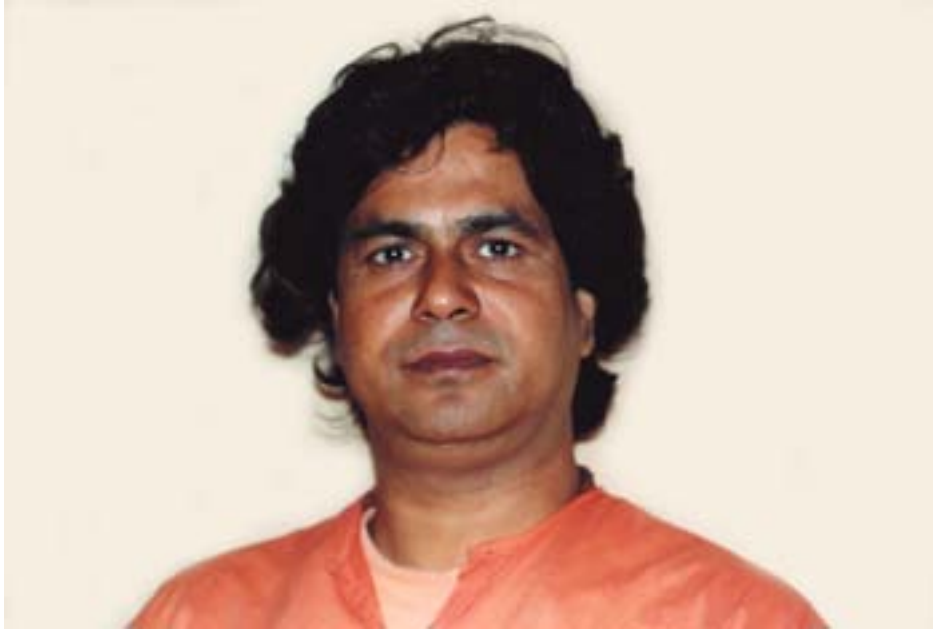




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Swami Paramananda, Shantibu, Norway 1993. Photo: BP.

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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Within Paramananda's Aura

Three years since our previous visit, Asgeir and I again landed as planned at Calcutta, from Norway via Moscow. During the stay at the airport hotel in Moscow we happened to become acquainted with a Bengali couple from Salt Lake in Calcutta, a doctor by the name of Sailendra Datta and his wife Ila, who had been visiting relatives in Germany. I first spotted them from behind in the dining room because Ila Datta caught the eye with her unusually long hair which was hanging loose and actually nearly touched the floor as she walked. So her hair was just as long as she was tall, and apart from Balyogi in South India I had never seen such long hair before. As they both looked very likeable and forthcoming, I most unusually took the courage to initiate a conversation. Soon we became friends and they invited me to their home in Salt Lake, where I later visited them together with Sobbo. I had told them about Paramananda and the Banagram ashram, and so one weekend soon afterwards they visited there and were greatly impressed. Ever since they have been avid followers of Paramananda, and some of the most important supporters of the Paramananda Mission in Calcutta.

Trishan received Asgeir and myself at the airport, and from there we went directly to Banagram ashram where Paramananda was waiting for us. As always, it was indescribably wonderful to meet Paramananda, who literally smiled like the sun, and as usual all things came in order after meeting him in his physical form. As soon as I was alone with him in his hut at night, in his inimitable way he solved all the problems that I had felt in my mind while in Norway.

Such a typical meeting with him alone in his room would often occur when I would come to his hut after being called by him, as I would never go on my own initiative, because I was always very careful not to disturb him. As usual he would sit on his simple earthen bed, and he would immediately ask me to bolt the door behind me so that we would not be interrupted (because, as already mentioned, there is absolutely no sense of privacy in India – if people sense that the door is open, they will just pour in to do *pranam*). Then with great friendliness he would ask me to sit.

