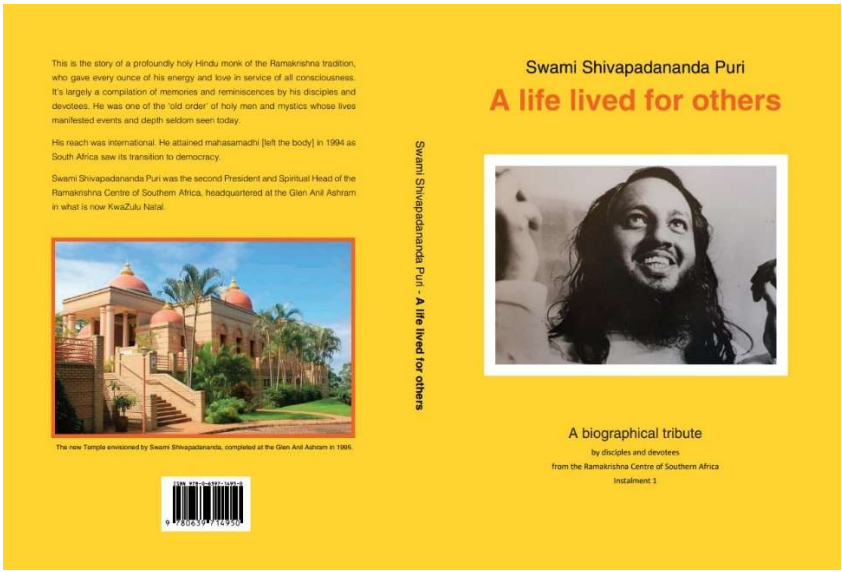
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A private, unofficial biographical tribute
by disciples and devotees of Swami Shivapadananda.

This is a draft, expanded work in progress, currently at **394 pages**
which will continue to be added to, from time to time.
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Please also enjoy over 1200 transcriptions or recordings of Swamiji speaking, available at https://swamishivapadananda.typepad.com
And Daily Talks published on https://swamishivapadananda.com
(These are live links above – you can click on them)

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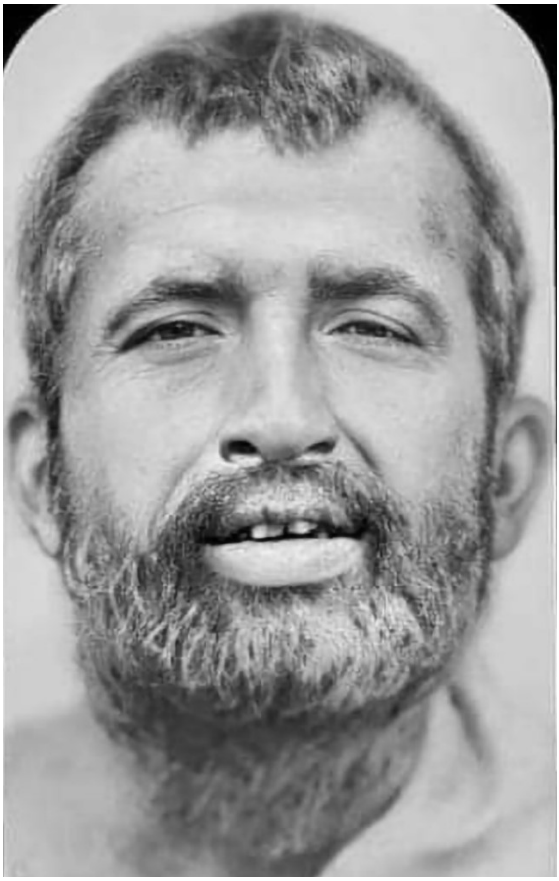
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Grateful Thanks
Our deepest pranams to Br Vasan Govender, Br Atmaprakash Kramer and Br Surend Barath who sponsored the first hard copy print runs of this book.



Paramahamsa Sri Ramakrishna [1836-1886] Also referred to as 'Thakur' or Master.
Sri Ramakrishna is widely regarded as an incarnation of God. His spiritually revolutionary dictum was, 'Religions are like rivers. They all end in that One ocean called God.' He also said, 'As many devotees, so many paths.' Ending the notion that a particular approach or ideology has a franchise on the Divine.
His astonishing life at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple in India has been exquisitely documented by Mahendranath Gupta [Sri 'M'] in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. It's complemented by the detailed recounting written by his direct disciple, Swami Saradananda in *Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master.*

मूकं करोति वाचालं पङ्गुं लङ्घयते गिरिं ।
यत्कृपा तमहं वन्दे परमानन्द माधवम् ॥

mūkaṁ karoti vācālaṁ paṅguṁ laṅghayate giriṁ ।
yatkr̥pā tamahaṁ vande paramānanda mādhavam ॥

Meaning as given to me by Papa:
'I salute that Madhava, the source of supreme bliss, whose grace makes the dumb man eloquent and the cripple cross mountains.'

