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Swami Paramananda at Lyngseidet, Tromsø, Norway 1995. Photo: BP.

IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

MY EXPERIENCES WITH
SWAMI PARAMANANDA

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI IN THE WEST

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CONTENTS

Prologue

Induction

The Condor of Transformation
The Adder's Message
Ios in my Heart
The Ashram in Rishikesh
Cosmic Lotuses
An Indian Yogi on Mt.Tron

(1) Paramananda's Smile

Unexpected Visit from South India
Letter from Swami Paramananda Giri
Captivity in Rishikesh
First Meeting with Paramananda
Tripti Ma
Five Days in Ranchi
Mantra-Diksha
Ramakrishna Darshan
Problems in Alvdal

(2) The Art of Meditation

Adaptation to Banagram
Life in Paramananda Mission
Mental Communication
The Journey to South India
Mahashivaratri and Balyogi Darshan
Malaria and Sannyasa
Omkaram
Banagram and Kathmandu
Malaria in Norway

(3) Transcendence

Sadhana at Shantibu
Hissing Kundalini
Within Paramananda's Aura
Guru Kripa
Visit by Friends from Norway
Asgeir's Passing Away
Turiya at Shantibu
"... how the Rishis breathe"
Baul in the Himalayas

(4) Life together with Paramananda

Arrival in Norway
Paramananda's Genesis and Life History
The Peace Plateau on Mt.Tron
The Truth about Anandacharya's Rebirth
Baul on Mt.Tron
"... we are almost the same ..."
Around Europe by Inter-Rail
Journey to North Norway
Lost Manuscript

(5) The University of Peace at Mt.Tron

Pilgrimage to Banagram
The Caves at Udayagiri
Tripti Ma goes to Norway
The Mt.Tron University of Peace Foundation
Paramananda comes again to Norway
Picnic on the Ganges
Paramananda Visits Norway a Third Time
Art of Life Course at Savalen
Difficulties and Plots

(6) Forever Paramananda

Last Appearance in Norway
Messages and Predictions
Paramananda Leaves His Physical Body
Great Sorrow in Banagram
Separation and Disintegration
Paramananda's Last Lesson
Essential Teaching
Who is Paramananda?
Paramananda's poem "I"

Deduction

Reincarnation and Rishis
East and West
Science and Spirituality
"Soul" and Mind
Guru and Sishya (Teacher and Pupil)
The Quest for Truth
The Purpose of Life

Epilogue

PARAMANANDA'S SMILE

Unexpected visit from South India

It was early on Christmas Eve when the telephone suddenly rang and a pleasant male voice introduced someone calling from Oslo and asked if he had got through to 'Brahmakul'? "Yes", I confirmed, "you have". "Oh yes, you see", the man continued, clearly relieved, "I have a visitor here, an Indian who is bent on finding Brahmakul - yes, he has actually been searching for Brahmakul for the last ten years. His name is Venkata Reddy and he is from South India. Is it possible that he can come and visit Brahmakul? It would mean so much to him!" "Of course, he is heartily welcome! When will he come?" I asked. "Just one moment, I shall ask him", the man replied, who was soon back on the phone: "Oh, now my guest is really happy and he would like to come just as soon as possible, would by train from Oslo tomorrow morning be possible?" "Just put him on the early morning train. I shall order a taxi for him for the four kilometres from the railway station up to here." Thanks a lot", the man concluded, clearly happy on behalf of his Indian guest. And thus it came to pass that a stranger from South India, in the year 1982, came all the way to "Shantibu" (formerly "Solbu")¹⁾ on Mt. Tron in Alvdal, Norway, on December 25th - the very birthday of Swami Paramananda.

The small, dark, middle aged Indian beamed like a child for having finally found "Brahmakul" after ten long years of tireless search. A great dream had come true. Venkata Reddy's story was this: Ten years earlier he had found a book in a library in Madras (now Chennai), which had made an indelible impression on him. The book was entitled "Karlina Rani"²⁾ and was written in English by Swami Sri Ananda Acharya. But there was something peculiar about the book, or rather, with its publisher, as on the reverse of the title page was written "Published by: The Brahmakul, Gaurisankar, Scandinavia". That was all - no mention of Norway even. But what attracted Mr. Reddy the school teacher so much was the word *brahmakul*, which he found completely fantastic. He told me that everywhere in India one could find the word *gurukul*, but *brahmakul* he had never seen before - it had so much more meaning and content he felt.

