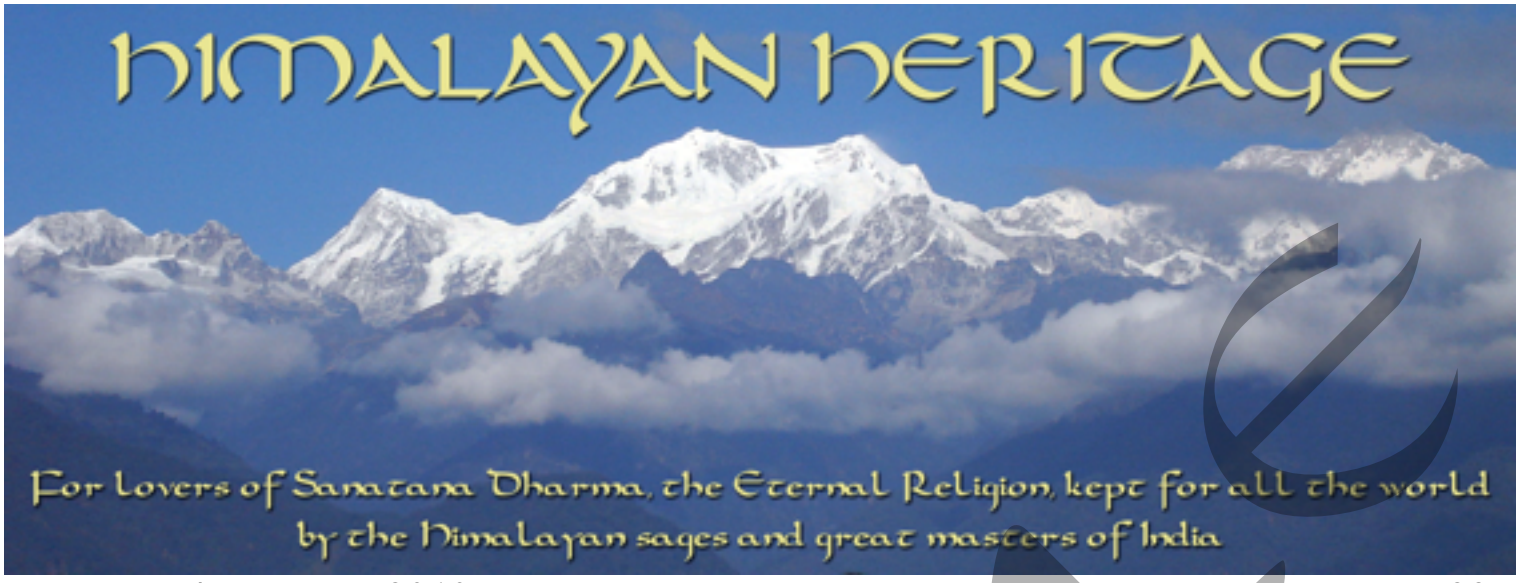

January/February 2010 **Issue No. 29**

At this special time of year, as we gratefully receive the blessings of so many holy days and festivals, I am reminded of a holiday greeting card that Self-Realization Fellowship minister, Brother Achalananda, once received. It read: "To all my Hindu friends, Joyous Diwali; to all my Jewish friends, Happy Hanukkah; to all my Christian friends, Merry Christmas; to all my atheist friends, GOOD LUCK!" Humorous, to be sure, yet there is so much truth in that short anecdote. Sri Daya Mata once remarked that she doesn't see how it is possible for people to live in this world without God. The state of the world today certainly bears witness to the truth of that statement! Yet there is room for great optimism as we see people all over the world awakening to the awareness of their need for the love, the peace, the joy and the unshakeable security that only communion with God can bring.

At the All-Day Christmas Meditation that is usually held about a week before Christmas in SRF temples, centers and meditation groups around the world, we sing many songs that were dear to Paramahansaji's heart. Some were secular songs that he spiritualized. One is the old Christian hymn, *In the Garden.* I have loved that song since I was a small child. My mother told me that a relative of hers had composed it. In the light of *dhyan yoga* it becomes clear why the Master loved it so much:

(1) *I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses*

The devotee comes to the garden in the early morning for prayer and meditation.

And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses

He is instantly in the presence of the Christ Consciousness.

(2) *He speaks and the sound of His voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing*

The devotee's consciousness is withdrawn inward so he is no longer able to hear external sounds such as the song of the birds.

And the melody that He gave to me, within my heart is ringing:

The 'ringing' or bell-sound is the astral sound of the heart (*anahata chakra*).

(3) *I'd stay in the garden with Him, though the night around me be falling*

The devotee has spent the entire day in communion with the Lord, and still he is reluctant to leave.

But He bids me go, with a voice of woe; His voice to me is calling

The Lord is telling the devotee that it is time for him to go now. "Woe" in this context indicates that the Lord Himself feels sorrow at being parted from His devotee. Yet even as the devotee's divine communion is broken, no matter where he goes, he feels and knows: "*His voice to me is calling*."

(Chorus) *And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own; and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.*

The author of this song must surely have known the secret of interiorized communion with God and Christ. I am sure that is why the great Master was so fond of it.

The holy day of *Makar Sankranti*, which falls on January 14th, is the second largest significant bathing day during the Kumbha Mela and the Maag Melas, which are held annually at Prayag Raj (Allahabad). It is also the date of the Baul Mela at Joydev in Bengal, and of the Ganga Sagar Mela, where the Ganga pours into the Bay of Bengal. It also happens to be my wife's birthday. How wonderful is that! Swami Nirvanananda Saraswati, from Italy, made a pilgrimage to the Ganga Sagar Mela in January, 2009. As that date is once again rapidly approaching, we felt it to be an auspicious time to present the story of Swamiji's pilgrimage in the *India Dreaming* section of our magazine.

(In the last five issues we have been narrating the story of our own pilgrimage during January and February of 2009. We began at the Janmotsav Sangam for the *Avhirbhav* of our Gurudeva in Bangalore; spent a week at Anandashram, founded by Swami Ramdas, in North Kerala, including a visit to two locations where the great *avadhut*, Bhagavan Nityananda, had lived and performed austerities; took a wonderful retreat at Yogoda Math, Dakshineshwar, where we had several nice visits with Swami Amarananda, as well as visiting the famous Kali Temple; ventured on to Indore, where we had the holy *darshan* of three great saints in one day, and participated in an *akhanda* (continuous) reading of *The Second Coming of Christ* by Paramahansa Yogananda, at the Yogoda Satsanga Society Kendra; went to the Sri Anandamayi Ma Ashram in Omkareshwar on the back of Swami Mangalananda's

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motorcycle; and did *parikrama* on the pilgrim trail around the holy island, meeting several wonderful saints. We will conclude the description of our *yatra* in the next two issues, taking a boat trip down the holy Narmada to visit forest hermitages, attending Narmada Jayanti celebrations for the 'birthday of the Narmada', concluding in Rishikesh with visits to the caves of Vashishta and Tatwalla Baba.)

