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Bjørn and Paramananda, Moss, Norway 1989. 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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PROLOGUE

Dear Reader,

Who am I, really? - behind that name and identity by which society and everybody knows me?

From where have I come, and to where do I go when my present life is over?

What is this life and why?

Fundamental and existential questions like these have accompanied me always throughout my life, and it has been absolutely essential for me to solve them. I didn't reflect so much on God and didn't have much of a notion about "Him". To me, the final truth behind all that is known was the thing that really mattered. The search for the "Truth" with a capital "T" has always pulled me forward, deeper and higher. And on this most narrow of all paths I received help and guidance from a most close and dear friend, who in a way was the manifestation of that Truth I was searching for - from within my innermost being.

Here in this book I am sharing with you my knowledge and experiences gained from one of the most unique and remarkable human beings who has ever lived on this planet and who has still to become widely known to the world: **Swami Paramananda** is hereby introduced to readers in the West and the rest of the world beyond India. Simultaneously, from first to last, it is a description of my own inner landscape, because it is the only real frame of reference I have in my unbroken search for Truth.

At an early stage during the process of writing it became clear to me that if I should be absolutely honest and just to Paramananda in my description of him, there should never be any doubt on the part of the reader that the presentation would be my own, the author's, subjective view and experience. For, regardless of how we might choose to present matters like this, it will always, in some way or another, be influenced by the writer, the one making the portrayal. Complete objectivity will never be possible. Therefore, as a necessary consequence, I formed the narrative as an autobiography so that I should not try to write a biography of Swami Paramananda, something which would otherwise feel impossible to accomplish.

The major part of the manuscript of this book was written in the Spring of 2015 at Shantibu in Tronsvanglia, Alvdal, Norway, supported by notes and diaries that I had carefully preserved for many years. But then, during Spring 2017, it became necessary for me first to write the biography of Swami Sri Ananda Acharya (1881-1945) in conjunction with the centenary celebration of his arrival in Alvdal in 1917. That book had to come first because the two stories are connected. This will be evident from

the chapter in the present book that concerns Sri Ananda. Everything that concerns Paramananda comes solely from my own experiences with him, and from stories heard first hand that he himself told me about his life. Extremely rarely, wherever information is from other sources, this is clearly indicated.

Traditionally, those who have described great souls and so-called "holy persons", have, on account of their great reverence and respect, had the annoying habit of describing these in a far too serious and solemn way, and thereby immediately created a distance to the reader, so that after having read about such persons, the impression one is usually left with is that their life is completely faraway, out of reach, and out of the question for most others. This I have fully and completely avoided. My goal for my writing has at all times been to describe everything as authentically as possible, to enable recognition and contact with the reader. Such persons are always a lot nearer to you than you think!

Therefore, I hope that you, dear reader, will come to know Swami Paramananda, at least to some extent, and that you will, at the same time, find lessons from my own personal experiences in my search for Truth and in my company with Paramananda.

Good reading!

Tronsvanger Seter, Alvdal, Norway,
Summer 2021.

Bjørn Pettersen.



*Bjørn and Paramananda, Ranchi, Bihar, India,
June 1983. Photo: Devendranath.*

INDUCTION

The Condor of Transformation

It was night. I was sitting by my desk in my room on the first floor of my childhood home and was looking out of the open window with a gloomy mind. All the others in the house were sleeping and it was completely quiet. In front of me on the table was a sharp knife, which I intended to use on myself to put an end to my miserable life. In no way had I been able to find any meaning to my life, even though I had been trying actively since the age of fourteen - since that time when I myself had deliberately caused something bad to happen (though it was really nothing more than typical boyish pranks mixed with a little wilful destruction), and I had got into a serious confrontation with my parents, while my sister, Kristin, three years older, who had been a passive witness to everything, came to me at night afterwards while I was in bed soaked in tears and told me that in spite of all the horrible things that had happened, Jesus loved me.

I was converted there and then, and Jesus became my great ideal. But after many years frequenting various Christian communities I had become frustrated and tired of what I viewed as artificial, narrow minded, repressed, intolerant and condemning attitudes where almost everything was sin and sinful. So when I was twenty years old and came into contact with groups who used soft drugs, it felt only natural temporarily to set aside my Christianity of laws and rules and to explore the new world of cannabis without inhibitions and prejudices. An intense and rather freaky year followed with groundbreaking mental experiences and a radical change in my life. But not even here could I find any meaning, and when my exploration stopped after that year I felt even more of a stranger in this world than ever before.

It was the last day of May in my 21st year. There I was sitting in the dark night of my life, deeply absorbed in the hopeless thoughts of my life's total meaninglessness, and wished to bring an end to it "forever". I was sick with a sore throat and a fever of more than 40 degrees Celsius was steadily increasing. As I sat there and stared at the knife in front of me already unsheathed and ready for use, I fell deeper and deeper into a kind of meditative state, which again slipped into a kind of vision. Suddenly I saw myself grab the knife to slice open my arteries, and my intuition told me to slice along them and not crosswise as most people do and therefore fail. But first I wanted to tell the world the truth of this life, and it was to be written in the red ink of my own blood. With the tip of the knife I slit the artery of my left hand a little, dipped

a quill pen in the blood that seeped out and wrote with my red blood on stiff parchment. This was my testament - my message to the world - where, on the one side, I hailed the innocent animals who had always been my close friends, and, on the other, gave expression to my deep disappointment over human imperfection and the senselessness of human society. Like that I wrote and wrote, page after page, until, after many laborious hours and several hundred written pages, I felt it was finished. Then I laid aside the quill pen, took the knife again and quickly cut two huge slices along the arteries of both my arms. The pressure was enormous, and the blood spurted out like a fountain and sprayed the whole room. The blood pumped and pumped out, and everything, absolutely everything around me, became intensely red. I saw everything as through a beautiful, deep red haze and I felt that my strength was quickly ebbing out and that life was about to leave my body. Just then I felt some huge talons penetrating deep into my shoulders, and I saw a gigantic condor lifting me up from the chair and carry me on enormous wings up to the infinite blue above. I saw my room, childhood home, Jeløya and everything disappear far, far, below me, and then I remember nothing more.