The word became like a mantra to him - he thought of it day and night, and lastly he decided that he should try to find this place in Scandinavia, almost at any cost! Via a friend in Sweden whom he had met in Madras he had managed to come to Stockholm a few years earlier, but found no more leads from there. But this time he managed to come to Oslo via a Norwegian friend of his Swed-

ish friend, who happened to be the leader of an umbrella organization dealing with books, authors' rights and publishing houses, so he was just the right man to take him further. Thus at his second attempt he succeeded.

Venkata Reddy stayed only one night as he had already made arrangements to go back to Sweden the next day. But as he was waiting for the taxi to take him to the railway station, I asked him if he knew about any genuine good guru in India - one who was not a fake who would only enchant and ensnare people with miracles and other nonsense. "Yes", Mr. Reddy replied at once, "I know of two. The one is about 70 years old and lives in Kerala, the other is young and stays near to Burdwan in West Bengal - his name is Robin. I do not have his address, but I have a sannyasin friend named Devendranath who is a friend of Robin and can take you to him. Devendranath is from South India, but speaks Bengali and knows English very well." Mr. Reddy just managed to write the address of Devendranath, as well as the name and address of the guru in Kerala, before the taxi arrived and we shared a hearty farewell.



Devendranath or Swami Vishuddhananda, which was his sannyasi-name. Here at Ranchi, Bihar, India 1983. Photo: BP.

Letter from Swami Paramananda Giri

The reason why I had asked Mr. Reddy about any good guru in India was that I wished to find a secure ashram where Saswati could stay. And it was Saswati herself who later chose from the two addresses that Mr. Reddy had given. She chose the young Robin in Bengal and therefore wrote a letter to Mr. Reddy's friend, Devendranath, in South India. On Thursday, February 3rd 1983, she received a nice reply from him. From the letter it became clear that Robin's name was actually Rabindranath and that 'Robin' was the English way of writing the Bengali pronunciation of the name's short form. He was born on December 25th 1954, and thus he was only a year older than myself. Attached to the letter was a most fascinating black and white photo of Robin together with his Guru, Ramananda Avaduth. It was taken in Uttar Kashi in the upper Himalayas immediately after the sannyas ceremony of Robin, so that his name was now actually Swami Paramananda Giri. In the picture they are sitting side by side outdoors among plants and vegetation, and are looking straight at the camera. Paramananda is sitting to the right of his guru with a clean shaven head and a shawl wrapped around his body, while Ramananda as usual is sitting completely naked (hence the title '*avaduth*' = 'without clothes') with his long matted hair and beard. The setting was so easy, simple and natural, and the expression on their faces looked totally sincere. My very first exclamation on seeing it was: "Yes, this is really something!"

The next day I received a chain letter, apparently from a South American Catholic priest, who promised me huge

riches in a few days if I only copied the letter and sent it on to ten further addresses. If, on the other hand, I did not follow his request, I would meet a certain and sudden death within only four days of receiving the letter. In the letter many examples were mentioned, with full names and addresses, about destinies in both directions; many who suddenly became incredibly rich after not breaking the chain, and others who had met an abrupt and untimely death only four days after breaking the letter chain. The way these unfortunate people had died was also painted in gruesome detail. Thus the threat seemed quite creepy and macabre. Saswati became afraid and strongly urged me to follow the demand of the priest, and besides, this was our opportunity to get rich easily. But I quickly crumpled the letter, put it in the oven and lit a fire. I mention this little incident here to demonstrate how typical it is that together with something very good, something very bad also appears.

In India, every year, the night of the New Moon in February is celebrated as the most important night, spiritually speaking, of the whole year and is called *Shivaratri* - 'the night of Shiva'. The day before, and the whole night, are spent in fasting and meditation, and those who wish to dedicate their lives to the search of truth and for the selfless service of others are traditionally initiated into sannyasa that night. At "Shantibu" Saswati and I were also marking this night. We lit candles and put the photo of Swami Paramananda and Ramananda Avaduth, which we had received just the day before, in front of us and sat down for meditation. Later, in India, Paramananda had told Saswati that he had seen us for the first time that night in Alvdal.



The picture Devendranath sent. Robin (to the left) together with his guru Ramananda Avaduth in Uttar Kashi, Himalaya 1978, just after the sannyasa ritual in which Robin became Swami Paramananda. Unknown photographer.

Saswati flew to India and arrived in Calcutta on March 3rd 1983. She was received by Devendranath (whose sannyasi name was Swami Visuddhananda), at the airport and they went on to Paramananda's small ashram just outside the little village of Banagram, far out in the countryside in the Burdwan district of the densely populated state of West Bengal. There she was well received and given a separate room.

