on the roof of his apartment in Singur, December 1984. Photo: BP.

was living in Singur, came along as guide. Shortly before departure from Norway I had received a letter from a Radhakishore Mallik in Hooghly who was a nephew of Anandacharya, the eldest son of his eldest sister, and we went to his address where we met a vigorous man of 90 years with long hair and beard who was not spiritual as his uncle, but instead a very religious Hindu. He brought us to the huge, old house in Baral Lane where Anandacharya was born and brought up, and showed us his room on the first floor. Now the whole building was rented out to many families who were not related to Anandacharya. From Baral Lane we went out to the nearby, beautiful rural area around Bandel Church, where Anandacharya went to school as a little boy, and where Sobbo had actually honeymooned with his wife Ranu.

Two days after this we also experienced a great concert in a stadium in Calcutta. Asgeir, Glenn, Sobbo, Purnananda and I enjoyed greatly Ravi Shankar on *sitar*, Ali Akbar Khan on *sarod* and Allah Rakha on *tabla* in an unforgettable ensemble performance on the full moon night of December 8th. After the concert Purnananda arranged for Glenn, who was a musician and played a little *sitar* himself, to have a brief meeting with Ravi Shankar behind the scenes.



Radhakishore Mallik, the nephew of Anandacharya, here 90 years of age, had lived his whole life as a sadhu. Photo: BP 1984.

A few days after this, beside the Ganges outside Calcutta, we visited the famous Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna had lived and then Belur Math, where his disciples led by Swami Vivekananda lived after the demise of Sri Ramakrishna.

The next day, on December 13th, the time had come for Asgeir to head back to Norway. Glenn went back nearly a month later while I had prepared to stay in India for half a year this time.

But before that, minus Asgeir, we all came back to Banagram on December 14th, Glenn's 30th birthday, and the next day was my 29th birthday. Tripti Ma made the sweet rice dish *paramanna* for both of us and thus served us with a feast and sang songs by Mirabai. Ten days after that, on December 25th, everyone celebrated Paramananda's 30th birthday.



Top right: Tripti Ma in Banagram Ashram in November 1984. Photo: Asgeir Arnesson.

Left: The famous Kali temple at Dakshineswar, Kolkata, where Sri Ramakrishna functioned as a priest under the patronage of Rani Rasmoni.

Above right: Belur Math as seen from the Ganges, where Swami Vivekananda and his brother disciples lived after the demise of Sri Ramakrishna. It is now the seat of the Ramakrishna Order. Both photos: BP 1984.

GLOSSARY (simplified)

darshan(a) – vision, view; also the term for ‘philosophy’ in India.

guru – ‘from darkness to light’; spiritual guide who dispels ignorance and confers wisdom.

Gurujī – loving address to spiritual guide. See *guru*.

Kali - the goddess Kali, a form of Shakti who is Shiva’s partner in mythology. When they are depicted together Shiva is lying on his back, sleeping (static), while Kali is dancing on his chest (dynamic).

Kali Mata – Mother Kali (the motherly aspect of Kali).

kundalini – ‘coiled up’; the central, ‘serpent-like’, power in man which is the cause of the development of the human body (through the serpent-like spinal cord) by its descent from the crown of the head through the spinal cord, and which remains ‘sleeping’ (and coiled up) at the tip of the tail bone after the completion of the body, and performs (passively) all the autonomous physical body functions from there, but which ascends (actively) through the spinal cord back to the starting point in the crown of the head if, or when, the individual has a spiritual awakening; basis for all physical and mental life in the human being.

Ma darshan – vision of Divine Mother (in this case, in the form of Sarada Ma). See *darshan*, *Sarada Ma*.

paramanna – Bengali sweet rice dish boiled with milk, raisins, cashew nuts and spices, preferably made with the very tiny, naturally sweet and scented rice called “Govinda”, which only grows in certain places alongside the Ganges; akin to the *khir* of North India.

Sarada Ma (1853 - 1920) - also known as **Sarada Devi**; the wife and spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, lived in Bengal.

sarod - Indian advanced string instrument.

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

sitar – highly advanced string instrument, which, together with the tabla is the most widely known Indian musical instrument in the world.

See *tabla*.

Sri Ramakrishna (1836 – 1886) - the most well-known Indian saint and avatar of modern times, who lived in Bengal and who by his *sadhana* united all the Indian spiritual traditions, and all the great religions of the World.

tabla – famous type of Indian drum or rhythmical instruments. See *sitar*.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.