As a rule, out of my natural modesty, I would respectfully sit on the floor in front of him, but very often he would insist on me sitting just beside him on his bed. He would always smile and beam like the sun, and look at

me with his most wonderful, loving gaze, as if nothing in the whole world could give him more joy than to see me. Like that he would sit in tranquility, with an enormous aura which was almost tangible. My head would often be full of thoughts and questions as I entered his hut, but as soon as I sat there before him and smiled a little shyly back to him, because I found his smile so incredibly infectious, all of my thoughts and mental disturbances literally vanished into thin air. It was an almost unearthly experience to sit there in front of him, and I always immediately felt as if my mind was vacuum-cleaned – it became a vacuum – and my concentration became completely focused in the *ajñachakra*, or the so-called “third eye” in the forehead.

To me it was enough just to sit like that in silent, loving communion, and look at this most wonderful human being in front of me. But Paramananda would always break the silence and say, almost a little shyly: “Bjørn, say something!” And to me it would always feel terribly difficult to say anything, either because I could not find anything to talk about, or because I felt that words were completely superfluous, or I was about to become that much absorbed that suddenly to think, formulate and utter some words felt like the most difficult thing in the world! So Paramananda would always come to my assistance and start saying something himself. And then he would always pick up those thoughts and questions that had occupied my mind just before entering his room but which had vanished from my mind in his immediate presence, whereupon he would give the most simple, clear and wonderfully inspiring explanations and answers to all the questions and problems.

Such was Paramananda – or at least that was in part the way I experienced him. He was a most unique human being to whom no description can do justice. All the time he was so incredibly friendly, caring and obliging, and was always safety and wisdom itself. At these visits to his hut, as a rule, he would always shower presents of sweets and fruits upon me, which he had been given by visiting devotees during the day. And he always knew what I liked and that I was especially fond of Bengali sweets made from milk. So if anybody offered him these sweetmeats, he would always save them for me. And when I was there with him, he would find them and eagerly bid me to eat them while he would say most generously: “Bjørn, eat – eat! This will not harm you in any way. Eat – eat more!” And then he would load my plate and see to it that I ate everything and became full. Absolutely fantastic! Paramananda only gave and gave in every way.

One day in the middle of October 1987, something enormous happened that is practically almost impossible to write about. Asgeir and I had been lodging in the east room of the office building where we spent much of our time in meditation together. One morning after bathing, while Paramananda sat outside his hut as usual and talked to visitors and others in *satsanga*, Asgeir and I were both in deep meditation in our room. For quite a long time I had had very good meditations in which my mind was completely absorbed into a unity. When this occurred, I had no consciousness of my body. The blood circulation, breath and heartbeat were reduced to an absolute minimum, and all of the sense apparatus had been indrawn and had come to absolute rest. In my mind all activities had subsided, and there was no consciousness of time or place, name or form. As my *sadhana* was *jñanayoga* and I meditated without any *ishta* or image (picture or symbol), and also without mantra, my mind was an abstract unity.

While I was fully absorbed in this way, something suddenly happened – as if someone should have flipped a switch – something completely, completely different which is impossible to describe, simply because there are no words, and because there cannot be any words. I can only say one thing – there was no more mind.

In this world the mind is everything. All that we perceive and experience, we perceive and experience through the mind. The mind is the medium through which go all the impressions in life; the sense impressions from the physical world, and all their processing by thoughts, feelings, reasoning, etc. in the mental world. Without the mind there is no creation and no universe – the whole Cosmos disappears! And all the words of all the languages in the whole world are sound utterances which impart perceptions, ideas, impressions, thoughts, feelings, imaginations, symbols, experiences, etc. from the physical and the mental world – all through the mind. Without the mind there is no frame of reference to anything, and therefore it is impossible to describe something that is without mind. If we try, we immediately understand that it will be wrong. From the very start if, for example, we try to use words about it like a ‘state’, or a ‘dimension’, or an ‘experience’, or the like, we fail completely, because these words refer to known concepts that have to do with the mind, which we can understand through the mind. But something without mind, with all that it refers to, we cannot possibly think of it – thought doesn’t reach there – so therefore it is also impossible to describe it.

