

A Saga of Spiritual Unfoldment

—A Glimpse of a Spiritual Life

by Swami Chaitanyananda

A Saga of Spiritual Unfoldment is Swami Chaitanyanandaji's autobiography. Originally written in meticulous longhand, Swami Chaitanyanandaji was engaged in correcting the page proofs when his already frail health began to deteriorate in the middle of 2003. Swamiji finished the final corrections and additions just hours before his mahasamadhi at 3.45am on 30th August, 2003.

One of the foremost disciples of Swami Sivananda, the young Swami Chaitanyananda was recognized as a vedantin by the great Master – one whose life would be devoted to study, introspection and Self-inquiry. "He is a Swami for Uttarkashi" was the Master's prophetic declaration. Swami Chaitanyanandaji remained in his Himalayan retreat for forty-eight years, teaching Sanskrit and Advaita Vedanta to the few who would make the difficult journey, and the still fewer who would remain.

A Saga of Spiritual Unfoldment is Swami Chaitanyanandaji's only written work. It gives unique insights into his early childhood and education, the experiences that led him to a life of renunciation, his years of service with Swami Sivananda in Rishikesh and his austerity and teaching in Uttarkashi. It contains inspiring and spontaneous teachings on the practice of Sivananda's Synthesis of Yoga and the Brahma vichara (Self-inquiry) of Ramana Maharshi.

A Saga of Spiritual Unfoldment was published on November 8, 2003 to mark the occasion of Swami Chaitanyanandaji's 77th birthday. The following extracts describe Swamiji's spiritual awakening as a young seventeen year-old in 1943; some insights he gained from working closely with Swami Sivananda as Head of the Correspondence Section of the Ashram in Rishikesh in 1956 and a miraculous escape in Uttarkashi in 1962. Finally, some extracts from Swami Chaitanyanandaji's inspirational teachings.

Spiritual awakening

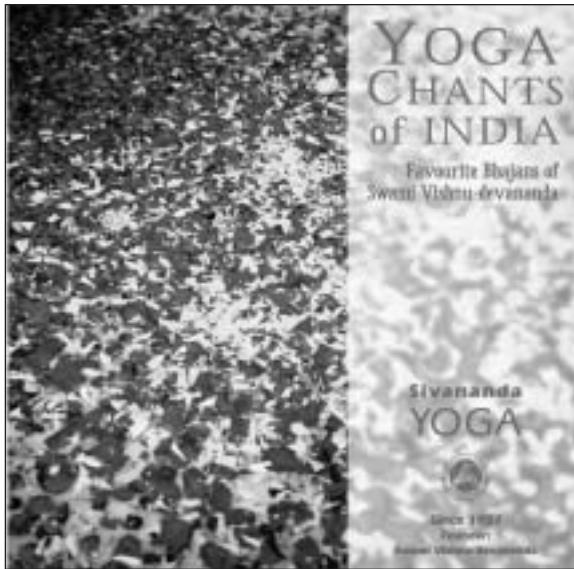
"I was about seventeen years of age and was residing in the temple in Jangaon and studying in the Preston Institute with my two brothers. About 6PM one day, our Telugu Pundit came with a book and told me: 'This is a good book, read it.' He then gave the book to me and went away. He evinced a deep liking for me, and I knew that he kept track of the way I was growing. That evening he did not say anything more about that book or its contents; neither did I ask anything about it. I received it quietly without even saying thank you, and he went away.

Soon after the Pundit left, I opened the book. It was a biography of Swami Vivekananda in Telugu with his well-known photo taken during the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. I had seen that photo earlier and learnt about the Ramakrishna Mission that he had established, but I did not know much either about the Mission or about the disciples of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

It was getting dark in the evening and I could only read the first page. As soon as I closed the book, a strange vision appeared before me, as though on a television, though it was long before television was introduced in India. I saw a river flowing and heard an announcement ring out: 'Narmada.' Thousands of people gathered on its left bank; perhaps a mela was in progress. In the middle of the extensive sea of pilgrims there was a group of *sannyasis*, headed by Swami Vivekananda, and I saw myself standing along with other *sannyasis*. It was a band of some six or seven ochre-robed holy men. This stirred me so deeply that I passed the whole night in the sitting position engrossed in old memories. But I cannot recall now what else I saw or experienced in that semi-absorbed state. The night passed and an awakening or rather an inner inquiry began, 'WHO AM I?' and 'WHAT AM I?' From that day on, this inquiry persisted and I spent nights experiencing at times what is called *yoga-nidra*, though remaining seated. Consequently my interest in studies waned, although I continued my daily routine and attended the school. The thought of getting a first class in the examinations took leave of my mind and my interest in reading spiritual literature began to grow. I started reading, leisurely but intently, one or two books of Ramana Maharshi and a few of the Ramakrishna Mission."

