

# the Himalayan Saint

by Shankara Chaitanya

*Swamiji's beloved gurubhai (brother monk) Swami Chaitanyanandaji of Uttarkashi attained mahasamadhi on August 30, 2003 at 3.45am in the Intensive Care Unit of Rama Krishna Mission Sevashram Hospital in Haridwar, following a number of cardiac arrests. Swami Chaitanyanandaji's body was taken to Uttarkashi on the same day for people to pay their respects. On the afternoon of August 31, according to tradition, the body was carried on a decorated palanquin by disciples and devotees, followed by a large number of sadhus and others in procession to Kedar Ghat on the Ganga. After the ceremonial holy bath and rituals the body, covered with blankets and amidst chanting of mantras, was immersed in the sacred waters of Mother Ganga. It was a grand finale to a life of half a century spent in tapasya and meditation in Uttarkashi.*

*Swami Chaitanyanandaji had finished writing his autobiography and had corrected the manuscript the day before his mahasamadhi. It was published on November 8, 2003 his 77th birthday.*

*To commemorate this remarkable life, Shankar, a devotee who spent the past two and a half years with Swami Chaitanyanandaji in Uttarkashi offers his thoughts on the Himalayan saint.*

**I**t was 3:15am, August 30, 2003. My alarm clock started teasing me, but I was too tired. I begged it to leave me until 4am. At 4am I asked it to just leave me alone without any further disturbances. Silently it gave up the attempt to wake me. At 5am I was half-awake when Swami Hariomananda rushed into the room: “Swamiji has left his body at 3:45am!” Thus, in a split second, ended the most wonderful chapter of my life so far.

Now I am sitting in front of the computer trying to write something about this great man, with whom I spent the last two and a half years, and I find it rather painful to reduce the experience of true satsanga into mere words, which are so limiting. The heart that is filled to the brim with love has no room for words. Words transform the experience into memory, and once memory has taken over, the experience is gone. By putting the experience into words we try to conserve the past, which is already dead, and thus lose also the present.

And yet, thanks to the writings of the devotees of great saints like Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and others, millions of people around the globe are inspired and are able to have glimpses into the lives of those saints. These devotees probably faced the same difficulties as I am facing now. I feel that it is my responsibility to write, to the best of my ability about Swamiji. Reading about the life of this God-man, Swami Chaitanyananda of Uttarkashi, may benefit someone.

### *Nobility*

**T**he first time I met Swamiji was in October, 1999 in Israel. Swamiji was invited to the Yoga Teachers’ Training Course in Kibbutz Harel as a guest. Along with two senior members of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre I was appointed to go to the airport to pick him up. We reached the airport about

half an hour before his scheduled arrival, and were waiting in the arrivals terminal.

There is a special joy in watching the meetings of dear and beloved people after a long separation from each other. Each one behaves differently in meeting his dear ones according to his relationships with that particular person and according to his self-image. Presently a young passenger entered the terminal pushing a cart loaded with heavy baggage. All of a sudden a tiny dog, escaping the grip of the hands that were trying to hold it, ran straight to the passenger and in a single leap reached the expecting bosom of his long awaited master. The happiness of that little creature, who had found his lost master, knew no bounds. Human beings cannot express their joy totally, without the masks of their self-image, but that dog was beside himself with joy, barking, jumping and licking the tears of his loving master.

Thus time elapsed pleasantly. We had already been waiting for over an hour when suddenly all the eyes in the terminal turned to the figure that had just entered the gate. It may be my own imagination, but I literally felt as if the whole terminal lit up. He was dressed in a bright orange dhoti and sweatshirt, and was walking in a measured gait completely oblivious to the attention he attracted by His mere presence. Swamiji reached the place where we were standing and with folded hands greeted us. We touched His feet with reverence, and along with Him left the terminal. I was already in Love.

### *Hospitality*

**D**uring the month that Swamiji spent in Israel I had few opportunities to see Him and to hear His talks. The second time I met Swamiji was in His Ashram in the Himalayan town of Uttarkashi. I had come to Uttarkashi accompanied by a young sadhu, and we stayed at Sivananda Kutir in the

near-by village of Netala. Shortly after reaching Sivananda Kutir the young sadhu told me that he was going to Sivananda Ashram to visit a friend of his, and to have darshan of Swami Chaitanyananda. He asked if I would like to accompany him and I gladly agreed.

