

## COVER STORY

# Visiting Sri Anandamoyi Ma



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## By Rama Jyoti Vernon

In 1973 my husband and I were hosted on our first trip to India by Sant Keshavadas, known to his many followers as "the spiritual nightingale of India." It was through Sant that we met many masters, including one of India's most revered, in the female form, Sri Anandamoyi Ma (the blissful eternal mother of discrimination).\*

I first felt the desire to see Anandamoyi Ma in 1959, when reading Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Mataji, as she is endearingly called by throngs of Indian devotees, is considered to be a saint (self-actualized). Saint in Sanskrit is "Sant."

"Just what is a saint?" we asked Sant. His quiet reply was simple, but nearly impossible. "A saint is one who is equal in all situations." A saint, as I later found out, is also one around whom many people experience extraordinary phenomena. In the West, a saint is usually dead. But in the East saints are very much alive.

What began as a pilgrimage of appreciation of India's vast cultural heritage, ended as an expedition into the unexpected. In our search for Mataji, we were directed to Hardwar, a tiny city on the banks of the Ganges, overflowing with ochre-robed swamis, and sadhus with the matted locks of Lord Shiva. As if on a treasure hunt, our small party of five blindly, but faithfully, followed directions from one temple to the next.

"Let's quit," the others said. The humidity of monsoon season mingled with the piercing sun's rays to steam our bodies and heat our tempers. "No!" I said. An obsession to find her made me insensitive to their discomforts. We forged on, much to everyone's silent displeasure. We climbed the stairs of what the group decided would be the last temple. A priest met us at the top saying that Anandamoyi Ma was in seclusion at the nearby Ashram of the Seven Sages. I was breathless at the beauty of the name . . . the others said they were breathless from climbing the stairs.

The monsoons had flooded roads along the banks of the Ganges. To reach the gates of the ashram we needed to pass through one of these roads. Our hired cars could go no further, so we were forced to get out and walk. The waters had receded leaving enormous potholes of mud. As we neared our destination the mud deepened, inhaling sandals, saris, bermuda socks and my husband's favorite tennis shoes. Sacred cows roam more freely than people in India, and the consequent mixture of mud and fresh cow dung was not too popular with the more finicky members of our group.

"A saint is one who is equal in all situations. Even the mud is divine." Sant reminded us of the lotus that floats on top of the water after growing from the depths of the mud. I was definitely not a saint. The suction of the mud reminded me of the pull of gravity upon the mind, and mine was sinking fast. Was this a test? Our small band of pilgrims, to show their goodwill and forgiveness, smiled at me through clenched teeth and furrowed brows.

\*Honorable Sanskrit title.

As we sloshed on I thought of all the miraculous stories of the seekers and the sought. There was once a man who followed Hariakhan Baba into the Himalayan peaks to seek discipleship. When Babaji said "No," the man jumped to his death. And here we were complaining about a little mud. Although the story had a happy ending, the others in the group were not too happy to hear it.

In India, before meeting a saint or sage, custom dictates that one be bathed and clean. We arrived at the Ashram of the Seven Sages with eager faces, mud-spattered torsos and clay feet. The name was as entrancing as the grounds were beautiful. They were filled with fragrant roses and bougainvillea. A multi-tiered fountain stood majestically in the center of a tiled courtyard. In the back were attached buildings surrounded by large trees shading the weary traveler from a sun that always shines. The word "Ashram" literally means shelter in the woods. However, in India, they are city sanctuaries where one can take reflective refuge from the noise and turbulence of the crowded dust-filled streets.

We were met at the gate by a soft-spoken swami, uncommonly neat in his starched ochre robe, English umbrella and shiny black and white spats. As we crossed the threshold, dragging our footprints behind us, he graciously sent for water and towels. Sant explained our mission, asking if Mataji was there and if she would receive us. To protect her privacy, the Swami pretended not to know. When he was told that we had traveled 15,000 miles for this moment, he scurried away giving instructions for us to wash and to wait.

When he returned saying that she would receive us in private, I could not contain my joy. For years I had heard stories of the miraculous experiences of others. Although I had always pretended not to want such things, now my heart was pounding with expectation. We filed past a long line of devotees that had been waiting for days to catch a glimpse of "the secluded mother." Their palms were pressed in the reverential greeting of namaste. In passing, we returned the greeting. A mild feeling of unworthiness swept over me . . . I wanted to give my place to one of them but it was too late.