Makar Sankranti is a major harvest festival celebrated in various parts of India. According to the lunar calendar, it takes place when the sun moves from the Tropic of Cancer to the Tropic of Capricorn, in the month of *Poush*. The movement of the earth from one zodiac sign into another is called *Sankranti*, and as the Sun moves into the Capricorn zodiac known as *Makar*, in Hindi, this occasion is named *Makar Sankranti*. It is one of the few Hindu festivals which are celebrated on a fixed date every year. *Makar Sankranti* marks the termination of the winter season and beginning of a new harvest or spring season. It is a time when India becomes a floral paradise. And since it is a religious festival in honor of the Sun-God, *Surya Narayan*, this holy day symbolizes the divine qualities of wisdom and abundance.

"Without devotion, no sadhana can take you to God. To the man whose heart is dry of devotion, God remains farther than the farthest. But to a devoted soul, He is nearer than the nearest. All-pervasive, He dwells in the heart of every being."
– Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda (Mejda)

The Nainital Mothers

A Story About Neem Karoli Baba

Once, in Allahabad, Baba asked me to bring a rickshaw. Baba asked the rickshaw driver to take us to a certain locality about 3 kilometers away. The house turned out to be a police officer's home. His wife was present and she was suffering from depression. Baba sat down with her and asked her well-being. She later called up her husband, who sent a police car for us. We then went to the River Ganga bed, which was full of pilgrims who had come to spend a month at the Ganga shore, which meant bathing twice a day in the river and staying at the river bed in canvas tents using straw mattresses. The time was the end of January or early February of 1959.

Baba left the vehicle on the road at the end of an embankment, which is the stopping point. We walked down the slope and turned right onto the river embankment on the temporary road made by the civic authorities for the benefit of pilgrims. The whole place was full of both small and large tents which had accommodated thousands of people for the entire month of the Mela. The month-long period of stay was ending the day we went to visit.

Baba asked me to visit the area and find out where the mothers from Nainital were staying. There were literally hundreds of tents. It was nearly dark and people had closed the flap-door of their tents. Finding the exact tent among hundreds and hundreds of them was a tough act. You cannot just open a tent flap door and ask for Nainital mothers! I also had the fear that if I went to locate the mothers, Baba would probably disappear and I would be left stranded with no money in my pocket. However, I pretended twice to have made an effort, and also kept an eye on Baba. I ultimately announced that I could not seem to locate them.

Baba then took my hand and pretended to guess the right tent. He finally selected the tent where the mothers were staying and entered from the back door. I saw five or six ladies waving *arati* to his photograph. Their eyes were closed, and emotions of extreme devotion reflected on their faces. Baba cat-walked around them and sat behind his photograph. One of the ladies incidentally opened her eyes and had the shock of her life. She almost shrieked with delight! What I witnessed then was just a sonata and symphony in ecstasy.

The ladies, emotionally aroused to their full potential, sang and danced and waved the *arati* for their Lord who had come all the way unannounced to give them the opportunity to end their Ganga stay with such a grand finale. When the *arati* and singing were over, they embraced and prostrated to Baba, telling him that they had come to the river for a month stay and had wished for a live *arati* when ending their pilgrimage. Who could have fulfilled their prayers other than an omniscient one! Before parting, Baba invited the ladies to join him at Dada's (Dada Mukherjee) home on Church Lane the following evening, and to stay for a few days before departing back to Nainital. What could have been a better reward for them? Staying with their Master for two or three days was the greatest reward for the month-long life of austerity on the Ganga river bed which they had spent undergoing penances out of their love for Him.

Excerpted from the book, *I And My Father Are One: The Grand Unification*, by Rabboo Joshi, 2009.

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In Her Perfect Love – The Final Darshan

By Shraddha

On November 6, 1970, Shraddha and her husband, Satya, made their first trip to India to be with Mother: Sri Anandamayi Ma. It had been ten years since she had had an amazing experience which was to change her life forever. She writes: "In January or February of 1960, soon after my thirtieth birthday, I had a dream which would lead me on a wondrous journey – beyond the shores of the small world in which I slept." In that dream, the most beautiful divine lady that she had ever seen came to her in a most wonderful way. For years she had wondered if such a person really existed somewhere in the world. It took many years and an amazing series of coincidences before she suspected that the 'Lady of her dream' may actually be Anandamayi Ma. After seven trips to India to be with Ma which spanned the course of more than ten years, Shraddha concludes:

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Mother's *darshan* that evening was so powerful and personal to me that any words are inadequate to describe it. Again, Mother looked at me with such sad suffering eyes but, at the same time, they were filled with such sweetness that I felt as if my heart would break. As she looked into my eyes that way, I came the closest I ever had to remembering that blissful experience which She gave to me with those same eyes in my first *darshan*, my dream. If She had held me with that gaze for even a moment longer I feel that I would have swooned.

The rest of that *darshan* was wonderful. It seemed that I was breathing the lofty air of Mother's divine realm. My mouth was completely dry, and joy filled my being. Mother stayed with us for a long time. When She left, it was with another sweet look from Her folded hands.

What a blessing to love that perfect lover. She is everything to me. Without Her, there is only darkness.

After breakfast the following morning, we went to the ashram. Mother was sitting in the long room which was just inside the door of Her house. The room was like a wide hall or enclosed porch with windows all along the two outside walls. It was very much like the room upstairs in the old ashram side. Mother's bed was against the back wall parallel to the bank of windows next to the entryway. Those windows, which were hinged like shutters, had been opened, and while standing next to them, the four of us were able to see Mother quite well. Soon we were joined by Atmananda; then Ram and his bride, Parvati, also came there.

For about an hour we stood like that, enjoying the lovely *darshan*. Mother kept looking at us. There were people inside on the floor beneath the windows. They sat facing Mother, having some conversation with Her. During that time, Mother often looked toward us and smiled as we stood at the windows. Then she told the girls to bring *prasad* out to us. We were given dried coconut and rock crystal candy.

When *darshan* was ended, we talked with Atmananada for a long time. She told us about some young school girls who had just come to Mother, and how She had instructed them as to conduct and doing mantras… It was quite late when Mother came back out onto Her porch. She looked so sweet, and again we were blessed to stand up front near Her. She gave us many loving looks, and I felt so grateful to simply be there…

We waited a while and then Mother came into the hall. She greeted the *pandit* and the *sadhus* who were seated there, then took Her seat. The *Mahant* sat to Her right. Mother lay on Her side. I sat right in front and had a wonderful view. Behind her *asan*, hanging on the wall, was a truly remarkable piece of art work. On a long panel of while satin someone had applied beautiful figures of the Lord Krishna and Sri Radha. Their colorful costumes, and the entire work, was simply lovely.