After a few weeks I received a very positive and enthusiastic letter from her, which I answered. And the next letter I received from her arrived on April 22nd, the same date that I had first arrived at Shantibu five years earlier, and to my great surprise a handwritten letter from Paramananda was enclosed. It was written by hand in Bengali, and on the reverse side it had been translated into English by somebody else. To read this letter was absolutely inspiring. Never before had I received a letter that spoke so directly to me and which was so uplifting. I felt that it was as if he knew me and was a good, old friend. It read as follows:

Priya Atman

Dear Soul,

Hope you are keeping well. I heard much of you from the lips of Saswati, though I have not met you in bodily form. I pray to God that your spiritual life must be fulfilled and be good. May your body, mind and speech be pure and holy, because purity and holiness is the first step of spiritual life. Saswati is well now. You need not worry about her. She passes her days here like a divine child.

With the best wishes and eternal love.

Yours affectionately,

Swami Paramananda Giri.

I answered the letter and posted it just three days later. The first and the last words read thus:

I will remain ever thankful for your words of kindness, of revelation, and of consolation to me! ... From my inmost being I wish that your life on Earth may be without any kind of difficulty and pain. May you please accept my humble words. Touching your Lotus Feet, I remain yours in *Prema*, Bjørn.

In the letter I told him about my new plan of travelling back to the ashram in Rishikesh in India where I had stayed previously but that I also hoped to meet with him elsewhere in India during this trip. I wrote down the exact address of this ashram in my letter, and also the name of the swami there. After five years at "Solbu"/"Shantibu" and having read Sri Ananda's many books and poems, together with countless conversations with Einar Beer, I felt that I had digested all the strong impressions from my ashram life in Rishikesh in 1977, and gained a per-

spective on yoga and Indian culture. So now I felt a strong urge to go back to see everything with new eyes and to experience this very special life with a ballast of relevant knowledge. Not least, I wished to see if I could understand whether the guru there would be something for me further on in my life or not. I thought that only by meeting him face to face and looking him straight in the eye, could I understand.

Captivity in Rishikesh

So in May that year I made the necessary preparations and flew to New Delhi in India. I arrived at the ashram in Rishikesh on *Buddha Purnima* - the full moon in May, which is the birthday, enlightenment day and death day of the Buddha - and was well received. This time "Swamiji", as we called him, behaved quite differently towards me and gave me all kinds of privileges and favours as compared to the other disciples there at that time. He treated me almost like an equal, while all the others as usual were treated almost like street dogs. But I looked at him with completely different eyes now compared to the previous time, and already by the end of the first week I told him, face to face, that I wanted to leave and that I felt that I was wasting my time there. I understood that it could not be possible that this man could be realized, and my thoughts went more and more towards meeting Paramananda.

But Swamiji had my passport, my return air ticket and my money in his custody, which was normal practice, because his room was regarded as the safest one in the ashram in case of burglary and theft from outsiders. So without him personally giving them back to me, there was no chance of my leaving. And he didn't want me to leave, so I was completely at his mercy and goodwill. Thus he deprived me of my freedom and in a way kept me in captivity there. He started to tell me of my previous life and other things in a hope to make an impression or to have me change my mind and stay with him. Amongst other things he told me that I had been to that area before in my previous life, something that I had already understood, and he revealed that he had plans for my future there in the ashram with him. When on one occasion I told him about Paramananda, he said that he knew about him: "Oh yes, I remember Ravin (Hindi pronunciation of 'Robin'). He was in this area some years back." And then he added most arrogantly and condescendingly: "To me he is just a boy."

Swamiji belongs to a type of guru one should definitely avoid, but of a kind that it is usually very hard for na-

ive persons and untrained eyes to see through. He had a spectacular appearance of which he was extremely well aware. His eyes were shining (he took great care every day to use rose water and other things for his eyes) and he had a sonorous voice. His skin was almost that of a child that with the long hair gave him a certain feminine look. All his movements were controlled and graceful, and he cut quite an impressive figure. He was demonstrably a master of *Hatha Yoga* who had mastered all the *asanas* (physical positions) and all the *pranayamas* (breathing exercises), and he was a perfectionist in everything he undertook. When he taught us *asanas* we could see with our own eyes that physically he was like a contortionist, apparently without a bone in his body, and able to perform with the greatest ease the most difficult of exercises. About his own past he told that he had fled from his home as a boy, "because my parents wished to use my body", as he expressed it, without further comment.