As we entered the second story room, it was a shock to see "the Mother" sitting erect and cross-legged on a small raised platform. She was dictating an article on meditation to her secretary. I had expected her to be bubbling with joy and unable to function on the physical plane. Instead, she was calm and articulate.

The impact of our shocks and surprises are only measured by the degree of our own expectations. I realized afterwards that I had expected to find her lying languorously on a sofa (Rama Maharishi-style) or slumped in a chair in a catatonic state of ecstasy, mumbling divine incantations. Instead, she was sitting firmly upright with a towel wrapped around her head. She had just washed her hair and would dry it at intervals between dictation. Her attendant was in the same room behind a half-pulled



curtain preparing her lunch—another surprise. I was bewildered. “How could this be?” I wondered. “She’s supposed to be blissed out . . . drunk on God. She’s not supposed to have any desire for food . . . only God . . . How can she eat? Isn’t that sacrilegious? How can she do such a simple and mundane thing like wash her own hair?”

She was toppling from the pedestal that I had built from my own imaginings and expectations. The disappointment must have shown. “There is a difference in the levels of samadhi,” Santji whispered as we were invited to sit. “Sam” means to put together and “Adhi” means to adhere or to stick to. “She used to be in savikalpa samadhi when she was younger,” he added, “now she is in nirvikalpa.”\* That didn’t help. “When she was younger,” Sant whispered, “she could not function. Now she can. She has pierced through the form of her experiences and can now integrate her expanded states of consciousness into the actions of daily life.”

We had not brought the customary offering of fruit or flowers. The offering to the teacher is like a prostration; it is symbolic of the offering of one’s heart and the softening of one’s ego. It is of no benefit to bend a rigid knee if the ego does not bend with it. It serves no purpose to offer a flower if the heart does not reach out with it. The outer symbols are only reminders of the less tangible symbols within. We do not offer or bow to the personality within the body, but the light of universal essence that shines through it.

We had only a song to offer. We chanted Sant’s composition of “Rama Krishna Hari.” Her attendants were mildly amused at seeing Western men and women trying to adjust their tongues to the language and their bottoms to the floor. At that time, Indians were surprised if we adopted their customs and ways of dress, but we Westerners were surprised if they didn’t adopt ours.

She offered us prasada (divine food) and after eating in silence, Sant nudged me and said, “Sit closer to her.” I was already near her feet, but I tried to scoot closer. Pressing my palms in the customary namaste, I bowed my head to the floor. “Look into her eyes,” Sant urged. I was caught in the grip of self-consciousness. “I’ll look and then move away quickly,” I thought reluctantly. My greatest fear was that she would look back and see that even though my body was in a posture of humility, my heart and ego were not.

Mataji was always surrounded by thousands of followers. Those who spoke to me of her had always viewed and been affected by her at a distance. Yet here I was, nearly touching the hem of her garment, and nothing was happening. Feelings of unworthiness were choking my cells, forcing them to contract so as to take up as little space as possible. My body was occupying a place that should belong to those who love and believe in her. Although my insistence had brought us here, now I wanted to be elsewhere . . . or nowhere. Where else was there to go?

Not wanting to be rude, I looked *at* but not *into* her eyes.

A strange translucent film slowly began spreading out over them. It was as if an invisible curtain of dewy haze was descending from the upper to the lower lids. Tears were forming, but they did not fall. Instead, one droplet merged into the next until her eyes were two gigantic teardrops. I was overwhelmed with sorrow and wanted to look away. “Look into her eyes,” Sant quietly commanded. I tried, but they were no longer *her* eyes . . . they were the eyes of human pain and suffering. They were the cries of the body writhing in the limitations of its own creation: the endless search for human love, freedom from pain and the bondage of our attachments. They were the agony of the spirit crying out, life after life, in its earthly search for unity. “We are all one,” they seemed to say. Within them she held no pity or sympathy for humanity’s sufferings . . . because she was one with it. She was the eternal Mother mourning the deaths of her children. She held the world in her eyes, and within them I could see the reflection of my own sorrow . . . sorrow so deep that I could not reach its depths. A wave of energy leapt from my chest into my throat forming a knot of lifetimes of unshed tears. The pain was unbearable.