As I looked at Mother I prayed to Her mentally, telling Her of my love. She looked into my eyes for a very long time. I felt as if I were melting in that infinite ocean of love which is Mother. Tears of that love washed my face. Still She looked into my eyes and held my heart. There is nothing in this life without Her. She is my life, my love, my *pran*. I shall never know that love except in Her, the Self of my Being. Twice She blessed me with that look which enchanted my soul…

As I stood there, a certain knowing settled upon me. I saw that it does not matter in what way She chooses to play with me; I am completely Hers. I have no more choice in any way with Her. She can pet me or ignore me. I am Hers and that is finished…

That night I packed our things before going to bed. In the morning, by 9:00 a.m., our luggage had been put into the car. Swami Nirmalananda and Prangopal rode with us to the ashram for our last *darshan*…

At first Mother kept looking everywhere except at us. I wondered why She evaded my gaze. After standing for a while, She did look into my eyes as I mentally told Her of my love. It was like on our first trip in that I knew She would not leave me if I did not turn away. This time I *did not* turn away, and She stood looking deep into my eyes. I could not move.

After a while, Satya got worried about Mother standing for so long. He asked, "Darshan hogia?" As if by permission, Mother and Udas then stepped through the door and were gone.

A sense of unreality enfolded me as slowly we left that empty place where She last had stood. Taking our seats in the car, we were silently carried down the dirt road away from Kankhal.

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All sounds find their corresponding notes within the human physical and mental structure. They energize particular centers, and thus regenerate, rejuvenate, and integrate the entire being. Thus one feels extremely well and uplifted, mentally and spiritually. Such walking, especially as a pilgrimage, is a beneficial tonic and a great relaxation. Worldly tensions disappear and are replaced with intuitions that envisage a divine presence. Then one is inspired! Latent talents awaken and, in quite a few cases, one may develop into a genius. That is precisely why a pilgrimage along such a sacred river is classified as a tapas or austerity. It purifies the being and enriches it with great inner strength. Meditation follows spontaneously and becomes a natural habit. A purified mind opens itself to an inquiry into the mystery of God, the mystery of nature, and the mystery of man.

Devaprayag is the confluence of two main streams that form the Ganga. One is the Bhagirathi Ganga, and the other is the Alakananda Ganga. As such, it is a very special place. The Pilgrim rested and prayed at the famous Sri Ram temple that also had a dharmshala. The royal sage Bhagiratha performed tapas, and Ganga emerged from the matted hair of Lord Shiva. The Bhagirathi's source is at Gomukh, some 18 miles beyond Gangotri. The Alakananda comes from the Satopanth regions above Badrinath. Many years later, a friend of our Pilgrim, Dr. Sudhakar Misra, was to put it beautifully, saying that the Alakananda river is the Ganga, and Bhagirathi river is the Gangaji!

The trek continued along the Gangaji in the direction of Tehri, the capital of the Tehri Garhwal region, also known at Uttarkhand in religious circles. The path continued high above the Bhagirathi river. The mountains on both sides of the valley were quite steep, and only a few persons walked on this route. Then the Pilgrim had trouble with his feet due to the shoes he had obtained in Hardwar. Both his feet had blisters and wounds. Walking became an ordeal, and at one point any further progress was impossible! He had arrived at a small temple, and not too far from it was a village with two or three houses.

To camp next to the temple was decided upon. There was a spring of crystal water near the temple, which was a blessing indeed! Bathing and washing the wounds refreshed the exhausted Brahmachari. His drooping spirits gave way to a more placid mood. All he then needed was rest to let the wounds heal… Resting was all that could be done. Considering his helpless condition due to wounds that took time to heal, the Brahmachari decided that something drastic had to be done. He must continue the pilgrimage somehow! He tore off sufficient cloths from his dhotis, (of which he had two). Making bandages, he wrapped up both his feet in such a way that walking would be possible without further damaging the wounds. No shoes were needed, of course! Walking became quite easy, and there was joy in walking with such natural footwear. In fact, the more he walked, the easier it became. All discomfort and worry were forgotten.

Halting at places, cooking his meals, washing his feet in the evenings, and putting on new bandages in the morning before continuing the pilgrimage, became the routine of those days. Eventually, the Pilgrim arrived at Uttarkashi, barefoot, with shoes in his bag, and not much left of his dhotis either! By God's grace, all the wounds had dried up and were completely healed.

The Brahmachari felt great joy in meeting the already well known mahatmas of Uttarkashi. Many saints regularly came to visit and stay at such places like Uttarkashi that were familiar to them. Seth-ji too was glad to see the Brahmachari hale and hearty. He offered his hospitality, as usual. The young man stayed for just one night. He was looking for a solitary place to spend his time in yoga practice. A suitable room was found in an old dharmshala at Laksheshwar. The place had one or two kutirs and the remains of an old temple… In the small dharmshala there were two rooms. An elderly swami lived in one of these. The Pilgrim was deeply impressed by the simple, clean and practical manner of that mahatma. There was only one blanket on which this sannyasi meditated and slept. A book and water flask, plus a few incense sticks and matches, a spare set of clothes, and that was all. The room was otherwise completely bare. There was nothing there to distract one's attention. There was no other pastime than to pray, read, meditate and practice some yoga asanas as a discipline. The blanket was used for both rest and sleep. Our young Brahmachari was determined to follow exactly the same ideal lifestyle. It may be said here that for about the first twenty years of his stay in India, he actually did adhere to such a mode of living. There was no place for anything superfluous.

The three or four sadhus living at Laksheshwar used to brew a kind of tea containing molasses, black pepper, and ginger. About a half a cup of this tea was shared by everyone, including our Brahmachari. Tea leaves were not used. This drink removed any uncomfortable wind symptoms from one's system. It was a very practical tonic to be taken moderately.

One sadhu explained that his particular research was of his dream life. He made notes of all his dreams and found hidden meaning in them. It proved itself a revealing method with regard to the subtle working of the mind. There was also a spiritual aspect to this type of inquiry. The Pilgrim was impressed on hearing about it, but he conserved his energy and remained busy with his particular sadhana of Kriya Yoga.

Editor's Note: *The above narrated excerpt from the book,* The Transcendent Journey*, is number nine in our ongoing series.*

Swami Jnanananda was given the ***Autobiography of a Yogi*** *to read by his aunt while he was a young man of 23 living in Switzerland. The day he received that book was March 7, 1952 – the very day on which the great guru entered mahasamadhi. He wanted to become a disciple of Paramahansaji and wrote to him at the Mother Center in Los Angeles. When he received the reply that the master had left the body, he decided to first make a pilgrimage to the holy land of India. He set off on foot. After many adventures in Europe and the Middle East, the young pilgrim finally arrived in India in the fall of that same year – never again to leave that holy ground.*

Forty-six years later, Swami Jnanananda wrote his spiritual autobiography which he titled, "The Transcendent Journey," describing many of the great saints he had met and lived with during his many years as a sadhu. Unfortunately, this amazing book has yet to be published in English. We were fortunate to obtain a working copy from a close friend of the Swami.

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India Dreaming

This feature presents stories from or about India, focusing on Her endlessly unfolding expressions of spirituality.

