

INTRODUCTION TO A SAINT

The painting is a dense, abstract composition. At the center, a figure is depicted in a white, flowing robe with a prominent red sash or belt. The figure's form is somewhat obscured by overlapping, semi-transparent shapes in shades of pink, purple, and orange. The background is a rich, textured wash of warm colors, primarily reds, oranges, and browns, with some darker, more muted tones on the left side. The overall style is expressive and layered, suggesting a sense of depth and complexity.

HENRI VAN ZEYST

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Henry van Zeyst

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Who is a saint? What is it that makes one a saint?

Saints, unlike other people like you and me, are not born; they are not made, either, for they are not sanctified. Perhaps they are so because they are not sinners. Then what is it that makes me a sinner?

A sinner is not a man who goes against the rules of the establishment. The Buddha broke all the rules of the Brahmins, of the established caste system, of his royal tradition. Jesus Christ broke the rules of the Sabbath and did not keep away from the company of money lenders and light women. A sinner, maybe, is one who goes against his own better judgement. If that is so, a saint would be one who does what he thinks to be right. But that is rather a risky rule, for how does one know that one is thinking rightly?

Our thinking is so prejudiced and conditioned that what we think right here is perhaps wrong elsewhere and again we are back to rules. Could not the rules themselves be wrong? In that case even a sinner could be a saint! It is all a question of relativity, as Einstein would say. But then, there are certain things in which even a sinner cannot go wrong without knowing it, without willing it. Thus, to tell a lie can never lead to truth, even if we do not know what truth is. One who understands the falsehood of hypocrisy, and then refuses to be an hypocrite, cannot be a sinner, not at least on that score. But he who pretends to be a saint while

knowing fully well that he is not, who wears the religious garb of saintliness and makes use of his position to acquire authority and power, he cannot be a saint.

I have met once a “saint”, although I did not speak to him and he did not even look at me; and our meeting did not last even five minutes. I do not know where he came from, nor where he went to. I only know that he was a beggar, one of the dozens sitting alongside the steps leading up to some temple in India. It was dark when I returned, one of the last to leave and there he was sitting, halfway down on the side, cross-legged, motionless, meditating or asleep, I do not know. Then, while I stood there higher up, he opened his eyes and looked round. Seeing all the other beggars gone, he looked down at the small piece of cloth in front of him, on which the devotees had thrown their coppers. Out of these he selected four annas (a quarter of an rupee), took up the little cloth and scattered all the other coins down the steps. Going down, I followed him close by. He went to some tiny shop where he bought two small rice-cakes and a glass of coffee, which was all he needed, he ate and drank standing near the entrance when he had paid his few annas, and then disappeared in the crowded street, without having spoken a word, not to be seen again.

He who knows his need,
And yet is without greed,
Whatever be his creed,
He is a saint indeed!

Ramana Maharshi

It was the 14th of August, 1947, the day before India got her independence. Preparations for the great event were going on all over Madras. Here it would not be like in New Delhi where the last viceroy would read the declaration from the rampart of the Red Fort, and Jawaharlal Nehru would hoist the flag of independent India. But Madras too, had great men, as Rajagopal Achari, Ramaswami Iyer, and so many others. Tomorrow there would be flag-hoisting, parades, speeches, speeches and more speeches. But it would not be my day, although I wish them well, for they have suffered enough.

And so it happened that I had escaped it all and found myself for a few days in the ashram of Shri Ramana Mahā Rishi, the saint, the Bhagavan, at Tiruvannamalai in South India, 227 km. by rail from Madras via Villapuram. As a young boy Ramana seems to have had a kind of experience, said by some to have been a vision of the Mother. It changed his life, and from then on his delight was in solitude which he found in a cave, halfway up the mountain, at the foot of which lies Tiruvannamalai with its great temple complex. From the age of 16 he discarded all clothing, but as a concession to the few who looked after his needs, he used a tiny piece of cloth to cover his nakedness. When the fame of his austerity began to spread, and the number of devotees increased, they built a hall close by, at a ½ mile distance perhaps, to accommodate the faithful and in which they enthroned their saint. Other buildings were joined, a free kitchen, a hall for

meals, living quarters, etc. but the saint remained unchanged, unmoved, even when they moved him, silent except for answering a question here and there.

And thus I found him there that day in the midst of a big gathering, at the joint of a large L-shaped hall, one side for males, the other for females, all absorbed in silent thought, as far as thought can be silent. I had read about him and I had read also several publications in which the “Bhagavan”, as he was styled, sums up his teaching in his exhortation to find out “who am I”?

After having joined the crowd in the hall without being able to quieten my mind I looked around me and saw the people sitting on the floor, some gazing at their idea of God, others in trance-like postures with eyes cast down or fully closed. Was I the only one who was restless? I had come with a purpose, first of all to escape the political enthusiasm of Madras, but I had also a question to ask. I had heard how the saint would frequently throw the question back with a counter-question: “First find out who that ‘I’ is!” And so I had carefully rehearsed my question, and even written it down with great precision, avoiding all references to self or I. I did not want to get caught here! But how to pop the question in the midst of this great outward silence.

My mental unrest must have communicated itself to my neighbour, for he gently turned to me and whispered to go more forward, closer to the Bhagavan if I wanted to ask him something. But any such movement would appear a disturbance, a distraction I felt. Then the saint, roused by what I do not know, slowly raised his large head with short cropped hair and beard and looked gently over the audience which immediately responded with slight movements here and there. This was my chance; and I crept forward and squeezed myself in somewhere close to the raised platform on which the saint reclined. And before everybody could settle down into a next bout of mental wrestling or concentration, I came out with my question:

“If one should feel periodically an urge to engage oneself in

some act of asceticism, should such a person follow that inclination, if it persists, in his spiritual life”?