However, so that we should be able to talk about it at all (without saying anything about what it really is), we have been given a word in Sanskrit by the ancient rishis of India as a guide,

and that word is *turiya*, which in the European languages usually is translated as ‘transcendence’, which only denotes that the mind has been transcended, i.e. beyond mind. In *turiya, tattwamasi* – “That thou art” – is a reality, and much more than that cannot be said about it. But one can speak about the circumstances around it and the life afterwards, even if it is necessarily a diversion and not the real thing. One can say everything that it is not, as, for instance, that it is not light, but also not darkness; it is not life, but also not death, and so on ad infinitum, but one can never say what it really is! However, it may be acceptable to denote it as the source of life – the static potentiality from where everything eventually comes into life and dynamic being.

Later, after both Asgeir and I had come back to our senses, but still sat quietly on the same spot, the ashram’s skilful homeopathic doctor, Dipti or Swami Boomananda, came up to us, radiant with joy, and said that Paramananda had just told his audience that Asgeir just now had had very good meditation and was in *turiya*. I didn’t know what had happened to Asgeir, and at that time the word ‘*turiya*’ didn’t mean anything to me, but I certainly knew what had just happened to me, and without saying anything in reply to Dipti I took it as a confirmation from Paramananda of what had just “happened” to me. The very first thought which appeared in my mind afterwards, when again my mind had become active, was that this was the “state” or “reality” that Paramananda was in or aware of all the time.

Asgeir and I never talked about this with one another, and I also never talked about it to anyone else, not even to Paramananda. Not until he had come to Norway for the first time and we sat alone together at Shantibu in Alvdal. Then suddenly one day Paramananda himself brought it up and asked me cautiously if I could describe what had happened to me “that time” in Banagram. I understood at once what he was aiming at, and for a moment I tried to search in my mind for words because I so very much wanted to give expression to it. I even opened my mouth to try to say something, but in the same moment I realized that it was completely futile, and only shook my head in resignation and said smilingly: “No, it is completely impossible!” “Yes, it is impossible”, Paramananda consented, also smilingly, while he continued: “It is that which is called *turiya* and it happened by *guru kripa* (the blessing of the guru).”

After this “happening” meditation no longer had any meaning to me – everything was like meditation and there was no special meditation – and my intense, restless longing vanished – it had been fully satisfied. What I had been searching I found. I knew “who” I was or “what” I was, and I knew what everything revolved around in life. I had no longer any agony or headache about myself, about God or about Life as such. I knew many things – I knew everything that was really worth knowing. But apart from that everything continued as before. Nobody else knew what had

happened, and I didn't feel any need that they should. It was only Paramananda who knew what I knew. The knowledge that he had described to me in his letter just a little more than three months earlier (02.07.1987) and which he called *brahmajñana*, had now become my very life and his words to me had come true.

Visit by Friends from Norway

At this time I became acquainted with more of Paramananda's sannyasins, like Swami Pragyananda who we called "Mihir", Swami Shankarananda, Swami Atmananda and Swami Krishnananda. Swami Bhagavatanda I had met last time, and Swami Nishkamananda ("Murari"), Swami Keshabananda ("Mama"), Swami Boomananda ("Dipti"), Pabitra Prana ("Tapi Ma") and Yogu Ma were permanent residents of the ashram. Tripti Ma (Samhita Prana) was then near Howrah outside Calcutta to investigate the possibility of starting a women's ashram there. But she went to Banagram now and then, and we met again on October 27th in a very happy reunion after a very long time. All of them, except for Yogu Ma, were clad in *gerrhua* – the traditional saffron coloured clothes of a sannyasin in India – while I was wearing the usual white of a *brahmachari* or novice. As I spent my time with these sannyasins every day, often in intimate conversations, I felt like being more similar to them also in outward appearance.