Yatra to the Ganga Sagar Mela, 2009

By Sri Swami Nirvanananda Saraswati

From Kolkata it is about a two hour drive to reach the ferry. Then we had to wait because the tide was very low. We actually had to wait in line for about four hours. Finally the ferry came. People were rushing around all over the place, but fortunately we had a lot of luggage, so they had to stay behind us! The ferry, obviously, was very crowded. It was already starting to get dark, since we had had to wait all afternoon. The river is very wide there since this is where the Ganga flows into the ocean. When we reached the midpoint between the two banks, the boat became stuck. All the people were shouting. Then another ferry came along and got too close to our boat and bumped us, so the people were really yelling and getting mad. We were all thinking that these were the last minutes of our lives! Fortunately, someone began to chant the Hare Krishna Mahamantra, so everybody became quiet. They were able to repair the damage to the ferry boat, and after another half an hour or so we were able to continue.

Sri Swami Shankarananda Perfoming Yajña

There were many devotees from Swami Shankarananda's ashram, as well as many musicians who had come from Bhubaneshwar with us. Then we reached the other bank which is on an island that is about twenty miles long. There we stayed at an ashram that was very close to Ganga Sagar, where the river merges with the sea. We had to cross the entire island to get to the ashram, but fortunately there was a vehicle available to take us and our baggage. From there it still took another hour to reach the ashram, and by then it was completely dark. We reached the ashram around nine or ten o'clock.

The ashram, also, was very crowded, so we had to be accommodated in a tent on the roof. The feeling at the Ganga Sagar Mela might be compared to being at a Kumbha Mela hundreds of years ago. The atmosphere was incredible! Around the ashram were simple huts where the farmers and villagers lived very simple lives. This ashram was known as the Kalikananda Ashram. Swami Kalikananda is a brother disciple of Swami Shankarananda, and both are disciples of Swami Narayan. Swami Narayan was a brother disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda, and a disciple of India's Jnanavatar, Swami Sri Yukteswar Giriji Maharaj. When we arrived, Swami Shankarananda was already there, along with some of his Western disciples.

While at the ashram we would have wonderful chanting and musical programs every evening with musicians that had come from the Bhubaneshwar ashram; and in the morning, meditation.

The following morning was one day before the main bathing festival which occurs on Makar Sankranti, January 14th. We went to the holy location anyway, carrying flags and chanting all the way. Swami Shankaranandaji then performed a homa fire and yajna. After that we all took our bath, either fully or partially, since the water was very cold. That bath was indescribable – just wonderful! Sadhus and Naga Babas were all around. One sadhu was dressed like Shiva. He was very close to us and dancing wildly. It was amazing!

The second day was the main bathing festival, and it was huge! Busses kept pouring in, bringing crowds of pilgrims. We had a big procession with a vehicle on which were mounted large pictures of our Guru Parampara: Babaji was in front, Lahiri Mahasaya on the left, Sri Yukteswarji on the right, and Paramahansa Yogananda on the back. Swamis Kalikananda and Shankarananda rode up front. Very slowly we moved along. It took us about an hour to cover the mile or so to the bathing location. We had left very early in the morning, probably around 6 AM, so as to arrive at the most auspicious time, which was between 8:30 and 10:30.

We spent the whole morning there chanting and taking our baths. It was beautiful. Once again, of course, there we many sadhus there. One old sadhu was playing a very beautiful musical instrument. There were many other holy men there with images of various Deities. It was really very special.

Due to the immense crowds it wasn't possible to leave the next day, so we stayed on till the afternoon of the 16th. Then we were able to catch a ferry and come back to Kolkata. Swami

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Shankaranandaji, however, wanted to continue on to his ashram in Bubaneshwar, so we drove all night, arriving there the next morning.

Just like at the Kumbha Mela, they have boats that you can take out into the river to bathe. The swamis told me the story that on one occasion when Swami Sri Yukteswarji was attending the Mela, he saw a boat on which was written: "This boat will take you across the ocean of delusion." He then adopted that saying and used it on his lotus-symbol logo above the entrance to his ashram. He also named the spiritual organization that he founded "Sadhu Sanga," for it is the company of saints that will take us across the ocean of this world. There is also a famous photo of Yoganandaji holding a staff with some of his family members that was taken here at Ganga Sagar. His brother, Sananda, later painted a beautiful painting from that photo as well.

Ganga Sagar was wonderful! Being there it didn't seem as though time had passed at all. It could have been in Guruji's own time – or a thousand years ago – still it would have been the same.

For more information about Sri Swami Nirvanananda, please visit http://www.ShantipuriFriends.org/

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The magic *lila* was ended, and there can be nothing to equal it in this life. Yet, She can never be lost to me, as She Herself told me many years ago: "I am *always* with you wherever you are. I *always* see you sitting at My feet."

Sometimes Mother blesses me by coming in a dream. This story began with a dream and I shall end it with one which came to me three years after She left Her body. I sat at Mother's feet and She had blessed me. It was so wonderful to be with Her, when suddenly I remembered that She had left Her body, and I knew that I was dreaming. Instantly, I had the *knowing* that She is no less real in that dream state that in this dream state which we call 'life." She has said that there is no place where She is not. This Maya belongs to her, not She to it.

The story of Shraddha and Satya's seven amazing trips to be with Sri Anandamayi Ma are narrated in her thrilling book, *In Her Perfect Love.*

The Ganga Sagar Mela

The village priest leads a horde of devotees chanting, *sab teerth baar baar, Ganga Sagar ek bar*. "You can go to all the holy places, but a pilgrimage to Ganga Sagar equals them all." This place is Sagar Island, on the confluence of the Ganga with the Bay of Bengal. The day "Makar Sankranti," the last day of the month of *Paus* (mid-December thru mid-January).

Legend has it that, before joining the sea, the Ganga watered the mortal remains of King Sagar's 60,000 sons liberating their souls once and forever. It was standing on the Sagar Island that the mythical Kapil Muni condoned the sins of the sons of King Sagar who had dared to stop the horse blessed at Lord Indra's Ashwamedha Yagna and tied it to a post near his temple. It is this legend that attracts people to this little island in a remote southern corner of West Bengal.

The Ganga Sagar Mela (fair) is the largest annual assemblage of devotees in India. The greatness of the Mela can be assessed from the fact that over a million pilgrims come from far-flung corners of India and beyond, speaking different languages and belonging to diverse castes and creeds, for a sacred dip at this holy confluence. For this, no invitation is given. No propaganda is carried out and no authority exists for carrying out the Mela.

It is indeed a tough journey. A few days in packed buses and trains bring the pilgrims to Kolkatta. From there, a long bus journey to ferry *ghats* or jetty in the Sunderbans area, followed by crossing the tidal river stretching for miles. The last leg involves either walking or traveling by a local bus up to 30 kilometers, depending on the location of the disembarkation point.

The journey can be tiring, but the religious fervor of the pilgrims overcomes all hardships. *Kapil Muni ki jai, Kapil Muni ki jai*, (Hail Kapil Muni), the din rises above the grinding motors of the launches ferrying the pilgrims across the Ganga, and the countless buses plying between Kolkata and Namkhana. The problem of traveling doesn't deter even the weak and vulnerable. Old people in their eighties, and village women carrying babies and little children are a common sight.