And the answer came like a bomb-shell with tear gas:

“Let that person who feels the urge find out who urges him!”

There was a ripple of amusement on many faces over the immature question of this so obviously “young soul” who had been so neatly put in his place by this Bhagavan.

Sometime later, no doubt at the auspicious time, there was also in the Ashram the ceremonial hoisting of the new flag of independent India, and the saint was led to the flag pole to unfurl the flag, while Brahmins chanted the verses of praise and prayers and congress-men with their Gandhi caps stood at attention. Oh, I do wish them well; but who is that “I”?

Meals were served to all without distinction, except that men were served first, of course! Oh, how to stop that critical mind of mine!

Whose mind?

The day was warm, hot, and in the afternoon when all nature was asleep I went to the cave where young Ramana began his ascetic life some seventy years earlier. I was bare-bodied, only wearing my dhoti, yielding to the heat and perhaps to a touch of the ascetic life which is so evident here in all its austerity and peace. There was only a narrow footpath winding through the boulders on the mountainside, so well trodden by the pilgrims throughout the years that no further indications were necessary. Thus slowly finding my way up among the rocks and thinking my own thoughts with longings and ideals, I heard from a distance below me the confused sounds of men talking for the sake of talking.

As they were moving faster, and as I did not want to get involved, I stepped off the path and sat down behind a rock to let them pass unnoticed. And there they came, one of their leaders protesting with some vehemence that socialism is all right, “but that does not mean that I am going to allow just anybody in my house to stay, even though there are 16 rooms of which several are

not used. Why should I”? My silent reaction to this neo-socialist firebrand was: “Why shouldn’t you”? Then they were gone. There was only one way to go and with only one destination: young Ramana’s cave. And so I waited behind the rock till they returned, still talking politics. When all was quiet, I moved on and sat for a little while where the young ascetic would have sat before he became a Mahā Rishi. The peace of mind in those silent surroundings was indescribable, and there remains no memory of it. Time passed without knowledge thereof, till a further batch of pilgrims began to direct their curiosity to me sitting there all alone with only my dhoti. Now the time had come for me to pass, and I was soon out of sight among the big boulders all along the narrow winding path.

Then all at once there stood before me a young boy, a beggar boy with only a dirty loincloth reaching not below his knees. He held up his hands, but I had nothing to give him. We did not speak one another’s languages, but signs and gestures were clear enough. He wanted something and I had nothing. Then he pointed to my clean dhoti and his own dirty loincloth; he seemed to ask—but how could I give him when I had nothing else to wear? And I told him so with my one finger. But he was ingenious, and suggested an exchange. How could I? But hardly that reaction came but as a thought when my own thought flashed back from a little while ago, my answer to that would be socialist: Why not? There was no further thought, but only action. We both went behind a big boulder and we exchanged. I do not remember what happened after that: the boy darted off with his new cloth before I might perhaps change my mind. I do not remember how I came back to the Ashram, but I had found the answer to the Maharshi’s question, “Who am I”?—there just wasn’t any! But there was peace and joy!

It was not a dream. I still have that cloth. It is well-washed now and does not smell any more. I do not know why I keep it, for I do not use it any more. But it is still my teacher answering an occasional question: Why? Why not? The question of Ramana

Maharshi's, "Who am I"? has been answered by many according to their conditioning, the most widely accepted, of course, being that of his followers in Vedanta. The little individual "I" is a delusion which must disappear to be absorbed in the greater "self", the Paramātman, the Brahman. Then the relative becomes the absolute and the tiny drop slips back into the ocean. Then "thou art that" (*Tat tvam asi*).

It is a beautiful concept, but it is still a concept. It is the self made absolute, but it is still "self". It is what I think, the ideal for which I strive, the thought I think. And that am I, a thought, a concept, an ideal.

Swami Ramdas

Across the width of India on the other side of the Western Ghats there lies that fertile strip now called Kerala, a distance of over 520 miles (830km) from Madras, comprising the former territories of the Maharajas of Travancore and Cochin, the land of Malabar, from India's most southern tip of Cape Comorin where the Virgin Queen, Kanya Kumari, is honoured, to the former Portuguese settlement of Goa with its incorruptible saint enshrined.

Somewhere towards the north of that coastal strip lies Kanhangad which will not be found on any atlas even though it has a railway station. There lies a small community of Saraswathi Brahmins who speak their own language, but have no script of their own. Too small to make any impact even on the local politics of the sub-continent, yet they have produced a saint who had forgotten himself so much that he would only refer to himself in the third person, as if he was not there. He was Swami Ramdas. I had come across his autobiography relating his more than marvellous experiences in his solitary travels in search of truth, but never speaking of himself even when meeting him face to face, he would refer to "Ramdas" going to do this or that and it needed a little time to get accustomed to this approach to "self".

It would be a long journey by the Madras—Mangalore Mail, leaving Madras Central about 8 in the evening, reaching Calicut only by noon next day; and then another four hours to Kanhangad, the nearest station to Ānanda Ashram. And so, on arrival at Madras Central, having my third-class ticket I went first to the

men's lavatory where I changed for greater comfort into my Indian dhoti round my waist and another dhoti thrown over my shoulders, packing all my other things in a small suitcase: shirt, trousers, underwear, purse and passport, sandals, and a booklet about Ānanda Ashram; in short, everything except the two dhosis I was wearing, and the railway ticket to be shown to the inspectors throughout my journey.