Dear reader, greetings in the name of Paramahamsa Sri Ramakrishna and that of our beloved Guru, Swami Shivapadananda Puri to whom this biographical tribute is dedicated. The starting day of this work in progress was Wednesday the 25th of May 2022.



His Holiness Sri Swami Shivapadananda Puri [1938-1994]. My 'Papa'.

Welcome to this biographical tribute of love and worship. It's comprised largely of devotee reminiscences about our beloved Guru, Sri Swami Shivapadananda Puri Maharaj, whom I refer to as 'Papa'.

He was the second president and spiritual head of the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, headquartered at the Avoca (aka Glen Anil today) ashram,

KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. We have kept with the original 'Avoca' throughout this memoire, for the sake of consistency.

The 'Puri' suffix indicates that this line of monks descends from Tota Puri, or Nangta [the naked one] as he was referred to by Sri Ramakrishna. He was the Advaitin [practitioner of non-dualism] and sadhu [holy man] who played a role in Sri Ramakrishna's life during Master's sadhana [spiritual practise] period.

Other Hindu monks will have the suffixes of Giri, Saraswati and so on following their monastic names, indicating their Guruparampara [spiritual lineage].

The ashram name given to me by Papa is Brother Francis. I have the extraordinary grace and privilege of being a disciple or initiate of Papa, having re-made our physical acquaintance in 1971.

I had the joy of taking this picture of Papa while he sat next to a pillar on the veranda of the old ashram. I took several pictures that day, including of Papa with his first monastic disciple, Swami Premananda Puri, our Gurubhai [brother-disciple of the same spiritual Preceptor or Guru]. Papa had six monastic disciples, being Swamis Premananda, Saradananda [now Saradaprabhananda and referred to hereafter by that name], Madhavananda, Pravrajika Atmaprana, Pravrajika Ishtaprana and Swami Tribhuvan. Initiated in that order.

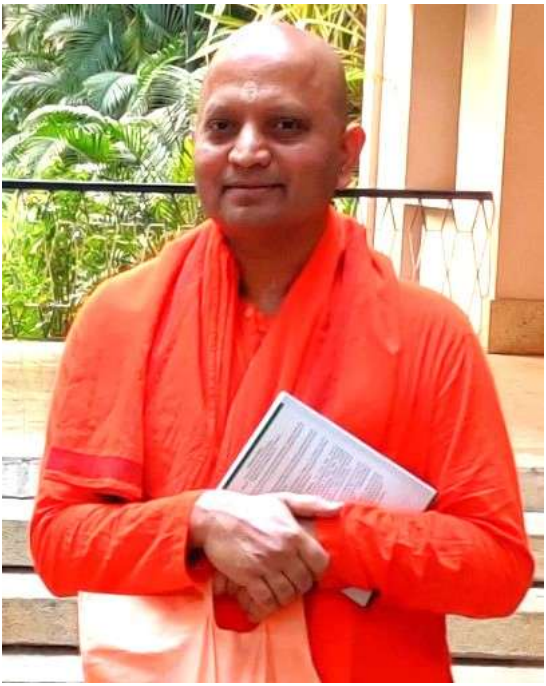
Once, when we were talking about photography, Papa said that he wished for anyone looking at his picture, to get the same feeling he was experiencing when the picture was taken.

In the first few pictures I took of Papa he looked rather serious. In my naivete, I asked, 'Could you smile please?' Papa replied gently, 'I am smiling – inside.' But then he externalised that lovely smile. May you be blessed by him and all the great ones who came before him in our Guruparampara [lineage of spiritual preceptors].

I'm but one among several contributors to this project, in the role of compiler and co-ordinator of insights and stories which we hope will both thrill and inspire you on your spiritual journey. The richest biographical insights are from devotees rather than linear or chronological historical facts. And they will continue to unfold in subsequent instalments. This first instalment is a broad-brush-stokes 'scene-setter'. Much detail will follow later. If you spot glitches, please let us know.

These reminiscences about Papa's earthly life, will with divine grace in time be featured as an e-book, in which the colour pictures will be seen!

Embrace The Change



The initial idea of generating Papa's biographical information and teachings in incremental instalments, was suggested by Swami Swatmaramananda [pictured] the President of the Ramakrishna Centre at Avoca in South Africa.

Maharaj [literally great 'king'] is the preferred term used for monks of the Ramakrishna order, rather than 'Swamiji', which of out profound respect, is used by the order exclusively to refer to Sri Ramakrishna's chief disciple, the great Swami Vivekananda.