Anne Siri Rodum (left), Bjørn in *gerrhua* (middle) and Mihir (Swami Prajñananda), in Bjørn's room in Banagram ashram, November 1987. Photo: Torleif Sund.

So once, when Paramananda was travelling in Bengal, and I went with Sobbo and his family who had been visiting Banagram back to their home in Seoraphulli, accompanied also by Tarun, Swami Purnananda and Tapi Ma, we all decided that Sobbo's wife Ranu should dye my clothes *gerrhua*. I thought that now I would try to feel how it is to be a sannyasin – if I would feel any differently. But most of all I wanted to be like one of them, and last time I was in India Paramananda had certainly given me *gerrhua* and said that I could wear it if I liked. So I thought this was a good opportunity to try it. In India it is a very serious matter to give *sannyasa* and *gerrhua* clothes to anyone, and it can only be given by one who is himself a sannyasin and is competent to initiate others. Not just anyone can wear these clothes – it will not be accepted. There were many who didn't know that Paramananda had already given me *sannyasa* almost three years earlier. *Sannyasa* actually means a three day long ritual, and nobody there had seen me in such a ritual or any ritual at all for that matter. But when I returned to Banagram it was nicely approved of by all there. Only one person reacted with scepticism and that was the devotee and police officer Biplob, who was of the opinion that I had taken *sannyasa* from Ranu!

The reason why I went with Sobbo to Seoraphulli was to go with him to the airport in Calcutta to receive my friend Torleif and his live-in partner, the nurse Anne Siri, who were to arrive by plane from Norway. They arrived a day late on Monday November 9th, and after staying overnight at Sobbo's home we went on to Banagram the next day, where Paramananda had returned and was awaiting us. When he



Sannyasins and orphan boys together with a few village boys in the ashram, November 1987. Left, standing, Swami Tapeswarananda, Swami Sahajananda (Hari) and Pradip – the very first orphan boy in the ashram. Far right, standing, Swami Chitbilasananda (Madhan). These three sannyasins used to be in charge of the orphan boys. Both Tapeswarananda and Madhan have since left their bodies. Note the construction of pillars in the background for the first school building of the ashram. Photo: Torleif Sund.

heard that Torleif and Anne Siri were not married but were living together as a couple, he smilingly commented: "Oh, very advanced!" Otherwise, this kind of arrangement was unheard of in India at that time, completely unthinkable and unacceptable. So Torleif and Anne Siri quickly found when introduced to village people and others it was much easier for them to say they were married than to try to explain the meaning of live-in partnership!

Almost every night of the following days Torleif, Anne Siri, Asgeir, myself and sometimes also Mihir, spent with Paramananda in his hut. Torleif was considerably more talkative than me and always had lots of questions about everything between heaven and earth, so the lively conversations went on throughout the night. On one of these nights Paramananda called me before the others to give me some good, personal, advice. He said many things, and then suddenly he said that I was a yogi with *samskaras* (impressions) from the Himalayas. I silently noted what he said and then there was nothing more said about it. Then the others came and we had a very nice time as usual. Often we talked about Norway and Paramananda coming there. In a letter that I wrote to him in December 1986, I let him know that I was prepared, as soon as he was ready, to come to India and fetch him, so that he wouldn't have to travel alone to Norway. In his letter of reply in February 1987 he wrote that he had not yet decided when he was going to leave and that he would let me know the date later. Since then there had been no more discussion on the subject – until now when it was again raised and brought up to date.

