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Swami Paramananda at Konarak, Orissa, India, 1990. 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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THE UNIVERSITY OF PEACE AT MT. TRON

Tripti Ma goes to Norway

Most of my time in India during this stay was spent preparing for Tripti Ma to come to Norway. At Shantibu I had confided to Paramananda that I regarded my hermit life as over and that I did not like to continue living there alone. I imagined a small ashram life with a few members, perhaps three or four, but I had not thought too deeply about it. We shared views back and forth about all the possible candidates among our friends both in Norway and in India, but after a while I understood that Paramananda preferred to send one of his own from Banagram. Lastly, to my great surprise, Paramananda suggested Tripti Ma. I could never have thought it possible. My respect and admiration for her was very great and I regarded her as one of his more advanced disciples, who I knew would be an enormous asset wherever she would be. She and I were already good friends, and at that time she, together with Mihir, were possibly the only ones among Paramananda's disciples who possessed a passport. When I told him that once she had confided in me that she had a wish to visit Norway, he said that it definitely had to be her. He therefore suggested that I talked with her as soon as we arrived in Banagram.

At that time Tripti Ma was very busy establishing a women's ashram in Karimpur, far north in Nadia District, near the border with Bangladesh. But she sometimes visited Banagram to discuss the development of the ashram with Paramananda. Therefore, I would only be able to talk with her during one of these visits. When, after a long wait, we finally met, she first said that going to Norway was completely out of the question from her side as she was far too busy in Karimpur. However, after discussing the matter with Paramananda, it became clear that she would come back with me to Norway when I returned there from India. Paramananda wanted her to help with the work there for establishing the University of Peace. So, just as I had done for Paramananda the previous year, I had to make all the necessary preparations for her concerning visa application, health attestation, air ticket, etc., which meant several months of work, travelling and waiting. Money for her plane ticket had to be collected from friends in India. At that time a written invitation guaranteeing maintenance was sufficient for foreigners from the Third World to obtain a one year residence permit in Norway. Paramananda was permitted to stay in Norway under this regulation, and Tripti

Ma would be one of the very last to enjoy this liberty, because from January 1st 1991 completely new rules were applied that severely tightened the previous rules.

In connection with her application for a residence permit in Norway, I needed to travel twice to Karimpur and once to Delhi. When in Delhi, I wished to see a certain woman that Paramananda had told me about, who had been raised by wild bears in the Himalayas, and who was now in the care of one of Mother Theresa's centres in Delhi. A kind of "Mowgli story" from real life, which is known to happen from time to time in India. Paramananda had met this woman once in that centre, and he described her to me and related her incredible story.

Somehow or other the woman, while still a small child, had become separated from her parents in the Himalayas and had been adopted by two bears, who actually managed to raise her to adulthood. When a hunter shot the two bears outside their cave many years later, to his utter amazement and alarm, suddenly a naked, human-like creature with huge, matted hair came out of the cave, roared like a bear, bared her teeth and charged him running on all fours. Terrified, he ran away from there. When he came back to his village he assembled several men and together they went back to the cave and caught the bear-woman in a net, and then handed her over to the sisters in the Mother Theresa Order of nuns. Naturally the woman had no language, and she had to learn to live with people, to dress, eat human food, use a toilet, walk on two legs and everything else that a human child learns. In the centre in Delhi she was kept in a cage as she was considered a danger to the other people there. She only made bear sounds.

I wanted to see her, and so on August 30th, Tyagiji and I spent the whole day searching in the streets of Delhi for the Mother Theresa Centre. It was *lu* – a hot wind – bringing a heatwave from the Rajasthan desert that day and the thermometer registered 48 degrees centigrade in the shade. After some hours outdoors in that heat, with nothing to drink, my thirst eventually became insane and I was in immediate danger of serious dehydration, so I felt that I had to drink something quickly. Just at that time there was nothing else to be found than ice cold soft drinks from a street stall. I knew that it would be dangerous to drink something ice cold, but there were no other drinks available. Since I could see no other option in the vicinity I bought a bottle. I was thinking I would just sip slowly from the bottle and warm the liquid up in my

mouth before swallowing, but I was quite desperate with thirst and could not manage to control myself. Once the liquid entered my mouth I could not resist the flow – I only wanted more and more and could not drink fast enough. Thus the whole bottle was emptied in seconds, and only God knows why I didn't fall to the ground with a heart attack on the spot. Actually I felt nothing untoward then, but a few hours later, after coming back to Tyagiji's home in Brij Vihar, I got a high fever with the symptoms of having caught a cold. Before returning to the home, we had managed to find the address of the centre but the organization had moved away to a place in quite another part of the city, so we gave up any further search and my wish to see this woman was not fulfilled.