Picture Quality Or Lack Of

Some of the photographs used are inescapably of quite poor quality. Many date back a long way and are photographs-of-photographs or were sent by WhatsApp or via older mobile phone messaging. But the spirit of the individuals or the times hopefully remains intact.

We hope to make the biography and reminiscences easily accessible and comprehensible to the widest possible audience. Explanations of terms, names or other clarifications are in [square brackets like this] immediately following any possibly unfamiliar word or term, so your reading is uninterrupted. It may also signal that we're inserting an anecdote, clarification, observation, or additional information.

We've used only the lightest possible editorial touch on contributed items. The idea is to be faithful to the voice and style of the contributing individual.

There's intentionally no Preface with this work, or as Swami Vivekananda would have described it, 'worship'. Because few people ever read a Preface, much less a Foreword. Instead, I've put these 'housekeeping' but essential items here to be sure you extract maximum value from browsing or reading.

Chiselling Through The Mountain

I went to bed late the night before starting what the team named 'Project Papa', thinking, 'Dear Papa, I have no idea where to start this writing. Please give me some guidance.' Next morning, I woke up and in my mind was a story I read some time back, about a very special man from India.

It's an exquisite metaphor for spiritual life and attempting to capture the life of a mahatma [great soul] like Papa, between the covers of a book. Here is that story.



In 1959, Dashrath Manjhi's wife Falguni Devi died on a steep mountain path, whilst desperately trying to reach medical care on the other side. This sad event took place in the Gehlour Hills in Bihar state, in the east of India. Dashrath was determined that this should not happen to anyone again.

To honour his wife's memory and make future life safer and easier for his fellow villagers, this landless farmer took on a Herculean task. Using only a hammer and chisel, he set about carving a path through the same mountain which forced villagers to travel a circuitous fifty-five kilometres to get to the nearest doctor.

People laughed at his 'crazy' idea and teased him. Some indulgently, others not so much. He worked all day and sometimes late into the night from 1960 to 1982. That's twenty-two years. Eventually, he'd carved a path one hundred and ten metres long and at places, seven and a half metres deep. In doing so, he shortened the distance to reach medical care from fifty-five kilometres to just fifteen. An incredible achievement, by any measure.

The Bihar government nominated him for the Padma Shri award in 2006. Popularly known as the 'Mountain Man', he passed away on 17th August 2007 at the age of 73, from gall bladder cancer. To honour his achievements, a hospital to serve the villagers was built in his name.



This extraordinary man was given a state funeral by the government of Bihar. There's some interesting YouTube footage about him.

Our Papa chiselled away at an inaccessible information and sadhana mountain, to cut a path to what he called our 'spiritual hospital' about which, more, later.

The Start

I checked for Rahu Kalam [according to Hinduism, an inauspicious period occurring at different times each day based on geographic location] and sat down at my laptop to start a journey along with many other disciples and devotees of Papa, to chisel away at the mountain of information about this holy monk, my beloved Guru, Swami Shivapadananda – our Papa.

Egos out of the way

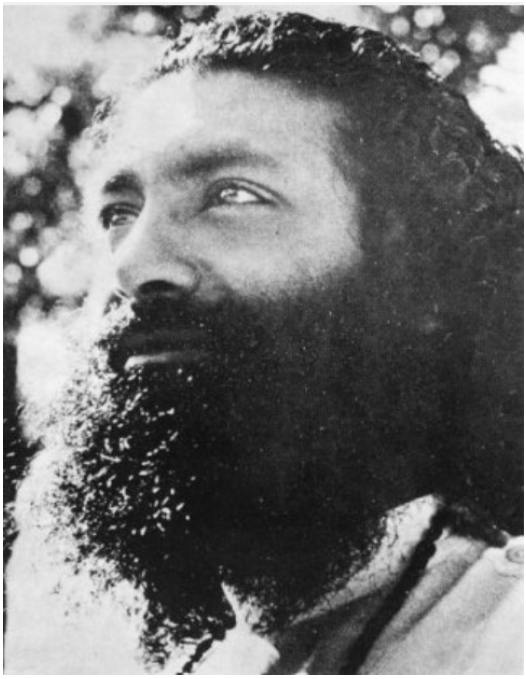
Each contributor has presented information and impressions as they saw, heard, or experienced them. Some contributors expressed a concern that it might sound like them writing about 'I, I, I'. But since all contributions are

personal reminiscences and anecdotes, this is perfectly understandable. And will reveal multiple facets of Papa as perceived by the contributors.