What had happened? After what seemed an eternity, I found myself in bed, whole, and outside the sun was shining high in the sky. Had I not committed suicide after all? I examined my wrists again and again. Had I popped up in another dimension or on "the other side"? I could not understand anything - what in the world was all this? I was absolutely confident that I had been sitting at my desk with my knife and that I had actually slit my wrists. So how then had I ended up in bed, and why were there no cuts and no blood? It all seemed quite incomprehensible to me, and at once I felt really disappointed to wake up to this life again. But after this momentous experience I had a deep and thorough feeling of being born anew or having started afresh in life. Also, I was completely fever free and had recovered from the sore throat, and it felt kind of strange to be alive, as if everything was completely fresh. The "suicide" had certainly only occurred in my mind or solely on the mental plane. But to me it had felt like a physical reality, something that was the starting point and the intention behind this deed. Deepmost inside me I most certainly did not have the courage really to do anything as drastic and meaningless as suicide, which of course never solves any problem, but in my intense depression and hopelessness I had entered a self-hypnotic stage where most things are possible. The human mind contains everything and is a great mystery.

The Adder's Message

Less than a year later I undertook a three week strict fast. On the fifth day of the fast I went for a stroll in the forest. It was a beautiful spring day with radiant sunshine. After a while I reached one of the familiar and beloved beaches at the southern end of Jeløya island at Moss where I lived. Standing down at the water's edge, facing the sea, suddenly it was as if a strange wave of forgetfulness flowed over me, and when I turned and looked towards the forest, I felt as if I had been stranded on a desolate island a very long time ago. It was as if I had gone back in time, thousands of years before, and was the very first human to set foot on this beach. Everywhere silence prevailed in the early morning and I was completely alone in the beautiful nature, which appeared as if shrouded in mystery. Full of wonder I looked around as if I had never been there before and everything was unknown to me. I moved slowly but alertly from the pebbled sea-shore towards the forest above. A small path led me to passages in lava formations up to small, open ridges bathed in sunshine.

And there, in the middle of the path, a fully grown adder was basking in the spring sun after a cold winter in hibernation. When it became aware of me it coiled up and looked at me with a raised head. Cautiously I went near and sat down quietly in front of it while speaking gently to it in my mind. And thus we were sitting calmly in front of each other while gazing deeply into each other's eyes, and the adder was moving its head slowly from side to side all the while. I concentrated to not focus my gaze, but with the snake in the centre I tried to keep my attention on the whole visual field simultaneously. Thus I sat motionless, half meditating, fully absorbed in the present, while the adder led me into a kind of vision.

I have no idea for how long we were sitting thus in deep communication, because the feeling of time eventually disappeared, but what this snake told me or showed me is almost indescribable. An incredible feeling of unity with all life was growing stronger and stronger in me. Everything around me was like branches or extensions of myself, and I of them again - all intimately interwoven by a fine, transparent network of glistening, silky threads, like a three dimensional, all-encompassing cobweb. And these

threads were like straight lines that went all over the world. It was such a wonderful fellow feeling of unity with all life where all belonged to each other and were connected in an equal and unitary reality. Finally, my body could not remain in this state any longer, and I prayed a silent prayer of gratitude and farewell to my good friend of wisdom who just then stopped its sideways head movement and instead gave me a consenting nod. At that moment I had fully regained my senses, and I rose slowly and went from there in such a careful and gentle way such as I had never moved before. Suddenly I was so extremely afraid that I should come to tread on any ant or grass or anything else of God's inconceivably precious life.

This happened in spring 1977 when I was in my 22nd year, I was reviewing my situation and it was time to decide what I wanted to do with my life and to strike out in that direction. For a long time I had been thinking that I had gone to school for so many years without learning anything of real value to me as a human being - something that would be valuable to myself. Everything should only be of importance to society - to a kind of 'economical solitaire' which would work out at our expense. Nowhere had I learnt anything of how I could master my mind and my body, and get to know myself. And never, while growing up, had I any friend, nor environment or impulses that could have stimulated me this way. This was before the alternative movement had established itself in Norway and before New Age came along with its multitude of "spiritual" offers and spiritual circus. What was known at that time was "hippies" and "freaks" who travelled to ashrams in India to receive spiritual guidance from various gurus. The only knowledge I had about India and yoga was a very simple book on Hatha-Yoga written by a South Indian, which I had read at the age of fifteen, but which awoke an enormous longing in me and made a deep impression.

After the fast in April that year as mentioned above, I therefore decided to leave all of the old and familiar, and to travel out into the big wide world in search of a person who could help me finding myself and provide answers to all my pressing philosophical questions about life. I had a faint intuition that somewhere or other someone would be there who could help me, and I took a decision that would change my entire life.

GLOSSARY

ashram – spiritual centre or community.

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

hatha-yoga – the yoga that harmonizes the two different sides of the physical body, by physical exercises and manipulation of breath; the most well-known form of yoga in the West.

Paramananda - 'Full Bliss' or 'Absolute Joy' or 'Complete Ecstasy'.

yoga – 'conjunction'; spiritual science that unites the individual with the universal in the human being; the second of the six main philosophical systems of India, established by Rishi Patanjali.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.