Visions of Vivekananda and an Unknown Swami

One late evening at about 8 o'clock I was seated in my meditation in an open, elevated spot opposite to the temple gate. All of a sudden, a figure descended in front of me and I recognized it to be that of Swami Vivekananda in his ochre robes, with a turban on his head and



YOGA CHANTS of INDIA

Swami Sivananda places great emphasis on the importance of kirtan, explaining how chanting is a wonderful inspiration for the soul, how it dispels depression, leading the spiritual seeker to a state of deep inner bliss. You will experience this bliss when you listen to the new CD, YOGA CHANTS OF INDIA, which contains some of the favourite bhajans of Swami Vishnu-devananda. The opening and concluding chants are taken from an original recording of the voice of Swami Sivananda, bringing the listener into close contact with the spirit of the great yoga master. The bhajans *Chidanand, Jai Guru, Rama Rama, Deva Deva Sivananda, Raghu Pati Raghava* and *Bhajo Radhe Krishna* are chanted with full devotion by Swami Durgananda, Swami Sivadasananda, Swami Kailasananda and other swamis from the Sivananda Ashrams, accompanied by classical Indian instrumentalists on veena, violin, sitar, bansuri, vibraphone, swar-mandala and percussion. The CD was recorded in Pune, India, and has a total playing time of 38 minutes.

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a cloth tied like a band round his waist. The descending figure became still at some height from the floor and started silently looking at me. I too kept looking at the apparition, forgetting even to salute the holy man. "I shall talk if he talks", I thought to myself and remained gazing at him. After a few moments the figure gradually faded away, leaving me wondering about the purpose of his *darshan* and the strange manner of arrival and departure.

A few days later another similar vision was experienced by me, and this time the figure was in a sitting position, wearing only a dhoti and with a gentle smile on the closed lips. This figure too did not talk. I failed to recognise the figure which, to some extent, resembled Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj. On a close observation of the forehead, nose and other features of the figure, I realized that it was not Swami Dayanandaji. Then who else could he be, I kept wondering.

A few days thereafter, a classmate of mine visited me with a book in his hand. He said, "This is a good book, please read it", and went away. The book, written in English, was entitled *Practice of Brahmacharya* and the author was Swami Sivananda. I opened the first page and what did I see but a picture of the same unknown Swamiji whose vision I had a few days ago!"

A Glimpse of the Master

"For two years, from 1956 to 1958, I was in charge of the Ashram's correspondence. Between 4pm and 6pm, I would be in Gurudev's kutir, sitting close to him, presenting the typed letters for Swamiji's signatures and collecting the incoming letters and receiving his guidance pertaining to some replies. This privilege provided me the opportunity to have some doubts cleared by Swamiji. But the power of his august presence was so overwhelming that I didn't dare to articulate my questions verbally. I would frame them within my mind, and that was enough. He would somehow pick up my thoughts and give appropriate answers."

"Swamiji was sitting on an easy chair on his verandah signing letters in the evening. Owing to lumbago pain, he could not sit up straight, so he reclined in the chair. I had to hold the letters for him to sign. He would never sign without reading the whole letter. He had to look up for reading and signing. He used a Parker pen, and in that position of his with the pen's nib pointing up, the ink would naturally flow backward, and so he could sign only after some effort. It was painful to see him in such a struggle, and my mind began arguing inwardly: 'Does Swamiji have to do all this in such a condition of health and at this advanced age? He has

A Saga of Spiritual Unfoldment

done more than enough physically and mentally, written extensively; ought he not to retire and relax now? Ramana Maharshi neither wrote letters nor signed them, yet all the activities of the Ashram went on smoothly; can it not be so here as well?

Thus musing, I brought up a letter in front of Guruji's face. He said, "Wait", and pushing back the letter, he repeated verbatim all my silent thoughts and concluded by saying, "That's my *svabhava* (nature); I cannot keep quiet, I must keep doing something. That's all. Is that all right?" I was stunned and I feared: 'If Swamiji keeps on reading my innermost thoughts word by word like this, can I ever hide anything from him?'

One evening after correspondence work was over, Swamiji was in a mood to talk. I had been inquisitive to know about his *sadhana*, his *Ishta Devata* and so on, but I did not feel free to ask him directly. He now began to disclose: "After the midday meal, I bolt the door from inside; even *Satchidananda* is forbidden to knock at the door or call me. Till 4 o'clock I remain inside. And during these four hours I am like Ramana Maharshi, no world and no Ashram. And when I come out and attend to office work, to interviews and various other things, I am like Vivekenanda—Ashram branches, publications, initiations, and all such humdrum—for some hours. And I write regularly in the mornings and evenings and also reply to some important letters: in this respect I am also like Sri Aurobind—three in one!"