The first stop was at Arakkonam, and it must have been shortly after that, by about 9pm, that people in the compartment began to shed their initial reserve and come out with the usual questions: Where do you come from? Where are you going to? To simplify matters I wanted to show them the little booklet about Ānanda Ashram and its Swami Ramdas at Kanhangad which I had packed in my small suitcase, placed below my seat. But somebody had removed it and probably de-trained with it at Arakkonam. And here I was in a strange land with absolutely nothing, apart from two dhosis and my ticket: no money, no clothing, no sandals, no toothbrush, and last of all—no passport. All at once I had become just nobody, and nothing to prove it, while the train was thundering through the night at 90 miles per hours towards an unknown destination. But I must admit it: I have perhaps never in my life—and it has been full of adventure—I have never been so happy, so free, just because I was nobody. They could have detained me for travelling as a foreigner without papers; but truly I had no identity, neither physically nor mentally: free from all that can possibly bind, without nationality, without property, without clothing, without money to buy food, without name, and yet going on through the dark night, not knowing even where to go to. Even if Nirvana is not more than that, I am ready for it, any amount relinquishing all that is “I” and “mine”.

The next stop was at Katpadi, and by about 10pm someone called in the railway guard, and he brought along the Station Master, who wanted me to get down and make a statement to the Railway Police. But by now we had come about 130km, and there was of course, no identification or suspicion possible. Thus I pre-

pared to remain “nobody” and travel on in saṃsāra to its proper ending, in the meantime enjoying the bliss of emancipation.

People, as always, were good and kind to me; and I was well looked after by them sharing with me whatever they had. It was midday next day when we reached Calicut, where I had to change into a slow passenger train which would take me to Kanhangad in another four hours. I had made many good friends during the night. It was late in the afternoon when I reached Ānanda Ashram, which is truly an “abode of bliss”. I was taken at once to Swami Ramdas, glowing with friendliness, hospitality and loving care. Spotlessly clean in his full white dress, with clean-shaven head and beard, he was full of concern about my welfare. That was being seen to by Mataji, the Mother of the Ashram, who with her helpers ran the institution in a most efficient manner. They insisted on washing my two dhotis while fresh clothes were provided. They would draw my bathing water, offer refreshments while meals were prepared, and insist on my doing nothing but sit at the foot of swamiji to listen to him, or just be with him, as a soothing and blessing of the spirit.

The “home” is quite an industrial centre too. It has its own hand looms for textiles, factory for leather products, dairy for its own oxen and fields with paddy and coconut palm groves. All that was shown to me the next day, and everywhere there was the joy of life and love. Swamiji’s faith in God has no bounds and his disinterested love is truly infectious. Knowing that I would never be able to share their spiritual enthusiasm and devotion, it was with some regret that I had to decline his serious offer to build for me a small hermitage on their premises which would give me privacy if I wanted, or share their lives if I would prefer.

Mataji hardly spoke, but she was able to forestall everybody’s need or wish in her spirit of service to the Divine embodied in her Swamiji.

I met them later once more in Colombo at a meeting in the Vivekananda Hall. Although sitting with the audience while they were accommodated on the platform, Swamiji sent word to me

to come and join them. And there on the platform, while speaker after speaker spoke of his virtue and saintliness, he kept on his conversation with me as if I was his only friend and son in the whole world. He certainly taught by example how to be happy by not being “self”.

Satya Sai Baba

There will be few at this stage who have not heard about the saint of Puttaparti. When I heard of him the first time, that is now more than thirty years ago, in 1947, was when I was attached to the staff of the Rishi Valley School in Chittoor District, which is now in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India. We had had some discussion with the staff on miracles, and when I expressed my disbelief in miracles of which I have heard too much for my liking, it was the Principal, Mr. Sirinivasam, who challenged me to come with him and see for myself.

And so a trip was arranged for the day after school term, when both of us, together with a senior student, Thiagarajah who was staying back for this reason, began our journey from Rishi Valley School by 10 o'clock one evening. A train was leaving a few minutes before midnight from the nearest town, Madanapalli, taking us to Dharmavaram Junction by about quarter past four. There we had to change trains and wait for our connection to Penukonde till 6:30 in the morning, reaching this destination close upon 8. A bus took us to Puttaparti by 10 o'clock, and from there we had to walk across the dried-out bed of an irrigation tank. When we reached the Ashram it would have been about 11. At that time Swami Satya Sai Baba, as he is now known to thousands even outside India, was hardly 23 years old and his Ashram was a simple room of 10ft square, attached to a fairly large hall for the regular prayer meetings and the accommodation

of the dozens of pilgrims, which number would steadily increase to several hundreds a day in years to come.

Without any fuss or delay we were led into Swamiji's little room, where he was sitting on his couch, the three of us being accommodated on a mat at his feet. At that time he spoke only Tamil and Telegu, being Andhra born himself. Every word of his and mine had to be translated. Therefore he began by giving us a little sermon, how to be good boys and not do bad things, a moral encouragement which any teacher can give whatever his beliefs, or even without belief. He was dressed in a long, red-coloured robe covering his body right down over his feet to the ground, with long and very wide sleeves, but so transparent that one could see through it the girdle with which he secured his loincloth.