Torleif and Anne Siri stayed for a total of four weeks. The last week of their stay I went with them on a little round trip. First, with Sobbo, we visited the Tattwamasi Ashram in Singur, which, as already mentioned, was a branch of the Paramananda Mission, and then we visited the childhood home of Anandacharya in Hooghly

and Bandel Church where he went to school. Thereafter, with Trishan and Tripti Ma, we visited Dakshineswar and Belur Math and lastly, to conclude the tour, the two of them took us to see various sights in Calcutta. Torleif and Anne Siri left on December 7th, on an overnight flight back to Norway. After their departure I travelled, via Bally and Seoraphulli, to Tapaban Ashram in Raina which Paramananda had started a few years before and where Swami Purnananda was the head. Asgeir arrived the next day with Purnananda who had brought him from Banagram, and he showed the two of us the nearby sashan where Paramananda had done *sadhana* before he had gone to Banagram for the first time.

Purnananda was a few years older than us, with thick, curly, hair and beard, and had a pleasantly striking look. He was always very calm and meditative, with a nice, composed, bearing, and to us from the West he looked like the very archetype of a sannyasin. But he could also be lively and playful, with a very good sense of humour. In addition he spoke excellent English and was always very kind and helpful. Often he would follow Paramananda on his journeys in Bengal, and we noticed that Paramananda used to address him by the Muslim name "Hazrat". When we asked the reason for this we learned that it was because Purnananda was not so fond of Muslims and had actually belonged to a fanatic Hindu organization which used to convert Muslims to Hinduism, before meeting Paramananda. So to tease him a little for that, Paramananda used to call him "Hazrat"!

However, there is a beautiful story pertaining to the *sadhana* life of Purnananda which he himself has told me in writing and which I can only summarise briefly here. Before Purnananda had been placed at Raina he had spent a year in the ashram of Swami Baulananda, the guru of Paramananda, at Perantapalli, approaching the source of the river Godavari, deep inside the jungle of Andhra

Pradesh. Baulananda had already left his body at that time, but his disciples and devotees maintained the ashram, called “Ramakrishna Hermitage”. A most wonderful atmosphere used to reign there, and Paramananda called it ‘Gupta Brindavan’ or ‘Hidden Brindavan’.

One day a most ferocious storm struck the idyllic place. When Purnananda roused from his routine meditation in the afternoon, and stepped out from his cottage to the loud sound of thunder, he witnessed nature already in the dire grip of havoc. The usually gentle hillside brook falling on the rocks just outside the walls had turned into a violent stream with several big trees falling into it and its waters pushing large boulders towards the Godavari river farther down. At first Purnananda enjoyed the scene and sat down on a chair on the verandah to observe it all.

But when several streams broke off from the violent brook and engulfed the cottage, he felt that it was not safe anymore to stay there. Huge thunderclaps and roaring nature in violent commotion sounded all around, and soon the pitch darkness of night would draw in. As he realized that his cottage could break down any minute he looked for a sheltered place to spend the night. But as soon as he left the verandah he was caught by the rushing waters and was swept downstream, only barely managing to get hold of a pointed rock on which he could sit. Behind him was a very big rock on whose back the streaming water was crashing ferociously producing a spray that was drenching him. Suddenly darkness fell and he was not able to see anything, all the while getting wet, and with an empty stomach that had not been fed since morning.

The thudding sound of falling trees and the crashing of rocks continued through the seemingly endless night, which apparently refused to pass, and he felt as if he would slip down from the rock and fall into the water at any time. From within his heart a prayer arose to save his body, and he prayed to Paramananda for the well-being of several mothers who were in the ashram below. But in that highly dramatic and insecure situation, facing death at any moment, he also felt a deep pain that his life has been wasted and that he had lost his guru. So darkness prevailed both inside and outside. His body was completely drenched and he could only feel a bit of warm current flowing through the spine, but there was a time that he really could not feel his body at all. Thus the night went on, and a snake also passed over his body during this time. Much later some faint light was finally breaking in front of his eyes while the heavy rains gradually diminished and the ferocious roaring and thunderous sounds disappeared. He had to pinch himself to confirm that he was still alive!