We will leave the take-away to you, dear reader. No editorial disclaimer required. Papa often said, 'The ant will find the grain of sugar, if there is a grain of sugar to be found.' Please read with an open mind. Take what's comfortable for you and ignore what isn't.

Why Are We Drawn To Holy People?

Our revered paramguru [one preceptor up the lineage], Swami Nischalananda, Papa's Guru [pictured] once asked him, 'Inder, [Papa's premonastic name] why do you come to the ashram?' Papa replied, 'Because I love you, Swamiji.' Gurudev gently responded, 'No. You come here because I love you.' I have no doubt that applies to us all.



It's important to note that Papa was strongly anti any yogic miracles being performed in the public eye. And he rarely did that. But, like all great yogis, he used divine power to heal and do various things when only close devotees were around, or most often, in an unobtrusive and subtle way. Always, but always giving credit for any positive outcome to Sri Ramakrishna. On the numerous occasions I said of something, 'Papa's grace' he would quickly say, 'Master's grace.' Or 'Mother's grace.'

One day in rather cheeky desperation, I retorted, 'Please tell me the difference.' He remained serene and silent.

Papa told me that he let certain devotees witness these 'miraculous' happenings, to increase our faith. As the number of devotees coming to the Ramakrishna Centre grew significantly from the early 1970s, such observable mystical, magical moments became fewer and fewer.

Holy Books



Papa once said, 'Everything you need to know about spiritual life is in Master's Gospel.' [Sri Ramakrishna's Gospel]. When I refer to 'Master', it's Sri Ramakrishna, sometimes referred to as 'Thakurji' – which means Master. To 'Holy Mother', it's Sri Sarada Devi Ma. 'Gurudev' is Swami Nischalananda, the first president and spiritual head of the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, which he founded in 1942. 'Guruji' is our revered Swami Purushottamananda who lived for over thirty years in a cave named Vasishtha guha on the banks of the Ganga [river Ganges] near Rishikesh in the Himalayas. Traditional Hindu history says that the original Vasistha Muni [sage] who is one of the eternal Sapta [seven] Rishis, really did live in that cave, thousands of years ago.

The current ashram at Vasishtha guha is depicted below. If I refer to 'Mummy' [pictured below] or 'ashram Mummy', I'm talking about Sri Jayanti Devi Mataji, whom I regarded as, referred to and introduced as my





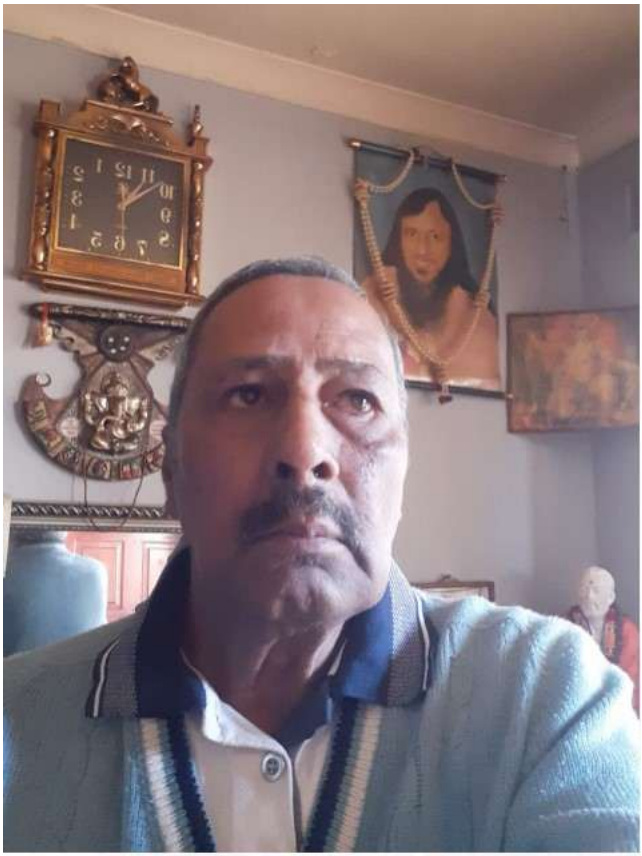
Godmother – with a capital G. Mummy was the closest disciple of both Swami Nischalananda and Swami Shivapadananda [Papa]. Mummy left the body in 2015 at the age of 86.

For non-Hindu readers, 'Sri' as a precursor, is an honorific, indicating reverence or respect. The suffix 'ji' is a term indicating affectionate respect for the individual. The role that these great spiritual personalities played, will unfold progressively throughout this writing.

'The pen is an instrument in the hand of the writer. In the same way, you are an instrument in the hands of God. When you forget that, remind yourself again of it.' – Swami Shivapadananda [our Papa].