There was no hiding place there, yet when he stretched out his hand, appearing to take something out of the open air, there appeared on his palm something he gave to each visitor. Most of them Hindus he presented them with some holy ash (*vibhuti*) but as if he knew my preference for sweets he gave me in the same manner a piece of sugar candy, which he asked me to eat, and which was good. At the end of the interview our headmaster asked Swami's permission to take a group photo of Swami with the three of us, which he granted.

There were some other groups or families on pilgrimage, and we were asked to join them for the midday meal. Having travelled the whole night and most of the morning, we were naturally rather tired and we slept in the hall on some mats for a few hours that afternoon. By four o'clock we decided to get some coffee drinks in the village. But at that time there was no catering yet for tourism and trade, and the village had no coffee bar. Milk might be had late, perhaps after the cattle would be brought in. Then what about a bath? The nearest river with water at that time of the year is seven miles away, while the village well is only for drinking and cooking.

And so there was nothing else to do but go for a quiet evening walk on the soft sand of the completely dried up river bed which

may overflow during the monsoon, but which at that time had only sand without a blade of grass. These we strolled on for about 15 minutes, when we saw around a curve of the river bed Swami himself going out for a walk with some of his devotees of the day. The sand-river seemed to be the only place for a quite walk, and so after a little while our two parties met from opposite directions.

And there, following Swamiji's example, we all sat down, with Swami in the centre, myself facing him not six feet away. Then he looked at me and asked me in his language to sing a song. That was translated for me, but as I felt somewhat shy in that strange environment, I passed the request on to the schoolboy Thiagarajah who was seated next to me. He sang well in Tamil and we all applauded. But Swamiji, looking at me again, repeated his request for me to sing a song. There was no way out, and I sang the first song which came to my mind, a Latin song in praise of the Queen of Heaven: "Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae ...". And again there was a polite applause.

Then Swamiji, so they told me, turned to Mr. Sirinivasam, our headmaster, and asked him why, after getting his permission in the morning for taking a photo we had not come to him to do so. And Mr. Sirinivasam explained that we ourselves did not have a camera with us, but that another visitor, Mr. Kuppam from Madras who had a brownie box camera was prepared to take the photo, but he had finished his roll and there were no exposures left. Swami looked then at Mr. Kuppam and asked him the size of his camera. Reply=120.

Again Swamiji looked at me sitting right in front of him only six feet away, smiled, pushed up the sleeves of his kurtha, bent forward and with both hands made a small mound of sand less than a foot in diameter. With one finger he then wrote on that little heap: 1-2-0, put his hand underneath, shook off sand and showed me a complete film roll. Tearing the lead paper, he pulled out the roll and showing me the number 120, he asked mischievously in English: "Number correct"? and handed it over to me.

The afternoon was passing and there would not have been enough light if one would have returned to the Ashram to fetch the camera. Thus I had the complete spool of film with me in the side pocket of the kurtha in which I also slept that night. Next morning, after our "ablutions", as they say in India, by about 7 o'clock we three from Rishi Valley School and Mr. Kuppam the owner of the camera, paid our respects to Swamiji who declared that he too was ready for the photo. An armchair and a small carpet was brought out to the front while Swami sat on the chair, Mr. Sirinivasam and myself sat at his feet and Thiagaraja stood behind with the sun rising brightly on our right so as not to fall in our eyes or onto the camera. Then the photo was taken. But to our great surprise Swamiji said something that that photo was not good and he wanted another snap to be taken. Mr. Kuppam pointed out that it must be all right, the light being good, the exposure well-timed. But as Swamiji insisted that the entire roll was a free gift, no objection could be raised, and so a second photo was made, which seemed to satisfy everybody.

I told Mr. Kuppam afterwards that he might use the balance of the film as he wished, but that I would like to have the outer lead paper wrapper, the inner dark papers, and the spool itself, together with the two exposures and some prints. I was prepared to reimburse him for the exposures, and gave my address. He did not want to hear of payment, but sent me later all the items requested by me. The first negative was so dark that no decent print could have been made. I still have the items with me here as I am writing this.

The evening of that day we went all together with Swamiji for a walk; and when we sat down somewhere, a lady in the company of the visitors gave to Swamiji a small tray with some home-made sweet meats, about a dozen or fifteen perhaps. Swamiji accepted gracefully, tasted one and offered one to me, took the tray round and everybody took one. Then a second round was served, at the end of which there were still six or seven left, while the company consisted of more than ten people. Even a stray dog

was given his share. Things like this happen all the time, so much so that the supernatural becomes normal. I was anxious to know more about it, and during a further interview I asked him, how and why he does these extraordinary things. Is there a spirit on the astral plane working for him, procuring these articles in a legitimate way, then dematerialising them for purposes of immediate transportation and rematerializing them on the spot? It is rather an involved question which had to be translated into the local language; and the Swami's reply had to be put into English for my benefit. The most of what I could gather was his saying that "it is all these".

I have been thinking about that, and for me it means as if one only had to tune in to the corneal wavelength to get the music required, which "is all there" although normally we do not perceive it. Thus for Swami Satya Sai Baba it is all these all the time. His name is taken from his "predecessor", a Muslim saint named Sai Baba whose picture can be seen frequently in smaller hotels and business premises. When our present Swami was a schoolboy (he comes from a Takya Hindu family) he was once stung by a scorpion, became unconscious and could not be revived for several days, till someone scored off the skin of his head and put in some chilli powder. From that day he was abnormal in his ways, talking of strange things, seeing invisible things, and was not sent back to school. When he began to do strange things such as can be witnessed now every moment of the day, people paid more attention to his words and respect to his person. He is supposed to be the re-incarnation of that Muslim saint but now in an Hindu body to show the unity of all religions. Thus he is the real, the truthful (*satya*) Sai Baba.