A Strange Experience

"Shortly after the move from Somashram to our new Ashram in Ujaili, Avadhoot Om Ashramji who was residing in the adjacent Devi Giri Ashram came on a visit, and while conversing on Upanishadic philosophy, made a request that I must undertake to rebuild the breast wall behind his *kutia*, because: "You know how to build properly; my two attempts failed and now I live in constant fear of the wall collapsing and destroying the *kutia*."

My first impulse was to refuse, as I was feeling tired after building not only our Ashram but also a compound wall in Somashram, in which I spent two years; but controlling myself agreed to the task and completed it.

Not long afterwards, the aged Swami came again with a new proposal: "I lived in Laksheswar Temple for a long time doing penance. The temple is in bad condition. I want it to be repaired and renovated. I have money. You may please undertake to render this noble service."

The temple is located about four furlongs from Ujaili. I would have to be away from the Ashram almost the whole

day if I agreed to execute the job. So naturally I expressed my inability and suggested that he may have it done through some contractor. But he said emphatically, "No, you are the best person, only you should do it." Time passed, and my unwillingness continued, despite repeated earnest pleadings of the Swami.

After some months, Rev. Swami Madhavanandaji came to spend some months with me. One day he said, "Let us go out for the evening walk and also pay a visit to Laksheswar Mahadev and spend some time on the Ganga bank."

A young Swami, Mayakund Krishnan (attendant of Madhavanandaji), Swami Madhavanandaji and myself set out accordingly. We left the road near the temple, went down and entered the semi-dark temple. We had *darshan* and *parikrama* and sat silently for some time. Getting up, we proceeded to the bank of the sacred Ganga. We took our seat on three different big boulders: Madhavanandaji to the left on the far end, myself on the right end and Krishnan on the middle one.

We began meditating. Soon holy thoughts ceased and visions of death and a dead body being carried away by the swift-flowing currents appeared. I tried to check the thoughts of death, but it all proved hopeless. I was feeling exasperated and frustrated. This condition continued for some minutes, when suddenly Krishnan got up on his rock and called out to me saying, "Swami, get up and come on to my rock quickly!" I asked "Why?" "I will tell you later on, but be quick, don't tarry; please come!" he blurted.

Unwillingly I got up and rushed to his rock. Instantaneously, a huge rock loosened from the steep bank and with a big sound fell on what was my boulder and splinters and powdered stone fell in the river. Had I been sitting on the rock, my body would have been pulverized, causing instantaneous death!

It was a dry season, there was no apparent cause for a single boulder to have darted out in this strange manner. Krishnan revealed: "Swamiji, I could visualize all this phenomenon, an imminent accident to befall and put an end to your life surely. That is why I urged you to come to my rock. What a miraculous escape!" All this set me pondering deeply. Soon it flashed in my mind that it was a warning from Lord Lakshewara who seemed to say: you see my power, I can harm as well as bless. Why have you been avoiding renovation of my temple. Beware!

Although I am an advaitin, non-dualist, I could not disbelieve this. Then and there I resolved to carry out the repairs. Every day I walked to the temple with labourers and masons and supervised the renovation. New windows were provided,

A Saga of Spiritual Unfoldment

which let sufficient light to stream into the otherwise dark temple. The *sanc-tum sanctorum* was cleared of roots of the big tree (in front of the temple) which were all around the Siva Linga. A concrete floor was laid. A new gate, the entrance gate, was added. Whitewashing and painting was the last item of work. The work lasted for a few weeks. We conducted *kirtan-bhajan* and a grand feasting for sadhus and the poor as a *finale*. Glory to the Lord of Lakshewar!”

Teachings

“Over the years sincere *sadhaks* have come to our Sivananda Ashram in Ujaili seeking guidance in their *sadhana*, clarification of their doubts and solutions to their problems. Many spoke about their personal circumstances and the obstacles that they encountered in their spiritual practice. My advice to these *sadhaks* has been to strive lifelong to follow the directions given by Gururji in his books and songs. Gururji has shown the nature of Truth, and he has also shown how to reach it: follow *yama* and *niyama*; strive ceaselessly in your *sadhana*; develop faith. It is so simple, but we fail to grasp it because we want complicated things. We are looking for something miraculous to happen.”

Thought

“Thoughts are the last things to overcome. So long as thoughts are there, *atma jnana* is not there. Thought has to die a natural death. When the mind becomes unmind, then one sees no duality whatsoever. So long as the mind is there, duality is there, because thought is in duality. You think OF some object. Therefore your meditation is not real meditation. The meditation has to stop; but how does it stop? Only through meditation. Through thought alone thoughtless-

ness can come, and then you see the futility of thought. That is the way.”

Will

“Gururji remarked many times, ‘If you develop even one virtue in one life, you have done more than enough, and you can do, mostly, only that much’. We have to clear one chapter every birth in the Book of Realization, and it is really a difficult task.