Paramahansa Yogananda at Ganga Sagar

The never ending stream of pilgrims keeps pouring in throughout the day and night before the auspicious day, and occupies any available space on the sandy beach. They move about in groups, many displaying saffron and red flags, identifying the religious *Akhara* (group) they belong to. People walks to the sound of the bells, blowing conch shells and chanting prayers. Strains of devotional songs can be heard from far and near. People crowd around the *Naga sadhus* (naked ascetics) without whom the Ganga Sagar Mela would be incomplete.

While devotees visit numerous temporary shrines to pay homage, Kapil Muni's temple remains the chief attraction. The tall dome of the temple is visible from a distance. Inside the temple, three images engraved in stone are displayed, the one in the middle is that of Kapil Muni. The sage is seen in a *jogasana*; his eyes wide open, looking towards the sea with millions of devotees before him. The idols of Ganga and King Sagar flank Kapil Muni, and the horse of the sacrificial yajna stands at a distance.

As the night, pregnant with the auspicious moment, descends, all wait for the precise hour to take the dip. The sandy track to the water's edge is crowded with people who sit around fires before proceeding for the bath, chanting devotional songs and prayers. The seaside presents a spectacle in the darkness before dawn with large bonfires. At midnight, the high tide drives the pilgrims back. The confidence in God, and the fire of earnest faith, makes them brave the chill. The stars in the sky have quite a long time to fade when the great moment arrives. As soon as the priest announces the auspicious pre-dawn hour, the crowds surge forward to meet the tide with a loud chorus of *Kapil Muni ki Jai!* and plunge into the sea. Suddenly the place is charged with extraordinary power.

The Ganga Sagar Mela continues to throb with life, with the energy of millions of pilgrims. The pilgrimage may be tough, but the pilgrims know that the visit will purify their souls. The visit fulfills their lifelong desire, and often one can see tears of joy rolling down their faces. That is the true magic of the Hindu religion.

Banat Banat Ban Jai!

A Satsanga by Sri Swami Smarananda of Yogoda Satsanga Society – Mumbai, April 2nd, 2009

It feels so nice and joyous to be in Mumbai once again, though in transit. Today I would like to share with you all a few thoughts on ***'Banat banat ban jai'.*** This is one of Lahiri Mahasaya's favorite remarks as per Guruji's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. With these words, Lahiri Mahasaya would often encourage devotees in meditation. Literally it means "making, making, one day made," and in essence it means '***striving, striving, one day behold the divine goal.***' It means to persevere in meditation. I thought meditation was a problem for you and me; I never thought it was a problem 150 years ago. It is a universal problem. Everybody has problems in meditation; so take heart; you are not alone. One thing is for sure, no one in this world deals with so many failures as a meditator. Even the weakest football team in the world will score a goal sometime or the other but a meditator has to face constant failures. When we do not get a glimpse of the peace, love, joy, etc., we feel 'I have not meditated'. We should be prepared for maximum failures in life. Nothing is failure. No attempted meditation is 'failure'. To succeed in the spiritual life, the whole magic lies in perseverance.

According to the Dictionary, perseverance means to continue in spite of difficulties; to hold on; to persist; die hard. Definitely all this sounds very harsh. To continue in spite of difficulties. Why? But it is not really harsh in other ways. To persevere means building a foundation; lessons to be learnt; qualities to be cultivated; process of growing and learning; sacrifice of immediate gratification; endurance and patience; it is progress. Let us look at some of the meanings in detail:

1. **To persevere means building a foundation.**

For anything in life, whether it is a building, a career, education, a business – a foundation is required. Similarly, the spiritual life also requires a foundation. It is not a waste of effort. The most common example in spiritual life to illustrate the importance of a foundation is that of the Chinese Bamboo. The seed is planted by the farmer. For the first four years there is no visible growth. Then shoots start appearing above the ground. Then in 6 weeks it grows to a height of 90 feet i.e. 15 feet per week. Does it mean the first four years are wasted? No! The tremendous growth by the plant in developing its root system is so that it can hold that great height, to supply nutrition for the whole plant. Similarly personal growth may not manifest itself in the beginning. Let me give a mundane example. Someone is breaking a stone. Nothing happens with the first, second, third…ninth blow. But the tenth blow breaks the stone into small chips. Those 1 to 9 blows helped so that the 10th blow succeeds. Similarly meditation for 2 – 3 years does not show any results. But that is necessary to build the foundation for the future.

2. **Perseverance means a process of growing and learning.**

A disciple was excusing his lack of spiritual progress on the grounds that he had difficulty in overcoming his faults. Intuitively perceiving a deeper cause, ***Paramhansaji said: "The Lord doesn't mind your faults (and defects – Swamiji said). He minds your indifference."*** If it is difficult for you to meditate and you are still sitting down for meditation, you are showing *I am committed; I want to meditate*. If you are not meditating it shows your indifference to God. Pranayama – Kriya – is the highest technique available to mankind. Krishna relates that it was he, in a former incarnation, who communicated the indestructible yoga to an ancient illuminati, Vivasvat, who gave it to Manu, the great legislator. He, in turn, instructed Ikshwaku, the father of India's solar warrior dynasty. These meditation techniques are like musical instruments. After 20 years, a Tabla player or a Veena player says "I now feel as if I have become one with the instrument. What is there to learn about Hong Sau or Kriya? I can explain Hong Sau to you in two minutes or Kriya in 15 minutes. But it will take 15 years to fully grasp its import. It requires 9 to 10 years of practice to get to the stage where you can enjoy it. I never enjoyed Hong Sau all these years as much as I enjoy it now. We get hold of it more and more. Keep on doing. It helps to reach mastery. The key to better success is continuous practice. That is essential. Eventually each one of us here will say: it is not difficult for me to sit for meditation, but it is difficult for me to get up from meditation. But we have to get up to catch up with our other responsibilities. We may not be able to say that in the first or second year of meditation but at some point each one of you will be able to say: "It is not difficult for me to sit for meditation, but it is difficult for me to get up from meditation."

Daya Mata said: "If you are not regular in your meditation, you will be a beginner even after 20 years." Be regular, then you will not ask the same questions after 20 years.

One devotee had a contract with Guruji and still has. "Regularity at meditation is my responsibility. Going deep in meditation is your responsibility." Do we have any control over the depth in our meditation? No. But this devotee did not say "Unless Guruji's grace is there, how can I sit down to meditate?" Sitting for meditation is something he can do. It is not ego. I am sure Guruji will not say that devotee is egoistic. That devotee later told Swamiji with tears in his eyes, "I have always received more than what I expected. My only investment was regularity." All the joy, understanding, love that you are seeking will be yours in time if you keep on like the Tabla player.