I have visited his Ashram four times, each time stopping over for a few days. It was he who gave me the name Haridas, a sound mutation of my home name, Harry.

I have asked him what was his mission in life, his teaching, the purpose of his miracles. For him all people are children and he wants them to be happy. And certainly when we see how

people can be made happy with a little ash, we have not much outgrown the napkins we used as children.

I cannot offer an explanation of his “miracles”, as he himself has not given me one. But of one thing I am sure, and that is that he is not a fraud. And not being a sinner he must be a saint. In his presence one becomes like a child, happy and satisfied, and he does not expect anything in return. The first visit we had come with empty hands; and so we borrowed a tray and a coconut which we offered together with a five-rupee note. He took the coconut to please us, and refused the money. He reminds me of that beggar of whom I spoke in the introduction.

Some years afterwards when I was working as a proof-reader in the Theosophical Society of Adyar, Madras, the story of my experience with Swami Satya Sai Baba had gone the round there, and a person from South Africa came to see me with the request to take him to Puttaparthi as he was keen on making a film of a miracle wrought by Swamiji. I was not keen at all, and was less sure of the outcome, but I was persuaded in the end. And so we set out, this time from Madras direct to Dharmavanam and Penukonde and then by bus and foot. I was told later that Swami, seeing us coming across the dry bed of the irrigation tank, had told some of his devotees: Haridas is coming again; but he is bringing a friend who wants to test me.

After arrival we received the same warm welcome with sugar-candy for two and no ashes, according to our more refined tastes! Swami consented at once when asked to walk a little up and down with some of his “disciples” which would include me, while the cinematograph was working overtime. The result, if miracles were expected, was nil, as I had expected. My “friend” was naturally disappointed and did not want even to stay for the night, although Swamiji urged us to remain till next day. I stayed, he left. But he missed the bus connecting with the train, took the next slow train to Dharmavanam, got carried past his stop to Guntakel on the Bombay-Madras line and then had to stand in an

overcrowded passenger train the whole night, reaching Madras several hours late the following afternoon.

That same night at the Ashram we had the usual devotional singing, during which Swamiji told me that all religions are the same, and that the worship of the gods is very good for children. I left next morning after meals, had a comfortable journey, and reached Madras almost at the same time as my “friend”—he disappointed, I in a happy mood, having followed Swami’s advice.

I have been to the Ashram once more since then. He still knows me as Haridas, but the place has much changed. People have built nearby their own houses to be always with the saint. A hospital has been built in which Swami takes a very personal interest; but stories about miraculous operations have been confirmed. The crowds which gather have increased so much that less than one in ten gets the chance to meet him in his room. But he had always called me in, and he had always a place in my heart. I do not want anything from him, and he does not want anything from me and we are both happy! I do not call him Bhagavan, for I do not think of him as a God. I do not know what God means. It is an idea and an ideal. But Swami Satya Sai Baba is very real. His so-called miracles appear supernatural; but as a person he is very natural, kind, and charming and without guile. And those are the qualities of a saint!

Swami Sivananda

The scene shifts now to the north, to the foothills of the Himalayas, to the holy land of Lord Shiva where the mountains climb to heaven, their peaks covered with perpetual snow, where all worldly passions are meaningless and only the spirit can live alone in peace. The train takes me to Haridwar, the “gateway to the land of God” where the sacred Ganges leaves the mountains and enters the plains.

From there a side line goes as far as Rishikesh, which even now is the “field where the saints blossom forth”. It used to be in Tehri-Garwal State and now comes within Uttar Pradesh, because there is nothing beyond. Rishikesh is the location for the biennial sangham (convocation) of monks, ascetics, sannyasins, and sadhus who then gather here in their thousands, out-numbering the local lay population by ten to one, discoursing and chanting, preaching and praising, feasting and fasting according to their various sects, the Shankars with their metal staffs and thongs, as well as the lonely hermits covered with ash or dressed in a leopard-skin with matted hair as the Lord Shiva himself, but all with utter disregard for the world. Among them may be seen occasionally a totally naked ascetic with only a flower in his hair, and “clad by the sky”, unaware of himself and innocent as a child for all appearances. But throughout the year, in summer and in winter, there are in Rishikesh the many ashrams which have given character to the place for centuries before the knowledge of time.

One of them has achieved international fame through Swami Sivananda, the founder of the Divine Life Society. In his early life he was a medical practitioner in the Federal Malay States, although by birth a Tamil from the South of India. Solidly built like a rock he stands well over six foot in height, but at the same time supple and agile, assuming without effort any āsanās, or concentration postures—the lotus, the cobra, or standing on his head without support. Speaking English fluently he is a natural attraction for the foreigner in search of mysticism. And if that is what one wants, it is provided here with the help of modern techniques and artifices.