One day Gururji told me: ‘Don’t think that Self-realization is such an easy job. You have to crush your bones to powder, and make paste of that, and then drink. Then probably you will have Self-realization.’ It is really so. One cannot become even a sound scholar in one lifetime.”

Tenacity

“How long should one do *sadhana*? Shankaracharya said clearly in the *Viveka Chudamani*: ‘Learned aspirant, relentlessly strive to undo the superimposition of not-Self on Self till the sense of reality of the individual soul and the world vanishes, and both appear as dreamy entities.’”

“Our duty is to go on doing, and when the fruit ripens it falls by itself. Therefore, no book and no *jnani* has said after how much practice we would realize the Truth, because there is no such thing at all. After all, from the ultimate view-point realization itself is false. You are already that Truth, then where is the question of realizing in course of time?”

“We want to remain and enjoy that blissful state of Self-realization. Ordinary people think that spirituality means acquisition of so many wonderful things, but the fact is that the acquirer himself will have to quit. He should be dethroned. One should be prepared to lose completely his individuality, because it is opposed to *Atma*.

When the one is there, the other can’t come.”

Guru

“And what is the role of the guru, can he take me to the goal? People like to think like that, but it is not so. Even if my guru is perfect, I have to pay the same price which the guru himself paid. Even in secular affairs it is the same. Suppose I am a Ph.D. and I have a son, can I make him a Ph.D. in five years? Even if I desire so, I cannot.”

Method

“How do we know what particular method is right for us? There is no ‘how’. There is no method. The very desire, sincere desire, to do it is the thing necessary. If you keep up the inspiration in your heart, the method and all help will surely follow.”

“People ask, ‘What should I do? How should I practice?’ although our Swamiji’s books are full of answers to these questions. ‘Meditate daily, pray, do *japa*, fast on *Ekadasi*, observe *mouna* daily for two hours, do charity 1/10th of your income, etc.’ So he has given everything. But we imagine that these things are commonplace, and we want something new. We feel it is all commonplace, we have out-grown all that. But see what Swamiji said, ‘Through selfless service I have evolved’.”

Faith

“What is faith (*shradha*)?” “We must have faith in the *rishis*, that what they are saying is true, and follow their guidance. When they tell me that I am already perfect, I should believe that, and live up to that, but immediately we block ourselves by saying, ‘No, no, I don’t know, and it might take me at least twenty years.’ So we make a program for twenty years.

The very readiness for faith shows the degree of evolution of a seeker.

A Saga of Spiritual Unfoldment

Guruji had it as well as I, but there is a difference: he had unflinching faith and put it into practice without postponement. We cannot do so because we are not so ripe. But a time will come, even for us, when everything will be taken in the proper attitude and light, and we will have no more doubts. And any method can take us to perfection.”

Patience

“If you have been following Swami Sivananda’s instructions for some time but feel that it is too difficult, it means that you are not ripe for full-time spiritual quest. You need to have some other experiences and ultimately develop ripeness.

Truth is so simple, but to come to that simplicity takes time. As it is said, ‘hurry makes worry’, and in any field it is the same. For instance, to get a mango fruit I have to put the mango-seed in the ground, and then I have to wait for years until it grows. It will put forth flowers first, and only after some more time fruits will come. It is not possible to get the fruits immediately, not even in one year. Spiritual progress is no different. Fruition takes place in due time. Just as it takes six months for the paddy to get ready, so also Atma Jnana takes time.”

“Don’t be in an impatient mood, just do your duty.”

Determination

“Right now our desire for Atma Jnana is quite tepid, lukewarm. It has to be raised to boiling point, for you cannot cook rice in lukewarm water. All day you will cook and it will not be cooked. Only when it boils up to 100° will it be cooked properly.”

“Ask yourself ‘Who am I?’ repeatedly, and ultimately ‘I am He’ will come. Don’t ask for any method. What you

have got from Guruji’s books and from Vishnuji’s disciples is more than enough. What you need is regular practice.

In South India if we want water we dig a well. One man digs for some ten feet and finds no water issuing out, so he leaves it and starts digging at yet another place. Similarly people run from one yoga to another, from one guru to another, and go on constantly rolling. But he who digs in one place will strike water. Water will come, maybe after forty or fifty feet, but he will strike water. So also here. The tenacity to persevere in one line is essential in the spiritual path.”

Direction

“There is no right direction or wrong direction in this matter. Your very effort means that it is the right direction, because it is essentially a pathless path: there is no exclusive or only path here. At first we say that there is a path to lead us, but ultimately it is the flight of the alone to the alone. It is only a question of time. Because ego and Truth cannot go together, one of them has to go. Therefore, when the ego goes, Truth alone remains.”