Papa used to emphasise that it's not the book [or other process] that gets the praise or reviews, but the author. And the true author is God. We are but instruments in the process.

Our Gurubhai



A key contributor of pictures and information about Papa's pre-monastic life is our late Bashabhai [Brother Basha] as we referred to him – seen alongside and more formally known as Sridutt Lutchman. He was Papa's pre-monastic younger brother. We use the term 'pre-monastic' because on taking final vows, the monk renounces worldly attachments and embraces all consciousness as his family.

Other information comes from the recordings made over a period of more than twenty years of Papa speaking both formally and informally. They are from ashram mother Radha [Elizabeth or Betty to her non-ashram friends]. She was very close to Papa and to Swami Venkatesananda of the Divine Life

ashram in Mauritius. Raised in India, she also spoke Hindustani. She was emphatic, bossy, and outspoken. Often rubbing up people the wrong way with her delightfully frank views. To my unending merriment, she inadvertently tended to give orders rather than make requests. One day, she accidently did this with Papa, and he very sweetly said, 'You think I'm your husband?'



I adored Radha. And because holy men are called sadhus and she was female, I punned and nicknamed her 'Sadhini'.

We were a duo who frequently charged off into Durban city at short notice, to get items needed for the ashram or which Papa personally needed. Radha was expert at sourcing electronic bits and bobs or household repair items.

She'd started transcribing and editing some of her recordings of Papa at that time. We often debated the issue of changing just one word of what a holy person said. Even if it was seemingly ungrammatical. Because we'd learned that by changing it, you sometimes put at risk the entire intended meaning. Or worse, presented the teaching as the 180 degrees opposite of what was meant.

We included trips to her printer to check on the progress of her short-run, stapled booklets. She was the generous and energetic force ensuring that so many of Papa's world-benefitting thoughts would not wither in obscurity

but reach a much wider audience. That was her vision, and this biographical tribute will help give her sadhana [spiritual practise] the broader international exposure that it richly deserves.

Low Blood Sugar And The Grumps

I realised that the driver of Radha's impatience [and my own] was low blood sugar or hypoglycaemia. I made sure we always had something sweet or tasty at hand and when she started to get just a wee bit crabby on our shopping forays, I'd feed her. It worked every time. She was a delightful character with a beaming smile and a hearty laugh. And we laughed often.



Radha's son and our dear Gurubhai, Brother Tim [pictured], took over the role of transcribing the sometimes difficult to hear audio tapes. Digitally enhancing the sound quality and removing hissing or other noises resulting from the suboptimal recording equipment of the 1970s.

Tim has painstakingly made these available as sets of DVDs and sends, like clockwork, a daily transcribed reading, and an audio clip to devotees.

Religious Unity And Badsha Pir's Shrine

In the early 1900s, Hindus and Muslims in South Africa regularly attended each other's religious festivals and cultural events and they had strong social bonds. Social contrivances like Apartheid – discussed further on – forced the separation and ultimately, the alienation of these communities from each other. Apartheid was very much 'divide and rule'.

Both Papa and Bashabhai attended Hindu and Muslim religious functions in an area of Durban, that became the famous old Indian Market, close to the burial place of the revered Sufi Saint, Badsha Pir.

'Badsha' is an honorific, meaning at its very simplest, 'leader'. Pir or Peer [Persian: پیر, lit. 'elder'] is a title for a Sufi spiritual guide. They are also referred to as a Hazrat [from Arabic: حضرة, romanised: Ḥaḍra] and Sheikh or Shaykh, which is the Arabic equivalent. Badsha Pir arrived in South Africa in 1860, one of the first Indian indentured [contracted] labourers to arrive in the country and he chose the north coast of Natal as it then was, as his destination.

Indenture contracts lasted anything from five to ten years. Those who chose the ten-year option were given the choice on expiration of their term, of returning to India at the expense of the government or remaining in South Africa. Badsha Pir chose to remain.

Badsha Pir's burial place was originally almost lost to us. Years after his passing, his holiness was recognised by the great Muslim missionary and saint, Hazrath Shah Goolam Muhammad Sufi. Badsha Pir had predicted this saint's arrival. The holy man intuitively sought out Badsha Pir's unmarked and weed-covered grave, cleared the undergrowth off it, placed his very own shawl on it, positioned stones on either side and pronounced him a saint. It is believed that Hazrath Badsha Pir's lineage is traceable back to the Holy Prophet Muhammad [pbuh] himself.

Papa sent some Muslim people that I personally knew, to pray or meditate at this Sufi mystic's shrine. There they inevitably found mental peace and solutions to their worries.