Theologically, this lion of the Himalayas, as often referred to by his inspired disciples, is an Advaita Vedantin: that means a follower of the Vedānta philosophy of non-duality. But there is not much philosophy in the Ānanda Kutir as the ashram is called, for the great Swami is a Bhakti Yogi whose strong and melodious voice leads his congregation in devotional songs at eventide. The Swami is extremely gentle for his great bulk; and any new visitor is taken aback by the agility with which he humbles himself before the newcomer has a chance of paying his respects. His education and reading has given him the advantage of modernity which is not confined to his well-tailored tweed overcoat in wintertime, but supported by his own printing press and cinematograph with developing and printing facilities. Suddenly he will burst out in song or slogan, some rather vague and considered deep; and there will always be on hand a disciple to take notes which later are collated as pamphlets: 20 sayings make a leaflet, 20 leaflets make a booklet, and 20 booklets make a volume, sometimes with little coherence, but always inspiring to those who already believe, and do not mind a little repetition.

One fine afternoon we all went for a walk along the path which skirts the mighty river, the Swami leading. At once, just around a corner, he stopped for he had noticed his cameraman who was sent ahead. Then raising his hand with one finger uplifted he signalled his man to shoot. The picture was later

published with the caption: “The Lion of the Himalayas discourses to the disciples of the Divine Life Forest University on the One and Only Absolute Om!”

If it takes all types of men to make a world, it also takes all sorts of saints to make a heaven. His writings, supported by illustrations and photos, are said to have great appeal in the United States, where some of his disciples are lecturing and singing his songs of love and divine.

Swami Purushottamānanda

It was in Rishikesh that I first heard of a saintly sannyasi living in a cave some twenty-odd miles higher up into the mountains along the river Ganges. A young sannyasi of the Ramakrishna Mission too wanted to visit the cave, which is named after the ancient seer Vasistha, and in which there lived the old monk from the South, Swami Purushottamānanda. It was August, the monsoon had failed and the days were hot. So we decided to walk the distance by night when the moon was full. When others heard of our plan, they thought and said that we were mad, for the narrow footpath high above the river course bed through thick jungle, populated by several types of wild animals which roam at night. To soothe our conscience we left the decision to fate, and tossed a coin. We won!

And so, that night we left with just a few chapatis left over from our evening meal. The forest was enchanting, with deep shadows and bright patches where the full moon could break through; for below, the murmur of the great river cascading over the many rocks on its way to the plains beyond the Haridwar, the door to the land of Hari. It was God's land and we were in his hands; and we had no fear. We thought we heard the call of some wild animals, but did not see any. By midnight we passed some clearing in the jungle where charcoal burners had put up their huts. There were some glowing coals near one of the huts,

which we blew up into a small fire to warm our chapatis. They must have heard us, but fear kept them in, for good spirits do not roam at night. And then we were off again.

The path was mostly on the level, and the coolness of the night made walking pleasant, so that hardly any rest was taken in between. It was early morning before sunrise when we reached Vasistha Guha, where the old swami had already finished his early meditation. Our meeting was love at first sight. He took me into his cave and made me sit near the lingam of his devotions, and made my mind silent. Then, softly at first, but increasingly stronger, came the eternal sound of Om, the beginning, the middle and the end (A-U-M) of all sound, that is, of all words, born of thought. We spent the day with him in goodly talk which made him happy as a child.

There was another cave close by, and he wanted to get that cleared for me, for I must stay with him where he could teach me. My excuses of having brought no clothing or cover for the night were of no avail. I was allowed to return to Rishikesh only after I had promised him faithfully that I would return soon after. And so it was that I found myself installed in a natural cave hollowed out of the solid rock by the swirling waters of the Ganges at a time when the riverbed was higher. A big stretch of clean sand, now above water, level, but covered when the river is in spate, separated the cave from a peacefully flowing river, gently murmuring and playing with the rocks. In the side wall of the cave was a hollow to be used as an open hearth, for the winter is coming soon and the nights are cold. With reeds some curtain was improvised as a door, not for privacy but to keep the monkeys out. Half a mile away some pupils of Swamiji lived in a small ashram, cultivating some vegetables in season and looking after their cow Radha with her daughter Ganga. Daily they would come to our cave to receive from Swami a lump of sugar-candy before continuing their search for food in the jungle.

Vasistha Guha is on the route to Badrinath, where the Ganges comes forth from the glacier or out of the mouth of the sacred

cow (*go-mukh*). That temple gets fully snowed under in winter, but a sacred oil lamp with sufficient oil for six months is kept burning when the temple doors are closed in September till April of the following year. Passing pilgrims then visit the cave where Swami lives and leave their offerings of wheat flour and dhal. This food is wholesome but monotonous and not balanced, as vegetables are scarce. The only fruits are hill-bananas.

Every afternoon Swami would speak to me on some passage of the Bhagavad Gita or of the Upanishads. He was a born teacher for small children, with infinite patience and loving care. One day he took me deep into his cave and initiated me as his shishya with the imposition of a mantra for meditation and that became my work. The constant repetition of the mantra and the accompanying corresponding thoughts soon had this effect. One night I heard—or thought I heard—the voice of Swamiji softly singing without words. It was so gentle and full of peace that all thought ceased. To hear better I slowly left my cave and moved closer to his. The sound of the song remained as before, till I realised that its source was not in the cave but in me. Soon I could produce it in my mind at will, and sometimes it would swell as the pealing bells of a nearby church. But I also knew it was my own mind. The joy may be ecstatic, but there is always the danger of attachment, of stagnation, of hallucination. It was Swamiji who saved me from that.