The next day I travelled back to Calcutta by train which took nearly twenty hours and then immediately took another train and bus to Karimpur which took another seven or eight hours, in order to visit Tripti Ma. I suffered with a high fever, headache and nausea the whole way. Once in Karimpur I was bedridden for a whole week before I summoned up enough courage to travel back to Calcutta to see my doctor friend in Salt Lake. He took me to a nearby private clinic for X-Ray and the pictures showed a fully developed pneumonia. Thus I remained with the Datta family in Salt Lake for more than two weeks and received their medical treatment and heartfelt care. For the first few days the doctor gave me heavy doses of antibiotics but that made my body so extremely



heavy and feeble that I could hardly talk.

So, after three days on this cure I said very clearly that I didn't want to have any more of that "nonsense medicine". As usual I was reluctant to take any form of allopathic medicine. But now I was living in the home of an allopathic doctor and receiving treatment from him, perhaps more as a friend than a patient, so it was quite hard for me to refuse the medicine. But as I felt all vitality was leaving my body, I had to do something. When Ila Ma, the mother of the house, saw that I reacted in such a way, she called her father who was a homeopathic doctor, but the medicines from him also did not seem to work, at least not quickly enough. So naturally there arose great worry about my condition. Then, after finding no other solution, Ila Ma very secretly mixed small doses of antibiotic in my food, and that eventually saved my life. More than 20 years later she admitted that to me!

One day during that time – on October 18th 1990 – during one of my many errands to Calcutta to arrange for Tripti Ma's going to Norway, to my great wonder and utter amazement I saw that the streets of Calcutta were practically empty. It was really weird to experience such an enormous city, which otherwise was completely packed and overcrowded with people and vehicles, like a human ant hill, as if empty and deserted. How it was practically possible I have no idea, but it happened the day Nelson Mandela came to town!

Left: Ila Ma at her home in Salt Lake, Calcutta, December 17th 1994. The floor-length hair has been cut, but is still fairly long.

Below: The Datta family outside their home at Salt Lake, 1990. From left, (late) Sailen, Ila Ma, Babusona and Rinku. Their house was always like a home to me whenever in Calcutta. Their hospitality and care knew no bounds. I also brought lots of friends there, both Indian and foreign, over the years, even my own father in 2003, and they always took good care of them all! Both photos: BP.



When I was to buy the ticket for Tripti Ma's flight to Norway from the Aeroflot office in Calcutta, I again stayed with the Datta family at Salt Lake. For many months all the money needed for the ticket had been carefully collected from many of Paramananda's friends and followers. By Indian standards, especially at that time, it represented a considerable amount of money. I kept it all in my wallet inside a small bag inside my Indian shoulder bag. Of course I was well aware of the many pickpockets in town as I had been well instructed many years before always to be aware of my shoulder bag while travelling anywhere in India. I took the city bus from Salt Lake into town to the ticket office. Anyone who has travelled by bus in Calcutta during the daytime knows that one has to stand completely packed in like sardines in a tin and be fully occupied with just trying to hold on to something with both hands due to the rough driving and the extreme traffic. I therefore had to try to hold on as best as I could with both my hands to a horizontal pole fixed to the roof, while people came and went by wriggling their way through the completely packed and sweaty mass of bodies. So even if I was aware of my money and shoulder bag, there were moments where I could not fully focus on them.