The exquisite picture (when in colour) of Badsha Pir's tomb is from https://www.sa-venues.com/attractionskzn/hazrath-badsha-Pir-shrine.php Today his tomb is a place of pilgrimage for people of many spiritual persuasions.



Virtually in the middle of the busy market on Victoria Street Durban, stands the Brook Street cemetery, one of the oldest cemeteries in Durban. Here, among the four different religious denominations of the cemetery [Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish] is Badsha Pir's shrine.

The fuller story of how Badsha Pir was recognised as a saint, tells how he spent more time in meditation and spiritual exercises while sitting under a tree, than he did ploughing and cultivating his designated labour area. His fellow workers feared that he would be punished for neglecting his duties but at the end of each day his area of land was tilled as required. Yet nobody saw him move.

Ashram Mummy, Sri Jayanti Devi, [pictured with a young Siphe Buthelezi – more about him later] – told me that a good number of Indian people in those days used Tantric or occult powers to do their tilling of the land in the sugar cane



fields. They'd chant the appropriate mantra, and sit quietly under a tree, while the hoe, worked vigorously by unseen hands, tilled the earth. Western minds may now be having a 'what the!' moment on reading this. But be patient. There are likely many more 'what the!' moments ahead.

The British government officials recognised Badsha Pir's religious influence and spiritual powers [or were possibly a little afraid of him and his beneficial influence?] and gave him an honourable release. Instead of a salary, which they offered him, he asked to be transported to Durban, where he went straight to the Grey Street Mosque – seen below, then a lot smaller than it is now.

He moved into a tin shack directly behind the mosque and continued to commune with Allah. He made many predictions about events which would and did occur. But few of these were taken seriously at the time because nobody yet recognised him as a saint.



Grey Street Mosque or Masjid - Durban

Religion and 'politricks'

Papa once said to us, 'This ashram is not a retirement home for saints. It's a hospital for sinners. And when you've been admitted here, we don't discharge you until you're cured!' He also often emphasised that people bring their minds with them when they join any organisation. And they're not all there motivated by lofty ideals or objectives. So, ego, jealousy, rivalry and its ugly cousins will also be present.

I've learned that all clergy and religious community members, from the highest levels on down, can be politicians. And, as the truly holy late Pope

Francis refers to them, 'careerists'. They develop sharp elbows in their jostling for status, influence, and control. They don't have any special immunity from such power plays. That's the price of having a human brain and a share of the cosmic mind. Maha Maya, the divine force of deception and illusion which keeps this whole cosmic simulation or lila [play] going, needs cast members and participants. And religious organisations can be a talent recruitment bureau for such people.

South Africa Before Papa

Understanding the context into which Papa took a body [was born] in 1938, in Apartheid South Africa, into the family of a marginalised [Indian] community is important for context. Knowing the social circumstances of the time, provides insight and relevance, particularly for non-South African readers.

In 1938, when Papa was born, South Africa was a socio-political cesspool, at the height of Apartheid – which was legislated and rigorously enforced racial discrimination. The National Party government clung to and preferred using the euphemism 'separate development', hoping it would gain traction and become the accepted term. Fortunately, it never did. Apartheid remains the crime against humanity that the United Nations declared it to be in 1966. Papa's family lived under the oppression of this racist regime jackboot before his birth and for another 56 years until he entered mahasamadhi [passed on] in 1994.

That was the year which saw the transition to democracy in South Africa, with Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela as our first democratically elected president. Rolihlahla is an IsiXhosa name meaning 'he who tugs at the branch of the tree'. Colloquially interpreted as 'a troublemaker.' He was and is still lovingly and respectfully referred to by many South Africans, using his clan-name, 'Madiba'.



In Madiba's case, trouble of a very beneficial and transformative kind. A great soul, forged through the suffering of twenty-seven years of imprisonment for unswerving commitment to his beliefs.

Encyclopaedia Britannica elaborates: 'Racial segregation, sanctioned by law, was widely practiced in South Africa before 1948. But when the National Party, led by [Prime Minister] Daniel F. Malan, gained office that year, it extended the policy and gave it the name Apartheid. The implementation of Apartheid, often called 'separate development' since the 1960s, was made possible through the Population Registration Act of 1950, which classified all South Africans as either Bantu [Black Africans], Coloured [those of mixed race], or white. A fourth category—Asian [Indian and Pakistani]—was later added.'

The South African government contorted itself into ludicrous shapes to smooth international trade relations. 'In 1984, the Group Areas Act was amended to allow Chinese South Africans to live in areas the government had declared white areas and use the facilities within them. However, they never attained the formal 'honorary white' status of Taiwanese, Koreans, and Japanese [who were trade partners] in South Africa and also couldn't vote.' – excerpt from the Wall Street Journal.