Here is an interesting analogy: There is a Sufi tale told about a certain Master who was in an expansive mood. His disciples approached him and asked him to describe the stages he had passed through in his quest for the divine. "God first led me by the hand," he said, "into the Land of Action, and there I dwelt for several years. Then I was led to the Land of Sorrows, and I lived there until my heart was purged of its attachments. That is when I found myself in the Land of Love, and the heat of that love consumed what was left in me of my worst impurities. Finally, after many years, I was brought to the Land of Silence.

The disciples were impressed, and wondered aloud how long it would take each of them to make the same journey to the Land of Silence. But then the Master spoke again and said, "There is one more journey after the Land of Silence. One day I heard God's voice say to me, 'Now I will take you to the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, to the very heart of God.' And that was the day I was led to the land of Laughter." In the Land of Laughter we get little glimpses, at least, of who we really are and how we fit into the scheme of things. And there's a lot connected to that perspective: compassion for ourselves and others; humility; forgiveness; and a better sense of how bound we are to the lives of others around us. And of course, there is also *joy*.

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Now where are we? We have to go through all the stages in our quest. The saints were not spared; neither will you or I be spared. We have to go through all this only to bring in more understanding. Most of us are probably in several Lands at the same time. All these stages are a part of the spiritual life. You should not expect to be spared. We have to be in the Land of Action to give us a particular spiritual development and understanding. No God realization is possible without action. The Bhagavad Gita says (Chapter 3, Verse 7):

yas tvindriyani manasa niyamyarabhate'rjuna
karmendriyaih karmayogam asaktah sa visisyate

But that man succeeds supremely, O Arjuna, who, disciplining the senses by the mind, unattached, keeps his organs of activity steadfast on the path of God-uniting actions.

In his commentary ***Guruji explains:***

…Meditation may seem to be withdrawal from activity because it demands from the beginner an absence of bodily movement. But deep meditation is intense mental activity – the highest form of action. Through the science of Kriya Yoga, the advanced yogi is able to withdraw his mind from the physical senses and direct their subtle astral powers to the inner activities of soul-freeing work. Such a spiritual specialist performs the true God-uniting activity (Karma Yoga). This is the highest path of karma or action. It leads directly to God, as differentiated from outer activities of religion…

So meditation is intense activity because we have to work with the life force. More time is spent in the Land of Action.

<u>Land of Sorrow:</u> Each event of sorrow brings some understanding.

<u>Land of Love:</u> It frees us from all dross. So give love, to all as family members – all caring; give, give, give.

<u>Land of Silence:</u> It is the stillness that you enjoy in meditation. When we sit and enjoy the stillness after the practice of the techniques, free from thoughts, free from emotions, it ultimately leads us to the Land of Laughter. Perseverance is required for all this. Some may feel, "I am somehow getting stuck too long in the Land of Sorrow." But when you feel joy bubbling up within you in spite of conditions, then you are in the Land of Joy, the Land of Laughter.

Let me give here the story of Thomas Alva Edison: When Thomas Edison was in the quest of inventing the electric light bulb, he didn't get it right the first time. Two of his dejected assistants came to him and said, "We have failed 700 times in the attempts to make a breakthrough." In response, ***Edison said, "No my friends, we have not failed 700 times. We have not failed once! We have succeeded in proving that those 700 ways would not work!"*** Not just those who have made those great discoveries or inventions, but all those who have worked at various levels, have had to go through failures, and ultimately all their perseverance led to the final success because others had worked at the initial stages.

One disciple asked the Master: "Sir, how long will it take me to attain enlightenment?"

He felt that the terms and conditions should be clear right at the beginning. The Master said: "10 years."

"So long?"

"No. I made a mistake. It will take you 20 years."

"Why double the time for me?"

The Master said: "Come to think of it, in your case it will take 30 years."

Moral: Some people never learn anything. Wisdom is not a destination. It is the journey.

What do you want in life? God realization is not like a binary system. A bulb is glowing or not glowing. It is like a van – a little slow at times, or a little faster. But it will finally take me to my final destination in different stages. It is not that this person knows God; this person does not know God. Knowing God comes step by step. Enlightenment means I have to become *Aham Brahmasmi*. That means I must be God. I must manifest all the qualities of God such as love, joy, compassion, concentration, tolerance. If I don't have these qualities, then I am not manifesting God. When do I get these qualities? When I become God? Or, if I keep on cultivating these qualities will I become God?

Swami Bhavanandaji says: "Seeking God means expressing God." I must express the qualities of joy, love, compassion, forgiveness, even-mindedness, tolerance. I must manifest all these qualities to manifest God. That is sadhana – whether it takes me 10 years or 20 years or more. We all have some defects here and there. We should keep on looking at those defects in order to correct them. Perseverance means developing divine qualities of tolerance, forgiveness etc. I have to manifest those qualities. Known and unknown people are constantly disturbing and annoying me. I must tolerate. That is sadhana. It is not a station that you arrive at but the manner of traveling. If you are concentrating on arriving too fast, you have missed the point.

Napoleon Hill has said: "***The strongest oak tree (it lives for many many years) of the forest is not the one that is protected from the storm and hidden from the sun. It's the one that stands in the open where it is compelled to struggle for its existence against the winds and rains and the scorching sun."*** The oak tree grown in the greenhouse is well protected. How tall and strong does it grow? You want to be protected? You are bound to face problems in life, more so if you want God. The key is not to escape but to face the world. Patience is required for that.

In the modern world patience takes on different meanings. 30-40 years back we could read the news in the newspaper only the next day or hear about it in the evening news of the radio. But now can we wait till tomorrow morning to know about things? We put on the TV or switch on the mobile and get the breaking news. 20 years back you could wait, now you cannot wait for the interesting news.

In the kitchen earlier if I were to ask my mother for idlis (I never asked her) she would have to grind the batter, then ferment it and only the next morning she will give me idlis. But now we have instant idli mix, instant gulab jamun mix, instant coffee. Similarly we want instant Samadhi. It may work with all the kitchen items. But it doesn't work in seeking God-realization. Perseverance and patience seem to have lost all their shine. But certain things cannot change. Go on meditating. 1 hour, 2 hours, 2 years and so on. But you have to build the foundation. Technology will not help you. That's why I left technology and joined the ashram.

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In His Own Words

Sri Neem Karoli Baba

Worldly people go outward, but you must go inward like the tortoise, withdrawing within your shell.

See all women as your mothers. Serve them as your mothers. When you see the entire world as your Mother, the ego falls away.

If you have enough faith, you can give up money and possessions.

It is not necessary for you to meet your Guru on the physical plane. The Guru is not external.

The eyes of a saint are always concentrated on the Supreme Self.

Forgiveness is the greatest weapon. A saint so armed is imperturbable… He can give up anger immediately.

Love is the best medicine. Work is worship. Money should be used to help others.

See God in everyone. It is deception to teach by individual differences and karma.

I love sorrow. It brings me closer to God.

I make devotees, not disciples.

One has not to ask anything from saints or God, for they themselves give what they feel is appropriate.

If people got to know the truth about me, they would even pinch off the hair on my body to make talismans.

A wife dedicated to her husband is greater than a yogi.

I am like the wind. No one can hold me. The whole world is my home. All are my family. I belong to everyone. No one can own me. I live in every heart. I will never leave thee.