Shortly after this event, when Purnananda had left Perantapalli and returned to Banagram ashram, he learned from Tapi Ma that Paramananda had said during a *satsanga*,

while his running nose was making towel after towel sopping wet, that “Anup [Purnananda’s childhood name] is in trouble. He is somehow sitting on a rock, all surrounded by water”. At their first meeting after Purnananda’s return Paramananda had not said anything to Purnananda, but one night as they walked back to the ashram from the village alone, Paramananda broke the silence and enquired about the tour to Perantapalli.

Purnandanda answered with a question: “Don’t you know?” and poked him playfully at the side of his belly. Then Paramananda lifted him high up in the air like a child and said: “I will throw you into the pond! Do you know my chest got pain through blocking the boulders and rocks? There were towels after towels which got wet with my running nose!” Purnananda then remembered that even after being wet for so long he did not catch a cold and also that he felt no pain in his body, so he said: “Guruji, keeping all the pains aside, there remains the greatest pain that even after meditating so much I could not remain as a witness. That is my biggest defeat.” Paramananda then said: “You have got a new life now. After this event, there will come once more a tormenting life challenging moment in your life. Remain calm during that period.” And after Paramananda had left his body Purnananda faced that tormenting experience.

Asgeir and I stayed with our good friend and guru-brother Purnananda in the Raina ashram for three days and then returned to Banagram.



Paramananda in Banagram ashram, November 1987. Photo: Torleif Sund.



Swami Paramananda in front. Behind from the left: Swami Swarupananda, Soumen, Nagen from Banagram village, Swami Tapeswarananda, Swami Keshabananda, and Swami Purnananda far right. Banagram ashram, November 1987. Photo: Torleif Sund.



Above: Trishan (later Swami Parameswarananda) in Calcutta, December 1987, A very rare photo at that time as Trishan never allowed anyone to take his picture, because, as he said, he didn’t want to leave anything behind when he left this world. Photo: Anne Siri Rodum.

Right: Anne Siri and Bjørn outside Anandacharya’s room in the big family house in Hooghly, December 1987. Photo: Torleif Sund.





Torleif, Anne Siri, Sobbo and Bjørn visiting the childhood home of Anandacharya in Hooghly, beginning of December 1987. Top left, we arrive at Baral Lane by rickshaw. The huge old family house lies in this lane. Top right, we are inside the big garden which extends down to the Ganges. The two pictures above, we are inside the spacious courtyard in front of the family Krishna & Radha temple. The decay of the buildings is enormous compared to what we can learn of their earlier condition from the autobiographical texts of Anandacharya, and the huge house is now entirely rented out to a variety of unrelated families. All photos: Torleif Sund.

GLOSSARY (simplified)

- ajñā-chakra** – the seat of mind; popularly known as the “Third Eye”; the sixth centre of the astral body, corresponding to the pituitary gland in the ‘endocrine orchestra’ of the physical body.
- brahmajñāna** – ‘knowledge of Brahman’; God-Realization.
- guru kripa** – the blessing of the guru.
- ishṭa** – ‘idol’ or ‘imago’; object of worship and devotion.
- jñāna-yoga** – the yoga of wisdom; one of the major forms of yoga in which traditionally the power of the intellect’s discernment is the main factor; the science which demonstrates that by self-knowledge, self-control, and self-reverence the human being can attain the highest end of life, and which teaches a system of self-development through the expansion of the understanding, with a view to transcend the limitations of nature and mind.
- pranam** – respectful greeting, found in various forms and variations.
- sadhana** – ‘which leads straight to the goal’; a person’s spiritual search or quest for truth (which involves personal commitment and practice); the collected effort – physically, emotionally and spiritually – for the realization of life’s end.
- samskara** – impression (in the mind).
- satsanga** – ‘gathering for truth’; a popular type of company with questions and answers, between guru and disciples or spiritual head and audience.
- tattvamasi** – “That Thou art”; one of the most famous formulas from the Upanishads and the Vedanta philosophy, and a much used mantra.
- Trishan** – one of the closest male disciples of Paramananda, who later took the sannyasi name **Swami Parameshwarananda**. Born 19th April 1957.
- 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.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.