'One of the other most significant acts forming the basis of the apartheid system was the Group Areas Act of 1950. It established residential and business sections in urban areas for each race, and members of other races were not allowed to live, run businesses, or own land in them. Which led to

thousands of Coloureds, Blacks, and Indians being forcibly removed from areas classified for white occupation.

This act and two others in 1954 and 1955, which became known collectively as the Land Acts, completed a dispossession process that had started with similar Land Acts adopted in 1913 and 1936. The result was to set aside more than 80% of South Africa's land for the white minority. To help enforce the segregation of the races and prevent blacks from encroaching on white areas, the government strengthened the existing pass laws, which required 'non-whites' to carry documents authorising their presence in restricted areas. [This passbook was given the colloquial name of 'dompas' by black communities. Literally meaning in Afrikaans, 'dumb pass'.] End of excerpt.

As a significant example of the indignity that these inhumane, evil laws inflicted on most of the South African population, Indian people were not permitted to sleep overnight in the then Orange Free State province. They were also not allowed to stay overnight elsewhere, in premises occupied by white people. You'll read in Swami Chandikananda's valuable reminiscences further on in this book, just how petty and disruptive some of these laws were, for people of colour.



Pictured left to right. Jay Soni, Papa, ashram Mummy Sri Jayanti Devi and Sister Henny Schimmel. Picture unrelated to the accommodation event later described by Swami Chandikananda.

Indenture And Freedom

This potted pen outline overleaf is loosely excerpted from SAHO [South African History Online].
URL https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/indian-community
It provides valuable understanding.



2010 marked the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Indian indentured workers and the growth of this community in South Africa.

Durban is home to the largest Indian population in South Africa. They contribute to the multicultural atmosphere of the city and many Indian rituals and traditions can still be observed today.

Between November 1860 and 1911 [when the system of indentured labour was stopped] over 153 000 indentured workers from across India arrived in Durban. But in 1885, to maintain the labour pool, a three Pound [the British and South African currency in use at the time] tax was implemented on formerly indentured Indians who failed to re-indenture or return to India after completing their contracts.

By 1910, nearly 27% of indentured men had returned to India. The majority, however, chose to stay and so became the forebears of most present-day South African Indians.

After completing their indenture, many people rented land to grow fruit and vegetables for the local market. In 1885, the Wragg Commission noted that Indians dominated the food produce market. A great achievement.

Those who did not turn to the food market became entrepreneurs, opening stores and hotels, while others made a living through gardening, informally vending a variety of merchandise, and fishing. To force Indians into employment, in 1910 the government introduced a one Pound (British currency) tax on all non-indentured adults, boys under 16 and girls under 12 and older. Many workers were forced to re-indenture to avoid the tax. By 1913, about two-thirds of workers were on second and third contracts. In 1914, this tax was abolished after the Passive Resistance Campaign of 1913.

Passenger Indians

Indian culture and way of life necessitated commodities such as prayer goods, spices, cooking utensils, religious books, and clothing. This is where the 'passenger Indians' came in and fulfilled the need for traders. This group who were mainly Gujarati speaking, but included a strong contingent from South India, were able to maintain links with India through travel and visits to home villages. The first Indian shop which sold condiments and other delicacies was opened in Field Street, Durban, by Bauboo Naidoo.



In 1875, the first 'Arab' store was opened in West Street by Aboobaker Amod, a trader from Porbandar [in the Indian state of Gujerat]. Some Muslims referred to themselves as 'Arab' to differentiate from other Indians. About two decades after Indians settled here, the Wragg Commission also observed that anti-Indian sentiment was driven largely by white traders, farmers, and workers, who feared agricultural competition.

In addition, the Pietermaritzburg [Capital city of today's KwaZulu Natal] Chamber of Commerce noted a growing fear from white settlers who demanded that all Indian traders be forced to produce photo identity documents when required. Despite all this, the Indian traders prospered, much to the chagrin of some white settlers. Inherent entrepreneurism won.

Many Indian traders became successful by trading with local black people in remote areas. They sold goods in smaller quantities and gave items on credit. Their products were often cheaper than those of their white counterparts. This made white traders envious, and they lobbied the government to pass numerous laws that would further restrict the Indian traders' rights.

Areas of Settlement

Indentured labourers were given accommodation by their employers but had to find their own way after indenture. Those who turned to agriculture usually stayed on the land, which they then rented.



A view of some of the barracks used as accommodation.

The railways as well as municipalities erected barracks for their Indian labourers. Similar structures were erected by other employers throughout the Durban area. But due to the shortage of housing, these and other facilities became overcrowded and soon turned into slums.