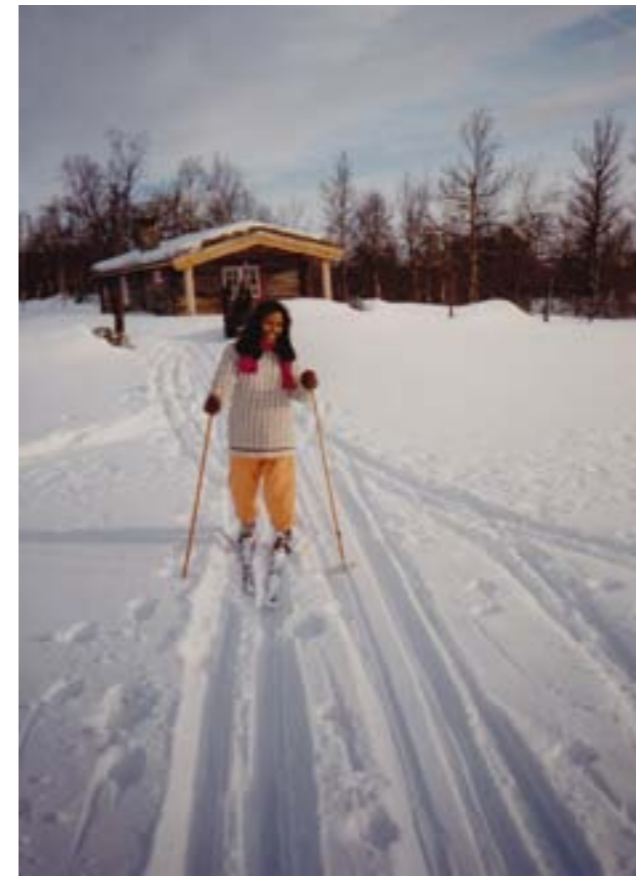
At one of the stops, for some reason or other, I noticed one particular man when he got off the bus. He wriggled his way through the crowd of people outside and came close to the window where I was standing inside the bus. There he turned and looked straight into my eyes, put his palms together and greeted me very rever-

ently in *pranam*. And thus he stood unmoving until the bus drove on. I was quite used to people, whom I didn't know, casually, on the street and elsewhere, sometimes making *pranam* to me, because of my style of dress they would see me as a sadhu – a truth seeker. But still I felt there was something else with this particular poor looking man. When I left the bus at the stop near the ticket office, my hand automatically went into my shoulder bag to check my belongings, and only then did I find that my wallet, money, passport and all the other things were no longer there. I found instead only a big square hole near the bottom of the bag, carefully cut by a razor blade.

Instantly I felt a shock to my mind – as if I could not believe it was true or really happened – and thereafter I felt anger towards that man, because I had no doubt that it was the man who made *pranam* to me from outside the bus who was the thief. But after thinking about the whole incident for a while I understood that the man must have been very poor, probably with a huge family to maintain, and that he needed the money much more than we did. So I came to terms with it and calmed down and instead called my parents in Norway and asked them to help me in the awkward situation, as there was no more time to start a new collection among friends in India. They sent the needed sum of money through bank transfer. A little delayed I could therefore finally buy the air ticket for Tripti Ma. We left India together on the same day as my Indian visa expired and arrived in Oslo and Moss the next day, on December 7th, exactly six months after my arrival in India.



TriptiMa, December 1990 at Shantibu, Alvdal. It was minus 20 degrees Centigrade when the picture was taken, but from TriptiMa only a big smile! Photo: BP.



TriptiMa tries skiing at Hummeldalen, Os. Photo: Torleif Sund.



TriptiMa in the home of Torleif and Anne Siri at Os, with baby Sandra on her lap. Photo: Anne Siri Rodum.

Paramananda had come to Norway at the peak of Summer and the warmest time of the year, but Tripti Ma came to Alvdal in midwinter at the darkest time of the year with lots of snow and nearly minus thirty degrees – straight from sub-tropical Bengal to the heart of Arctic winter Norway! But she met this situation with a smile and adapted incredibly well, and never once complained about the cold. The only time I can remember she uttered anything about the cold was when we went to the famous market of Røros in February, along with Kari Ada, to try to sell some hand made products by Tripti Ma to be able to buy some food – beautifully hand painted post cards, calendars and tablecloths. It was a wonderfully bright and cloudless day with the low sun of winter, and thirty degrees below zero. Even if Tripti Ma was well dressed for the cold, as a seller she had to remain standing at her outdoor stall in the street, and after a while she looked at me with a mixture of surprise

and alarm and exclaimed: “Oh Bjørn, my feet are burning!” For the very first time in her life she experienced that strong cold paradoxically may feel like a burning sensation.