Reaching the ashram, we first went to have *darshan* of Swamiji. He was sitting in His veranda alone and received us warmly. The young sadhu started talking to Swamiji and I was sitting a little way away listening. After a short time the sadhu said that he was going to meet his friend, and asked me to wait for him right there. Now I was alone with Swamiji. I didn’t know how I should behave or what I should say in His presence, therefore I just sat silently. Swamiji asked me some questions and I answered them, and again silence took over. After some time I thought that Swamiji might be disturbed by my uninvited presence, so I said, “I hope, Swamiji, that I’m not disturbing you by sitting here.” It seems that Swamiji didn’t hear my question properly. He asked, “You mean that you want to spend some days here in the ashram?” “It was not my question, Swamiji,” I said, “but if you bring it up, I would love to spend some time here.” Swamiji agreed, and shortly after I moved to the ashram.

### *Wisdom*

**O**ne day soon after my arrival I asked Swamiji to teach me some Scripture. After a short attempt to make me repeat some *shlokas* from the *Bhagavad-Gita* correctly, however, it was clear that I was not fit for that. Swamiji suggested that I should learn the basics of Sanskrit. I didn’t want to. My mind didn’t want to start this endless task of memorizing grammatical forms and new words. I just wanted to spend some nice time in the presence of the Holy, and go about my routine sadhana. But Swamiji adamantly insisted

that I should learn some Sanskrit. So I started.

For three months I studied a few hours a day but my restless mind wanted some new excitement. One day two of Swamiji's devotees who had come on a visit, offered for me to accompany them on their trip to Gomukh, the source of Ganga. I gladly agreed and went to seek Swamiji's permission. I found Swamiji in the kitchen taking His meal. I asked, "Swamiji, can I go with Shambo and Sukhadev to Gomukh?" "Don't go, you are sick" was the reply. "But my health is very good, Swamiji" I said. "Oh, is it so? In that case you can go." I was very happy and went to tell Shambo and Sukhadev that Swamiji had given me the green light to go. But later on I found myself wondering, 'why did Swamiji say that I should not go? Why did He say that I'm sick?'

In the evening, during my daily walk with Swamiji, I raised the subject again. "Swamiji," I asked, "should I go with them tomorrow?" "Don't go" Swamiji said softly, "You will have enough time to go in future, but you won't so easily find a teacher to teach you." I was struck by the gentle way Swamiji was directing me, without compulsion, without expectation.

Swamiji understood my weaknesses. The first time I asked, I didn't want to have His opinion, I just wanted His approval. Still He gave me the chance to do the right thing. But when I failed to catch the 'hint', He simply dropped it thinking that I was not ripe enough to make the right decision. He knew that if He forced me to stay I wouldn't go, but then there would be no understanding, which is necessary for growth. But when I came the second time with keen desire to know, then He talked directly and clearly. Later on, on many occasions, I could see how Swamiji allowed people to make mistakes in order to learn from their own experience. He used to say that

good students learn from their own mistakes, but first-class students learn from the mistakes of others.

## Generosity

One day, shortly before I was supposed to leave, during our daily stroll, Swamiji said, "If you like, you can come to spend a whole year in the Ashram." My immediate reply was: "No Swamiji, I have already planned to go to the Bahamas and join as staff in the Ashram there." Swamiji didn't say anything further. That night, before going to bed, suddenly it struck me how foolish I was. Such a saint gives me the priceless opportunity to be in constant satsanga with Him for a whole year, and I am stupid enough to tell Him that I have already made my plans. The next morning I rectified my error. Thus I came back to the Ashram after an absence of ten months to spend a whole year, which later was extended to Swamiji's *mahasamadhi* (departure from the physical body).

## Simplicity

It was a beautiful early winter morning. The sky was a spotless deep blue. One could hear the melody of Mother Ganga descending the Himalayan slopes. Just a couple of weeks earlier she had been so dynamic, but since the rains stopped she had mellowed and become so inviting. I joined Swamiji, who was standing amidst a sea of flowers in the garden watching the Holy Mother flowing below. For some time we were standing in silence, one with Nature. I don't remember the exact circumstances behind it, but I do remember Swamiji saying quietly, "It is not easy to be a simple man." Tremendous joy filled my heart as I started to fathom the meaning of His statement. After Swamiji left, I went to my room, sat on my asana and meditated on that.

What is simplicity? Is poverty simplicity? Is dullness simplicity? Is not simplicity something totally different?

Why are we so complicated, so cunning?

For a long time I had been trying to pinpoint Swamiji's most characteristic quality and now Swamiji Himself had put it in such a complete way. Swamiji is the embodiment of simplicity. Simplicity means 'be what you are', which is desirelessness. A simple man has no cravings of any kind, therefore he is fully content. Contentment is simplicity. He has no pretensions or cunning of any kind, therefore he is straightforward. Straightforwardness is simplicity. And this sentence, 'It is not easy to be a simple man,' is in itself so simple, and yet, so deep—just as the man who uttered it.