Of this world I am; desirous of the world I am not. Passing through the bazaar I am; the buyer I am not.

If you remember God all the time, you will not be born in this world again and again.

Always speak the truth. Total truth is necessary. You must live by what you say.

Everything is impermanent except the love of God.

It is better to see God in everything than to try to figure it out.

You can leave me. I won't leave you. Once I catch hold of you, I don't let go.

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Shirdi Sai Baba has said: "Devotion without faith is not effective." For my understanding I have extended it to: ***Devotion without faith; faith without surrender; surrender without patience is not effective.*** You tell Guruji, I am your bhakta but I have no faith in you? He is taking care of you; you are in the personal care of Guruji. If this faith is not there, then your devotion is not effective. Faith generally means Guruji will answer my prayers. Generally prayer means giving suggestions to God – what he has to do, when he has to do, how he has to do. This is how I started my spiritual life – defining what God has to do and when he has to do. Is it not that God is going to do not what I want, but what I need? You must pray that God gives me the understanding that whatever you give me is what I need. Have faith in God's justice, in God's timing. It is not that He will not answer. If that surrender is not there then our devotion is not effective.

Sri Swami Smarananda's satsanga will conclude in the next issue.

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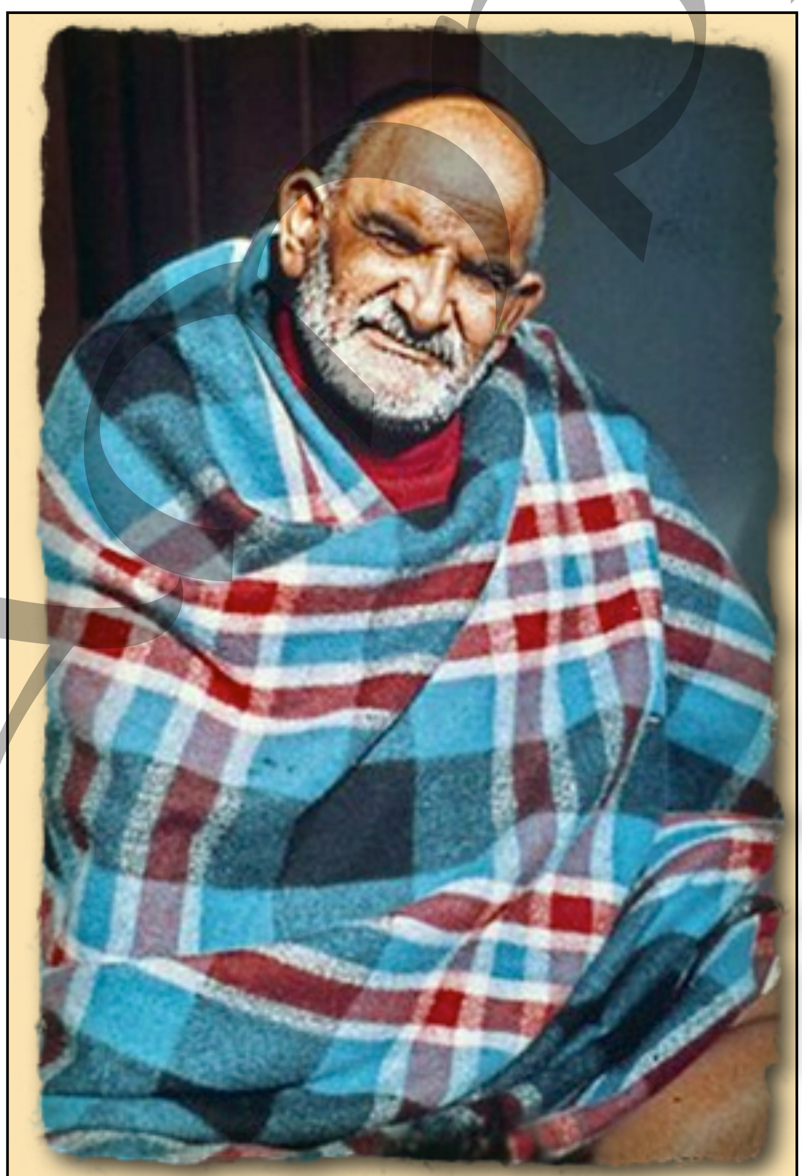
SAINTS & SAGES

This feature profiles the life of one of the great masters of India, creating an endless mandala of sanctity, which is a prominent feature of Indian culture.

Sri Neem Karoli Baba

Baba Neem Karoli Maharaj was a great Indian saint of the Himalayan lineage who left his body in 1973. Neem Karoli Baba is also known as Neeb Karori Baba, and is called "Maharaj-ji" by His devotees. Maharaj-ji's teachings were simple and universal. He often said, "Sub Ek" – All is One. He taught us to “love everyone, serve everyone, remember God, and tell the truth.” Strongly connected to Hanuman, the Hindu God in the form of a monkey, Maharaj-ji “taught” in a highly personalized, non-traditional way that reflected the deep devotion of the bhakti path of the heart. Known as the “Miracle Baba” throughout north India, He manifested many siddhis (powers), such as being in two places at once or putting devotees in samadhi (state of God-consciousness) at the touch of a finger. Maharaj-ji is best known for the unconditional love He showered on all who came into His presence, as well as those who never met Him in the body but established a connection to him beyond the physical plane.



This is how Maharaj-ji became known as Neem Karoli Baba, which means the sadhu from Neem Karoli (or Neeb Karori). This was many years ago, perhaps when Maharaj-ji was in his late twenties or early thirties. For several days, no one had given him any food and hunger drove him to board a train for the nearest city. When the conductor discovered Maharaj-ji seated in the first class coach without a ticket, he pulled the emergency brake and the train ground to a halt. After some verbal debate, Maharaj-ji was unceremoniously put off the train. The train had stopped near the village of Neeb Karori where Maharaj-Ji had been living. Maharaj-ji sat down under the shade of a tree while the conductor blew his whistle and the engineer opened the throttle. But the train didn’t move. For some time the train sat there while every attempt was made to get it to move. Another engine was called in to push it, but all to no avail. A local magistrate with one arm, who knew of Maharaj-ji, suggested to the officials that they coax that young sadhu back onto the train.