Much later, during the thaw of spring and when the snow melted at Shantibu, Tripti Ma was quick in finding mattock and spade from the shed. Her intention was to transform the untreated and rough forest floor of Shantibu into a cultivated garden of flower beds and grass lawns. The soil there was so barren and poor that we had to gather soil by wheelbarrow from bogs in the forest, and also the first flowers there were wild flowers from the forest. As the years rolled by Tripti Ma's colourful and luxuriant flower garden at 700 metres altitude inside the forest earned renown, and has been a constant delight for all visitors to Shantibu during the summer months through to late autumn.



TriptiMa enjoyed skiing. Here during snowfall at Tronsvangen, during winter 1991. Both photos: BP.





TriptiMa starting to make a garden at Shantibu immediately after the thaw in May 1991. She was barely able to lift the heavy pickhoe above her head, but when TriptiMa has decided anything it must be carried through! We made one big investment that year and that was the purchase of a wheelbarrow for NOK 150. It was kept busy carrying bog soil and wild flowers from the surrounding forest. Until then Shantibu had only been part of the surrounding forest floor, but with the tenacious labour of TriptiMa it got a new shape with a new, colourful content. Bjørn broke loose slabs of slate from beside the nearby brook, which were laid down on the lawn from the gate to the entrance door. All photos: BP 1991.

*In the summer of 1992 we cultivated the meadow at Gaurisankarseter, where Swami Sri Ananda Acharya had lived from 1917 to 1945, high up at Tronsvangen in Alvdal, at about 850 metres. The soil was rich and the growth good, but on account of the cold temperatures at night, which sometimes went below zero, we had to use fibre cloth as protection. We grew a variety of vegetables at the upper end of the field, and potatoes on the rest. A completely black species of viper (*Vipera berus*), the only poisonous snake species in Norway, also thrived there (photo: Johnny Plåt). Cultivation was exclusively by manual labour (without any machines) and it was a lot of work – sometimes with the help of our good friend Johnny Plåt. Photos: BP.*





Above: It was TriptiMa who initiated this daring project, and the results were wonderful: Here are some of the resulting produce; cabbage, cauliflower, turnip and Chinese cabbage (!). All grown according to ecological principles without artificial fertilizers or chemical sprays. Photo: BP.

Below: Torleif, Glenn, Kjetil Thorsen (with a Tibetan singing bowl) and Bjørn study maps of the Peace Plateau on Mt. Tron, Shantibu, autumn 1992. Photo: TriptiMa.



The Mt. Tron University of Peace Foundation

To me this was the start of a whole new life in Alvådal. Even though I had just lived closely with Paramananda for many months at Shantibu, nevertheless, after seven years of hermit life, it felt strange to adapt now to live very closely with another person. However, the greatest and most important change was from an introvert to an extrovert lifestyle. After the arrival of Tripti Ma the focus of work became fully externally focused and Shantibu opened up more and more to be able to receive visitors. This happened gradually through the years according to practical and economical constraints.

The greatest goal for the concrete, outward work was Anandacharya's vision for a University of Peace on Mt. Tron. We talked about the University of Peace a lot while Paramananda was in Norway, and it was he who brought it back to life and reenergized it after it had lain dormant for many years. Paramananda improved the main principles and furnished practical guidelines for architecture, content and operation, and brought the whole concept into the present age.

Therefore some of us were inspired by Paramananda to prepare for a concrete project. The very first feeble steps in 1992 were given a good boost when Kjetil Thorsen of Snøhetta, together with Glenn, visited Shantibu on September 19th that year, after I had first met him briefly in Oslo at the beginning of the month. We went up to the Peace Plateau on Mt. Tron and saw the intended site for the University of Peace. There he became very enthusiastic, especially when I explained to him that the building was imagined (by me) to just rise up from beneath the ground: "We will only lift up the turf and then it will come forth," I said. I know that afterwards the Snøhetta firm of architects made several sketches and projects for this concept, long before we had our own sketches of the project. Kjetil was actually so interested that he stated that if Snøhetta had not just then been so occupied with the new library of Alexandria in Egypt, as they were at that time, they would surely have wished to have the Mt. Tron University of Peace as their marquee project. As it was not possible for him personally to engage in our project, he took care to introduce us to an architect colleague, the Dane Knud Larsen, who was then a professor at the Norwegian Technical High School in Trondheim (later NTNU). However, Kjetil still helped us with the first room programme of the project and gave general guidelines for its further development.