→ “You will not know God,” she said to me with her eyes, “until you cry for Him as the mother cries out for her lost child. Want Him above all else.” Her eyes glowed with the essence of unconditional love . . . love which has no limits, contracts or expectations . . . that which exists for its sake alone. “Ma,” I ached to cry, but could not. I was choking on my own sorrow and feelings of self-pity. She was supposed to be *joyful* not *sorrowful* mother. Where was the joy? I tried to move and look away, but my gaze and limbs were paralyzed.

Just then, the pupils of her eyes began rolling upward into their sockets. Mine could not help but follow hers. Her eyes were turning up into her head and I was turning up with them. The knot in my throat loosened and a jolt of energy moved from throat to head. The heaviness in my heart lightened. I was now looking at, rather than swimming in, the sea of planetary pains.

Was it possible to look at one’s own pain without feeling it? And feel another’s as we would our own? She spoke without speaking, “Pain comes from attachment and rejection. We create our own. It is the expectation of getting and the fear of losing.” Instead of turbulence, her eyes were now still lakes mirroring the joys of the infinite. She held in them the bliss of unitive consciousness from which all things flow. First, there had been an inkling of the symptom of pain, and now, a glimpse of its source which is beyond both pain and pleasure and all polarities—it just is.

As I was about to take a deep breath and relax, her eyes suddenly became swirling magnetic vortices of energy. They were the universe and I was standing on its edge, ready to drop in. Fear loomed up, stretching its tentacles over the openings of my mind. I tried to pass through but could not. I was standing in my own way, crowding the doorway to self-awakening.

Frantically, I searched for feeling and identity within my body. Where was *my* arm . . . *my* leg . . . *my* head? I could

\*In Sanskrit, “kalpa” is a measure of time; “vi” is negating; in this case meaning without. “Vikalpa” is without time. This refers to fancy or imagination. The prefix “sa” means with and “nir” without. Hence, “savikalpa” means with imagination or form and “nirvikalpa” is without. “Nirvikalpa samadhi” is the transcendent state of awareness that is formless in its perception of universal truth.



not feel where I was supposed to be. "Where did God stand when He created the universe," my son once asked. "Where do we stand when we look at the universe?" the I now asked. Nirlamba . . . without support.

As the variations of each of the yoga postures are symbolic of life's situations, the way we do the pose is the way we do our life. The postures are tools for self-exploration, for redefining one's spatial as well as social relationships. I was learning through yoga asana that it takes courage to change one's habitual positions and move through space without fear of falling. I did not have that courage at this time.

Mataji did not "teach." She was a clear crystal reflecting one's own image; the clearer the being, the more penetrating the reflection. I was struck to the core. Whether standing on feet or head, fears—all the little ones such as failure, criticism, rejection—are all tied to the ultimate fear, death. It was not the death of the body I feared when looking into the universe of her eyes, but the letting go of life—the annihilation of ego. Without speaking, she revealed to me that I did not have even the courage of the infant who ventures out for a first step, for that is based on faith. I did not have that faith, for that is based on love. And I now knew that all my practices in yoga, until that moment, had been done with an empty heart.

Mataji's eyes continued rolling upward, moving into

galaxies where I could not follow. As her lids closed, one could feel her journey into the infinite begin. I sat before her vacant body, alone and yet not alone, remembering what Yogananda called "her paradoxical isolation of omnipresence."

Her attendant signaled that it was time to leave. We arose knowing that it was not the end to the journey, but an endless beginning. At the door, I turned for one last look. Her form was erect and motionless, immersed in radiance. No one spoke of personal experiences, but in the sunlight of the courtyard our embraces of each other were overflowing with joy and self-giving.

I do not remember the muddy walk to our waiting cars. But I do remember glancing back at the temple towers of the Ashram of the Seven Sages, filled with the knowledge that Sri Anandamoyi Ma carries within her heart the saintly love and immersion in God consciousness, tempered by the discriminative wisdom of a sage.

"Behold now and always one with the Eternal, I am ever the same."—Mataji ☆

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