He had come to Rishikesh at a very young age and had eventually found a guru who taught him yoga. (Swamiji once took me to that guru. He was sitting on a tiger skin in a big ashram with servants on every side, and looked completely dead, lifeless - he made absolutely no impression on me). I assume he had had a fairly traditional North Indian training with great emphasis on *Hatha Yoga* and a total rejection (the more precise expression here than 'renunciation') of the opposite sex. He said himself that he had been trained to look down every time he met a woman on the road or any other places; that at any cost he had to avoid talking to any woman; that he would never eat any food made by or given by a woman; and that he was never to look a woman in the eye. He adhered to this for 12 years. Unceasingly, he demanded a lot of everybody around him and enforced extremely strict discipline.



*From the ashram in Rishikesh.
Photo: BP 1983.*

If anybody was ever a "control freak", it was him. He observed our every least movement and needed to know what we were doing at any time. Incredibly sly and manipulating, temperamental, often with fierce outbursts of temper, he ruled us with fear and terror, sometimes even with violence. When he was in a good mood he could brag without inhibition of his own excellence and own merits. Once, when someone from the electricity company unexpectedly came to read the electricity meter, he easily improvised with lies and manipulated the whole situation so elegantly, that while he occupied the man with nonsensical talk, he had one of his female disciples open the meter and alter the reading so that he would get a minimal power bill. When the deed was done the woman made a very discreet sign to Swamiji who, thereafter, visibly quite satisfied, could now show the meter to the man. In his own eyes he and his ashram were holy and infallible, highly elevated over all and everybody, so that he was fully within his rights to undertake such dubious or even illegal acts. He would shun no means to have his way.³⁾

Unfortunately, persons like him have never understood what yoga and spiritual living are really about. It is not to get the purest possible physical body or as powerful a mind as possible with a variety of psychic abilities like clairvoyance or levitation or God knows what, rather it is in reality only one thing: namely, to get rid of the ego! At a stage in the development (or dismantling!) we all come to the point where we have to confront the ego - which is the last and most subtle - just like Jesus after his 40 days of fasting in the desert, when he was brought high up on the top of a mountain by Satan and shown the whole world. Satan then said that if Jesus were only to recognize him, he would give the whole world to Jesus - all riches, fame, followers and everything that he could



*The author in the ashram in Rishikesh, 1983.
Photo: Saumya.*

imagine would be his. But, as we all know, Jesus replied without hesitation: “Get thee hence, Satan!”

This Satan is nothing other than our ego. Persons like this guru in Rishikesh, after long mortifying of the flesh (he said that when his tongue wanted sweetness, he gave salt!), have reached that point, but obviously had not had the courage to take this last step. Nay, it was obviously much easier to submit to the temptation to experience the pleasant lustre of one’s own brilliance, splendour and grandness. The result is that they cultivate an elevated ego and build everything around that. Sadly, some of these have come to the West during the past 50 years and given an otherwise unique and wonderful Indian tradition a bad name. But worst of all is their misleading and causing frustration to sincere truth seekers the world over.

The ashram was closed to outsiders, indeed physically so with a tall wall all around the property. It was only open to visitors on Wednesdays and Sundays from 12 a.m. to 3 p.m. One day when I had the duty to receive visitors, an elderly sannyasin came to the ashram. He looked straight at me and smiled and asked in English if I was Mr. Peterson from Norway. I replied in the affirmative and he added that he had come from Uttar Kashi and was about to explain the reason for his visit. But before he could say anything more, Swamiji suddenly cut off our conversation by calling him into his reception room. Then he commanded me to go to the Ganges to bathe, meditate and then bring some water back in a bucket.

I felt elated, because I had a strong feeling that this man came from Paramananda and had come to fetch me. In my naivety I thought that Swamiji would prepare me now for the journey to Paramananda with this sannyasin by sending me to the Ganges for bathing and meditation. But when I returned to the ashram the sly swami had already sent him away without me having had the opportunity to talk with him, even though it was certain that he had come only to see me. The only thing Swamiji told me was: “He was a nice man - he will come here again”. It was a terrible disappointment, and after that incident my stay in the ashram felt more and more unbearable, like an imprisonment.

Less than two weeks after the sannyasin had come to see me, Saswati suddenly and totally unexpectedly showed up in the ashram. She was clad in an Indian *gerruha* colour cotton sari, like a sannyasini. It was June 17th (my father’s birthday). All of the following night we sat up and talked secretly, and from her I learnt that the sannyasin who had come two weeks before was Swami Tapeswarananda. He was a disciple of Paramananda and stayed presently in that area, and he acted on a telegram from Paramananda asking him to fetch me from that

ashram and take me to Bengal. To my great astonishment she also told me that Paramananda had sent several letters and telegrams to me. But I had seen nothing of them. All this information Saswati had gathered and then she decided on her own to go to Rishikesh to fetch me, without informing anyone in the ashram in Bengal. I told her that it would not be easy as in a way I was kept imprisoned there.