Doctrinally Swami Purushottamānanda was, of course, as a follower of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, a true blood Advaitin, an adherent of the non-dualistic theology which is neither dualistic nor monistic. It is in the realisation of non-duality, that is the realisation that the individual is but an emanation of the Absolute, that such illusion can be absorbed into the greatest, the universal self, from which it became separated by the illusion of Māyā. It is certainly a long way from the monistic theory of a Christian God and the Hebrew Jehovah, who is the creator of all, whose laws we have to obey, but who remains aloof till we are admitted into the beatific vision. Such monism in the worship of

one God is really dualism because from beginning to end there is God and the self. The self takes many forms: it is the “ego” for the man in the world like you or me; it is the “self” for the materialist who opposes himself to others in competition and exploitation; it is the “substance” for the scientist who needs a support for the phenomena he deals with; it is the “soul” for the spiritualist who needs permanence and continuance in his faith and idealism; it is the “super self” for the philosopher who thinks in categories and essence rather than in terms of existence; it is the “absolute” for him who wants to escape from relationship; it is “God” for the mystic who strives to lose himself in that spiritual union. And so, whatever way we turn in our search for truth, it remains a search for “self” in some form or other, whether monistic, dualistic or neither.

Thus there came more clarity in my approach to the search, a search which has always a pre-established goal for striving, a goal pre-determined by thought and which therefore sets out from “self” in order to find “self”. Such search if successful will inevitably lead to “self”.

One morning I woke up, shivering with cold, I thought, but it was malaria. I had gone to the river and on the hot sand I had stripped. And there they found me half delirious and carried me back to the Swami’s cave. With some homeopathic pills he had me soon cured, but weakness remained, which with the unbalanced diet was not easy to overcome.

It was February, and I had watched the lengthening of the days from the shadows cast in my cave. I had been here now for about six months, and I knew it was time to go. I felt sorry to leave that place, but I also knew that solitude is no escape from conflict as long as “self” is there. It was that “self” which now called me away, as it had lured me in satisfaction before. Two days later I was in Benares (Varanasi) and was happy to get some clean clothes from the laundry. Then I heard that Krishnaji was in town, leading a series of “discussions” in Rajghat and here was my next step. I had left my cave just in time.

Krishnamurti

Krishnaji, as we call him, would not be angry with me for including him in my saints-gallery, but if he found his photo in a rogues-gallery he would certainly be amused. In fact, in the USA some years ago his public talks had been investigated by the F.B.I. or some such organisation enquiring about un-American activities. They were returned with the remark, if that is communism, he may go ahead, because nobody will understand it.

He has certainly come a long way from the days when there was a world organization to prepare the world for the coming of Christ, when the Lord of the Universe was going to take possession of the body of this youth to give his message of peace and love to all. It was in 1919 when he was 30 years old, the age of Jesus when he began his preaching, that Krishnamurti, as head of the Order of the Star, disbanded the organisation and turned his back forever on all organized religion.

Although he has no followers in the sense of discipleship, there are thousands who follow him in Ojai (California), in Saanen (Switzerland), in Bombay, Madras, Delhi and Benares, where I met him now again. I had met him several times earlier, I had been living in his school at Rishi Valley, I have read many, if not all, his published talks and discussions, for that is the way he communicates. He has no system of philosophy; his psychology is not based on analysis like Freud or Jung; he does not adhere to any of the great religions; he does not cater for a demand for spiritual satisfaction; he does not even answer your question

directly, because there is no ready-made solution to an individual problem, and the world problem is the individual problem.

The longest time I was with him was in Madras from 19 October to 12 December 1967. While I was staying in the so-called Quadrangle of the Theosophical Society Headquarters in Adyar, Madras, Krishnaji was staying at Vasantha Vihar in Greenlands Road, on the other side of the river Adyar. There he would give his public talks three days a week, and group discussions on the other days, interspersed with private interviews. I met him also at meal times but did not share his low-salt diet. I am having here before me the notes I wrote down each day subsequent to (but not during) his talks or discussions. At that time there was an official stenographer, where nowadays his words are tape-recorded. My notes cannot be quoted as his, for they are merely my subsequent reactions. But a strange thing happened to me in the very beginning of that period of togetherness which I shall quote here from my notes written down within an hour after the experience.

It was the Sunday morning before the talks began. With some vague anticipation and excitement over the wonderful opportunity offered to me in attending such a prolonged and intensive course of “thinking together”, I had got up early that morning long before sunrise. After the usual morning attending to toilet and dressing, I sat down in my room upstairs with the light on as it was still dark. A window towards the garden to my left, another open window looking out on the verandah facing me, and next to that the door of the room, closed. The light switch was beside the door. Thus I sat down in a comfortable chair facing the open window and the closed door with the light on.

The time was 5:30am. Then a “procession of ghosts” (I am quoting from my notes) came through the closed door, four or five abreast, and hundreds of them passing in front of me through the room and out in the direction of the open window towards the garden. Each “ghost” (lacking a better word for description) was fully shrouded, and proceeded on their knees, while carrying

a parcel in his outstretched hands before him. I knew (don't ask me how) that this procession of "ghosts" was my life, each of them representing some ambition or desire. Most parcels were hiding my ambitions; still there were some carried openly. One ghost thus carried a crown, which I knew (how?) represents my ambition or striving for power. And so this procession, starting at 5:30am, went on and on. Slowly it began to become light, and I stood up, walked through the procession to the switch next to the door and switched off the light. The procession proceeded undisturbed by my going and coming.

Half an hour later the milkman brought me my daily milk, and I delivered him a message from a neighbour who would be absent for three days and wanted his milk supply stopped for that period. This was done by me through the window opening to the verandah, and again I crossed and re-crossed the procession of ghosts who continued undisturbed. Though I was not in the procession as a part of it, I knew and I felt that I was that procession.