## Proximity

Swamiji may be compared to a fire. Those who stand away can only see it. Those who come closer enjoy the heat. Those who come too close will be burned. But those few who bear the burning pain, and give themselves completely to the fire, become themselves fire.

While those who saw Swamiji without any intimacy could only see that He was an exceptional person, those who had the chance to know Swamiji fell in love with Him, and were benefited in accordance with their merit. But for those who dared to come closer and took shelter in Him, it was sometimes a challenging experience. Swamiji once told me that saints sometimes do or say things in order to test the aspirants. Many times, (especially when other people were present) Swamiji would scold me left and right, sometimes without any apparent reason. When I would try to defend myself He would brush aside my argument angrily. Then, in resentment, I would sit quietly with a bitter face. Seeing that, Swamiji would take pity on me, and, in an attempt to cheer me up, would start joking and telling stories. I would try to keep my bitterness to 'show' Him that I was hurt, but in no time



His sweetness would melt away my agony, and I would feel so stupid for my childishness.

Sometimes the test would go in the opposite direction: in my presence, Swamiji would praise me to the skies in front of some devotees. Then it would be even more difficult to let go, because the ego likes praise so much. Slowly both the praising and the scolding ceased, and I could understand that it all was only for my good. I saw the same thing happen with others. And I could see that the very few who managed to stay with Swamiji for a long duration, without burning themselves out, assimilated some of Swamiji's saintly qualities. How great, indeed, is the power of satsanga.

### *Immortality*

The day that Swamiji left the body is fresh in my mind. From the moment Swami Hariomanandaji came into my room with the news of Swamiji's departure, at 5am, everything went so fast. The first idea was to perform the *jalasamadhi* on the same day itself in Uttarkashi (ultimately it took place the following evening). We had to pack everything, arrange cars for the journey, purchase ice cubes to preserve the body, get the death certificate and pay the bill in the hospital, and all that in the heaviest downpour of the year. Also we had to inform all Swamiji's close devotees about His departure. After quickly packing Swamiji's and my belongings, I went with Hariomanandaji to the hospital to put Swamiji's body into *padmasana*, in accordance with tradition, before it became too stiff. All the time I was examining my mind, my

feelings and my reactions.

Sometimes in the past I had thought about what it would be like once Swamiji left the mortal plane. I knew quite well the theoretical aspect of life and death according to Vedanta, but I had no idea how the actual separation from the man I loved more than anything in this world would affect me. I



found that underneath all the activity that went on there was a very vivid, uninterrupted peace. I could neither find any sense of grief or sadness in myself, nor any loneliness. I knew that Swamiji hadn't gone anywhere, that Swamiji was present as before, and only some external changes had taken place.

I was completely soaked from the rain when I finally got the key to the room in which the body was kept. Swami Hariomanandaji and myself entered the room to put the corpse in *padmasana*. We took the sheet that covered what was just yesterday my beloved, and now was exactly the same except for one difference: Swamiji wasn't there!!!

I bowed to it, my forehead touching the feet. Then I took the head in my hands and gently caressed it (some-

thing that I would never dare to do before). I told it without sound, "That is it Sir, I have no more relation to you. Till now you were everything to me, but now, once Swamiji is no more manifested through you, you are nothing better than a log of wood. So far, for me, Swamiji was confined to you. In order to be with Him I followed

you everywhere. But now, Swamiji is everywhere. Wherever I am, He is." I was full of love and bliss, and the external activities could not disturb my state.

On the way to Uttarkashi, sitting in front of the body, this feeling only deepened. After about six hours of journey we reached Uttarkashi. The sad faces and the moistened eyes of the many that were awaiting us on the road disturbed me. I wanted to tell them: "What are you crying for? Nothing has happened. It is not Swamiji, He can't die. It is only the body that changes." But I kept silent. All I could do was to give them a comforting smile.

Now only I realized how well Swamiji prepared those who were most close to Him. Only in them I could see the unshakeable understanding that Swamiji's presence is as ever.

Looking back, I can see that many of the things that Swamiji said make me believe that Swamiji knew about the time of His *mahasamadhi* long before it took place. The last of them was a couple of days before Swamiji left the body. In the course of conversation Swamiji remarked, "If you ask me, I have already gone. Whatever time I am still here is just a bonus!" At that time I could not imagine that the bonus would be so short. ॐ

*Om Namo Bhagavate Chaitanyanandaya!*