Initially the officials were appalled by such superstition, but after many frustrating attempts to move the train they decided to give it a try. Many passengers and railway officials approached Maharaj-ji, carrying with them food and sweets as offerings to Him. They requested that He board the train. He agreed on two conditions: The railway officials must promise to have a station built for the village of Neeb Karori (at the time the villagers had to walk many miles to the nearest station), and the railroad must henceforth treat sadhus better. The officials promised to do whatever was in their power, and Maharaj-ji finally re-boarded the train. Then they asked Maharaj-ji to start the train. He got very abusive and said, “What, is it up to me to start trains?” The engineer started the train, the train traveled a few yards, and then the engineer stopped it and said, “Unless the sadhu orders me, I will not go forward.” Maharaj-ji said, “Let him go.” And they proceeded. Maharaj-ji said that the officials had kept their word. Soon afterward a train station was built at Neeb Karori and sadhus were treated with respect. **(Excerpted from *Miracle of Love*, by Ram Dass)**

The Divine Reality is free from all attributes and forms, yet He manifests Himself in Nature, which has attributes and forms. As such, the physical manifestation is a living realization of the Formless. In this way, He exists in every human being, indeed in all beings. In the unpolluted psyche of the great being, aspects of the divine are fully reflected. For this reason such superior beings are called divine incarnations. Although made of flesh and blood in appearance, such incarnated beings are intrinsically divine. They possess within themselves Godly qualities. They are not subservient to Nature, like ordinary mortals. Instead, the whole of Nature is under their command.

The highly revered Baba Neeb Karori is a living instance of this supernatural phenomenon.

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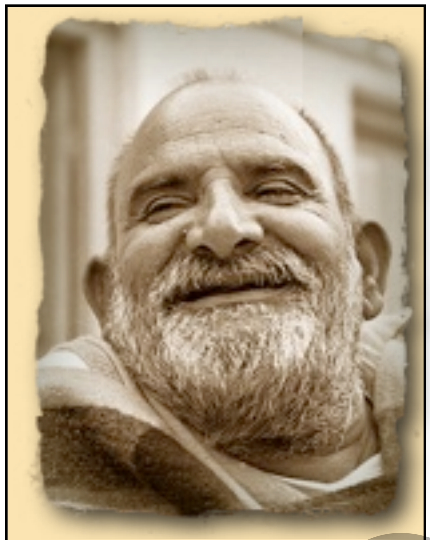
In His human form, Baba has brought with Him a divine wave, which submerged people in His Love and Grace. The incredible aspect of it is that after His Mahaparayan (after he left his mortal body), it became a tidal wave, and people are experiencing His Grace more and more. People are becoming devoted to Him all over the world, and their faith is blossoming…



The behavior of Baba Maharaj was most unpredictable. Whatever one may assume or expect, Baba would be seen doing just the opposite. His words and deeds were all mysterious. Reports about His glorious, extraordinary deeds remained verbal, not only during his lifetime, but also for a while afterwards… Once the late Raja of Bhadri, the then Lt. Governor of Himachal Pradesh, with great effort made a collection of many of Baba's lilas and sought his consent to get them published. Baba not only refused permission, but had the entire collection destroyed in His presence…. Devotees, keeping in mind Baba's dislike of publicity, never shared their experiences with people they did not know.

Those who had the privilege of being with Baba unanimously believe that He was an incarnation of Hanuman. It is said of Hanuman that there is nothing He cannot do. This is also aptly applied to Baba. Hanuman is said to be immortal, and so is the flow of Baba's indiscriminating Grace.

Baba's mystical lilas inspire people to discover the essence of Truth, by which a spontaneous change can be brought about in the essentials of this world. His divine ways are so exceedingly impressive and attractive that contemplation of them encourages one to seek improvement of the inner self. As a consequence of this inner cleansing, people start experiencing Baba's Grace and also receive his darshan in dreams, as well as in reality. Thus, by thoroughly contemplating and reflecting on His character and divine lila, it is natural that there will be changes in the thoughts and tendencies of the aspirants…

I had the opportunity to meet Baba for the first time in 1944, at Blunt Square, Lucknow, in my neighbor's house. Later, I had his darshan the same day in my own house. Since 1953 my association with him increased. I had the blessing to be with Him at Kainchi Ashram from time to time every year from 1966 to 31st August, 1973. In this way, I became more and more in touch with His devotees and was thus fortunate enough to hear about their wonderful experiences… There was a unique pleasure in traveling with Baba. On the one hand, a devotee had constant darshan of this divine person, and on the other, he witnessed various wonderful experiences. The journeys with him did come to an end, but the sweet memory of the moments passed in his company still remain in our hearts.

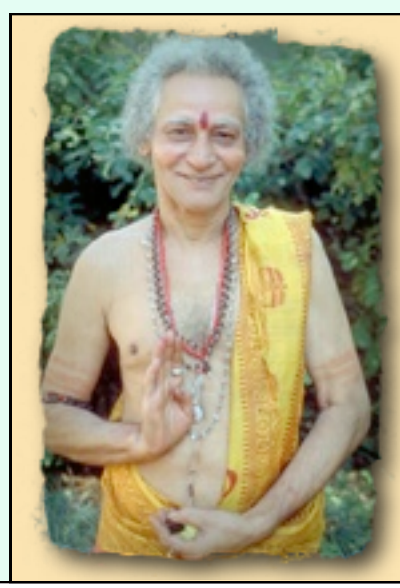
Before Mahaparayan, Maharaj often said that he would not die, and that he would stay at Amarkantak, by the bank of the Narmada River, where none will be able to meet him… One of the greatest saints of our time, Yogiraj Devraha Baba, mentioning the event of Baba's death as unrealistic, told his devotees, "Baba's death was not a reality. He has played with death many times. Where can he go? He is alive and will ever remain so."

– From *Divine Reality*, by Ravi Prakash Pande, 'Rajida'

Sri Sri Haradhan Chakraborti

In Memoriam

It is with great sadness of heart that we announce the unexpected passing of **Sri Haradhan Chakraborti (Guruji)**, the main priest of the Dakshineshwar Kali Temple who performed the *prana-pratishtana* (invocation of life) of Ma Dakshineshwari Kali at Kali Mandir. Sri Haradhanji left his body painlessly from heart failure on December 20 at around 7:30am (Kolkata time) en route from his village ashram to Dakshineshwar. Usha Ma and Rampriya Das were both present during the preliminary funeral rites at his ashram, which were attended my many thousands of grieving devotees. Guruji's passing was also announced by TV news programs in Kolkata.



Sri Haradhanji was born in Kolkata and grew up in the village of Chhoto Dongal near Kamapukur. He is related to Sri Ramakrishna's family through marriage. Following his father's footsteps, who served as a priest at the Dakshineswar Kali temple for 21 years, Sri Haradhanji became a staff priest when he was a young boy. He lived in a small room in the priest's quarters at the temple and has been worshipping the Divine Mother Bhavatarini (the same image worshiped by Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa) in the inner shrine for the last 50 years.

Sri Haradhanji was a Tantric sadhak who took initiation from Sri Tarakhyepa Adyaprasanna, a direct disciple of the famous Sri Bamakhyepa of Tarapith. Guruji has about 500 initiated disciples and established a beautiful Kali temple and ashram at Ramakrishnabati village, about 8 km from Dakshineswar, called Anandamayi Ashram.

Sri Haradhanji traveled seventeen times to the US to worship Ma Dakshineswari Kali during Kali Mandir's annual summer puja festivals. We are forever grateful to the Divine Mother for Her grace that has come to all of us through Her dear servant and devotee. Bowing at Guruji's lotus feet, we mourn the passing of his physical body and offer our condolences to his family, devotees and disciples. Jai Guru, Jai Ma!

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