After some further time Krishnaji himself came with that procession into my room, and seeing me he stopped and smiled at me, and sat down. I simply asked him: "What to do about it"? And he smiled back at me and said: "About what"? When I looked at the procession of ghosts again, I saw it thinning and disappearing altogether. The time was 7:30am. The entire experience had lasted two hours by the watch. I do not offer an explanation of the experience which in itself is not important; but I quote here verbatim from my notes subsequent to a talk given by Krishnaji on 27 Oct. 1967:

"The question: What to do about it? in connection with any problem cannot have any significance, apart from showing that the problem is not realised as vital, as a question of life and death. Confronted with a vital question, there will be direct, spontaneous action and no taking counsel. We will then act even against all previous advice if the actual occasion demands. Hence the question: What to do about it? must be taken as an indicator that

the problem is not important, or at least not important to me in this present moment. It is also the symptom of a lack of seriosity, which does not allow me to take vital problems seriously”.

This facing the problem directly without wanting to do something about it prevents a reaction setting in which is an escape from the real issue, which is a search for a solution by applying some acquired knowledge, memory or authority to get rid of the problem. Then what is the problem? Not how to get rid of it. Our search for a solution is an attempt at escaping from the disturbing influence which has arisen through relationship, through contact. If contact is satisfactory there is no problem. Therefore the conflict arises when there is “contradiction” in relationship. As long as everybody agrees with me and tells me what a wonderful chap I am, there is no difficulty because it flatters my “self”-consciousness. But when there is disagreement, the “self” which is the ideal that I have built up of myself is hurt; and there is opposition and conflict. The problem of conflict is therefore not in the external relationships, but in the ideal projected from the past through memory. It is the selection of memory which has created the image of “self”; and that was necessary if the “self” has to survive, for without memory there is no continuance. It is therefore the desire for continuance which creates, through memory, the ideal which is to continue in the future. In this string of continuance and projection and perpetuation of the ideal “self” there is the natural conflict with impermanence. Impermanence in itself is a fact and not a problem, but it becomes a problem and a conflict when the ideal resists the real, and a concept of permanence (soul-substance, self, ego, God) conflicts with actuality which is impermanent.

The understanding therefore of oneself knocks out the bottom of all conflicts. And as all striving is for becoming, whether that means more possessions, greater learning or higher virtue, striving will cease when becoming is seen as meaningless without a “self”. Then what happens? Without striving, without projection, without idealizing, without thinking about it, there

is a direct awareness of what actually is; there is an immediate understanding of a necessity for action, if the necessity is there. Then there is no speculation, as purposeful striving, no hope and no fear, no escape, no sublimation, no selecting, no gratification, no rationalisation of what is truth. To see the false, that it is false, that is the truth; and if the false is truly seen as false, it will just drop away. And when the false has dropped, there is freedom in an awakening of intelligence which sees and understands things as they are. Then the bindings of religion, the rules of morality, the speculations of philosophy, the fetters of tradition, the restrictions of race and nationality, which are so many concepts which protect the "self", will all be meaningless and will never again become a source of conflict.

And that is the meaning of freedom and emancipation.

Epilogue

Looking back over these pages, it comes to me as a surprise that all six saints I have lived with for some short time in India, in the south-east of Madras, in the south-west of Malabar, in the very north of the Himalayas, and in the most holy town of Benares, all belonged by birth to the same ethnic Dravidian group, and yet belonged to the world as a whole. Each one in his own way had lost that individualism of birth, and was free from the narrow confines of race and nationality. That perhaps was the only thing they had in common, as so many flowers in one garden, adding to the beauty of the whole. India is not the only soil where saints can grow and this variety will increase from land to land. There have been the great mystics in the past, saints like Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross, there have been Ruysbroeks and unknowers, as the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing". There must be many still in the cold mountains of the northern countries in silent contemplation, and in the warm Latin climates more suitable to emotional devotions, such as Francis of Assisi in his time; the Sufis in the desert lands of the Middle East, and among the followers and masters of Zen.

Some of them I have met and lived with, though they did not acquire the unsought fame of others. There was my novice master in the south of England who lived on the cross where Jesus died; the Vicar-General in an Italian monastery whose fear of sin was the beginning (and the end) of his wisdom; my own sister who took my place before the throne of God when I had

vacated that privileged position; I knew one walking the streets of London, playing cards to make money for the poor, while he himself lived in a tool-shed in the back of a garden; I knew quite a few here in Ceylon whom I cannot mention because they are still alive and too close to me. Nobody would believe them and they would be embarrassed. But all have that deep understanding which is love in need and without greed, who see and then are free; they may be quaint ...but that is a saint!

About the Author

Henri van Zeyst was born in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1905. Educated throughout in Catholic schools and colleges, he spent his final years of studies in philosophy and theology and the first year of his priestly ordination in an Italian monastery near Florence. At the age of 31 he was sent to London to be in charge of a new foundation of his Order, where he was also teaching Dogmatic Theology to the scholastics of Christus Rex Priory in North London. An intensive course of comparative religion brought him in contact with Buddhism. Within a year of his coming to Sri Lanka he was ordained a Buddhist monk there in 1938 under the name of Bhikkhu Dhammapāla. From 1956 to 1968 he worked at the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya of which he was in the final years of that period the Senior Assistant Editor and Administrative Officer. During the last stages of his life he was residing in a meditation centre at Nilambe, Kandy, giving instructions to those who came to him for guidance on meditation.

He died on September 15th in 1988.