Early next morning, when I was not present, Saswati had, without warning, suddenly jumped on Swamiji, pulled him by his long hair and nearly scratched out his eyes, while she screamed at him to “set Bjørn free!” And the others quickly spread the rumour that a wild “tiger from Norway” had entered the ashram. But this was exactly what was needed, and after this incident Swamiji became much meeker. In spite of him already having made plans for Saswati to stay there in the ashram with me, he gave in and said that I could leave after completing one month’s stay, “not to get a bad record for the future”, as he expressed it.

Saswati went back to Bengal later the same day, and I left the ashram and Rishikesh nine days later, on June 27th. When I finally took leave of Swamiji, he gave me a pile of letters and telegrams that had come to me from Paramananda, with a stupid excuse which I can no longer remember. I knew there and then that I would never come back to that place, and I never saw him again.



*The river Ganges at dusk with meditating sadhu.
Photo: BP, Rishikesh 1983.*

Footnotes

1) After the death of Einar Beer a former pastor complained to the local district recorder that his family name, Solbu, was being used as a place name by us, especially grievously, in his opinion, since we were heathens. He produced the evidence of seven or eight other similar cases in Norway where his complaint had been upheld. As I didn’t want to quarrel with this man and as the “sun” no longer lived at our place (‘Solbu’ means ‘home of the sun’), I used this good opportunity to change the name. ‘Shantibu’ means ‘the home of peace.’

2) “Karlina Rani” was published in 1921, first in Norwegian by Olaf Norli Publishing, Kristiania, and later the same year in English by his own publishing house. It contains 18 lectures on Yoga. The title means “The Queen-Mother who Rests in the Heart of Man”. Sri Ananda said that that book should never be publicized, but would pass from friend to friend, in this way it would always reach those who had always been his disciples. The book can now be freely downloaded as a PDF from the home page www.shantibu.no

3) Over 40 years later this yogi still lives, around 90 years old. He has since built another ashram and perhaps another place nearby. The Internet has many dreadful, scandalous stories about this yogi mostly concerning him and serious abuse of women.



*Shantibu at Alvdal, Norway, with a bust of Sri Ananda in the yard.
The name is a combination of Sanskrit and Norwegian. Sanskrit ‘shanti’ stands for ‘universal peace’, while the Norwegian ‘bu’ means ‘dwelling’. Photo: BP 2011.*

GLOSSARY (simplified)

asana – physical body posture in Classical Yoga.

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

Brahmakul – ‘God’s school’; the name of Anandacharya’s own publisher in Alvdal.

Buddha Purnima – the full moon in the month of May, when the Buddha was born, enlightened and died.

Devendranath - name of one of the closest male disciples of Paramananda, with the sannyasi name of Swami Visuddhananda.

Gaurisankar – name of the summer mountain farm of Anandacharya at Tronsvangen in Alvdal, Norway.

gerruha – Bengali name of the saffron coloured robes used by sannyasins.

gurukul – the ancient school system of India in which the pupils live with their teachers.

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.

pranayama – breathing exercises or manipulation of the breath; the fourth step of Classical Yoga.

prema – divine love or ecstatic love; the highest and most intense and unselfish form of love.

priya - ‘dear’.

Ramananda Avaduth – Paramananda’s sannyas-guru, who resided in the upper Himalayas, always completely naked, and who lived to about 160 years of age.

sannyasin – a dedicated truth-seeker who wears saffron coloured robes (gerruha), usually with the title swami and ananda as suffix in the name, who has renounced family happiness and personal career to help people wake up spiritually.

sannyasini – female sannyasin.

Saswati – name in female form meaning ‘full moon’.

Shantibu - name of the author’s home in Alvdal for more than 35 years and where Paramananda has his main dwelling in Norway.

Shiva – ‘in which everything rests’; the static aspect of the Absolute; “the transformer” and last part of the Divine Trinity, in which Brahma (the creator) is the first and Vishnu (the sustainer) is the second.

shivaratri – ‘Shiva’s night’; the new moon of February when Shiva is worshipped and celebrated, traditionally accompanied by fasting and meditation, the sannyasa ritual is most usually performed on this date.

swami – ‘master’; respectful title for sannyasins.

swamiji – common address to sannyasins.

Swami Tapeswarananda - the sannyasin who was asked by Paramananda to fetch me from the ashram in Rishikesh in 1983. He lived in the Banagram Ashram from mid 1980s until his death in 2020 at more than a 100 years of age.

Continuation follows in the next number next week.