Kjetil's visit, therefore, was a vitamin boost to us and, most importantly, he made the contact with Knud. Knud himself contacted us by telephone, and a couple of days later he and his wife, the ceramic artist Kari Christensen, visited Shantibu for the first time on October 13th 1992. Just as I had written the first draft to the Mt. Tron University of Peace Foundation, which was later finalized and founded on February 7th 1993. So it came about that we had started the planning of a concrete project, and that without it costing a single penny or even thinking about a budget or financial means. We had only our idealism and pure enthusiasm, without any selfish motives, and this has remained so for all closely involved ever since.

Throughout 1991 and 1992, and during spring 1993, I continued dreaming very often about Paramananda – usually very vivid and powerful dreams – in which I was together with him and usually got some advice or message, or a new understanding of things that had not been quite clear to me before. And otherwise there was a rather frequent mail correspondence between us at that time – as a rule about the development of the University of Peace and other practical matters but primarily about my *sadhana*, like the very first letter that I received from him after my return to Norway following my last visit to India, as a completely new life unfolded for me at Shantibu. Paramananda was in Nandyal in South India and the letter from him was dated January 30th 1991:

My dear Atman, Bjørn.

I have received your letter which informed me about your welfare. I hope you are doing well physically and spiritually and that you are doing *sadhana* regularly and nicely.

Dear Bjørn, do not allow worry to enter your mind. Do as I told you previously. There is nothing to be annoyed of. There are three things required for *sadhana* – conscience, sincerity and patience. So never get disappointed. Everything will be o.k. lastly. Do not worry.

How is Tripti Ma? I will write to her separately. Tell her there is nothing to worry about. How are your parents? Hope that everyone is o.k. ...

And again a letter where he is giving advice for my way of working, dated Banagram October 10th 1991:

... Do work for the welfare of people, free from attachment and let people think that you are for them. They will feel that you have sympathy for them. The sympathy that you render to them will inspire them. You will be blessed. Let me know how Tripti Ma is. Convey my blessings to her.

With lots and lots of love,

Yours affectionately, Swami Paramananda.

In a letter from Banagram dated August 23rd 1992 he attached a poem without any title or commentary but it is evident that it was either written at Shantibu or inspired by his stay there. If it was written at Shantibu it is one of a very few that was not put together with his manuscript and thus not lost on the flight from Norway via Moscow to India. Here it is in its entirety:

Days wear off in solitude
 Like falling leaves of pinewood trees
 Silent waves swell on sleepy Glomma
 Riding high on soundless tide
 One can sail with utmost ease
 Through a long voyage of life
 Drifting with the strength of tide
 Silent streams raise no flutters in life
 Even silence has its own sounds
 Life is enhanced in solitude
 Take the lonely path of solitude
 In intimacy of all your thoughts
 One can drift along the waves
 In a crowd of human beings
 Defying the quiet tides of heart
 Secret streams of Beauty
 Flows hidden in the solitary being
 Pounding across the groves of my body
 Let's take a dip in private intimacy
 Let life bathe in beauty
 Let the world bathe in beauty *

Clearly he remembered Alvdal and the rejuvenating stay that he had for many days with really good rest, because in many of his letters to me at that time he describes how incredibly busy he always is in India and that he never gets any rest. Sometimes Paramananda also called me from India, usually when he had been travelling somewhere outside of Banagram. One such occasion was on October 23rd 1992 when he called from a hospital in Calcutta to tell me that his mother had been admitted there for an abdomen operation to remove a cyst. In a letter at the beginning of the New Year, his mother was back home and completely well. Many years later, from friends in India, I heard about this incident: To the utter amazement of the doctors her cyst had just disappeared while she was in the hospital and an operation, therefore, was not necessary. To others present at that time Paramananda just said that this happened due to the grace of the Divine Mother.



*TriptiMa paints Christmas cards at Shantibu before Christmas 1990.
 Photo: BP.*

FOOTNOTES

* This poem was most probably written by Paramananda in Bengali and then later translated by someone.

GLOSSARY (simplified)

atman – the Self, in which rests the unity of being, including man, nature and God.

lu – ‘heat-wave’; a strong, hot and dry summer afternoon wind which is a familiar phenomenon in India when the heat is at its peak and is regarded as dangerous to health.

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

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.

Tripti Ma – one of Paramananda’s closest female disciples, born 1st July 1950, with the sannyasini name **Samhita Prana**.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.