In the central town area, merchant class Muslims settled in a racially exclusive central district of Durban. Some traders lived in their shops while

others rented flats just above their businesses. Later these became overcrowded.

Meanwhile the citizens of Durban were not happy with the arrival of Indians in the urban areas. They regarded this as an unwarranted intrusion on the 'colonial atmosphere'.

The government realised that the housing problem had to be solved and set aside several locations for Indians in areas around Natal. But living conditions in these areas were poor and families lived in cramped yards, usually sharing a communal toilet.

The main areas that Indians occupied were beyond the uMngeni River, in Riverside, Prospect Hall and further inland at Duikerfontein and Sea Cow Lake. Springfield and Sydenham were predominantly Indian. Indians also settled in Mayville, Cato Manor, Clairwood, the Magazine Barracks, and the Bluff. Excerpt ends.

[The Heritage Portal https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/brief-history-indian-indenture-south-africa contains a wealth of photographs and information on the period. The link will obviously only be live when this is an e-book.]

Enter Uncle Mali Maharaj and Inder

Papa's uncle Mali Maharaj [the family surname], his eldest paternal uncle, was described as a stocky, pious man of good material means. He played a significant role in the mentoring of the young Inder, as Papa became known.

Uncle Mali, in the Maharaj family tradition, practised Tantric worship and was a devotee of Mother Kali, Lord Shiva and Sri Hanumanji.

He gained renown as a spiritual healer. Due to the burning down of the family home in 1949 [mentioned later] pictures of Uncle Mali are regretfully not available.

In prevailing Indian tradition, a woman was expected to give birth in her own mother's home. On the 7th of March 1938, Papa was born to Mother Kossilla, into the Brahmin, Maharaj family in the Port Shepstone home of Kalapathi Maharaj, his grandmother. 'Shepstone', as it's colloquially referred to, is about 120 kilometres south of Durban. The Maharaj family was well-known and socially connected in Port Shepstone, so following Papa's birth, there was much dancing and singing in celebration, amongst friends and family.

Papa's naming ceremony took place six days after his birth. In accordance with tradition, only women were allowed to participate in the process, while the men socialised outside. Papa was given the rasi [astrologically determined] name of Dheendayal [one of the many names of Lord Krishna], meaning 'One who has mercy for the poor', or 'Kind to the poor'.



His secular name was Inderprasad. But he was known to family, friends, and associates, simply as 'Inder'. His surname was registered as Lutchman – his father's first name – instead of Maharaj.

Pictured: L-R Kossilla Ma with ashram Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi]

First and surname spelling muddles and distortions were commonplace in South Africa (as they were at Ellis Island in the USA) when it came to registration of immigrants or people of colour. Any native-born Indian person will notice it in the often almost phonetic spelling of many Indian surnames in South Africa. Under Apartheid, many government officials simply didn't care.

Inder was a boy of a new generation in the family. One born with astrological portents which predicted that he would play a special role in life. Feedback from those who knew Inder in his early years was that his warm nature attracted people from all walks of life and that the elders loved him. And

later, even his schoolteachers. Inder's three siblings were Raj, then Bashabhai and a sister, Maanpathi.

Physical Disability

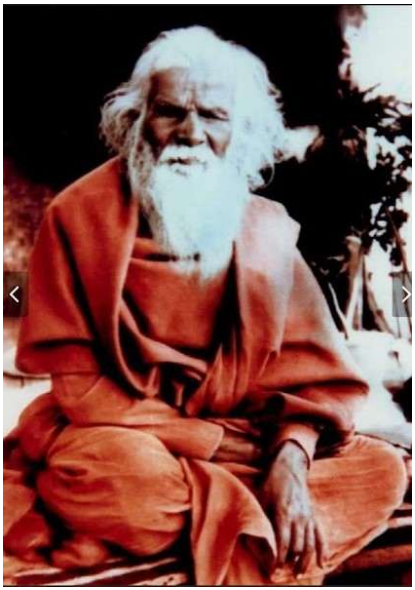
Inder was born with knee and ankle problems. He had to wear corrective boots with metal braces and straps on his lower legs. Bashabhai recalls him sometimes weeping with pain in his youth, as he struggled to pull on these boots. He had surgery for the problem, but without success. He wore boots and leg braces right up until age twenty.

Inder's condition according to our gurubhai Swami Chandikananda was officially diagnosed as Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease [named after the discoverers] or CMT. Papa once told me the condition was colloquially referred to as 'drop foot'. The internationally celebrated Mayo Clinic has this to say about it: 'Foot drop, sometimes called drop foot, isn't a disease. Rather, foot drop is a sign of an underlying neurological, muscular, or anatomical problem.



'Sometimes foot drop is temporary, but it can be permanent. If you have foot drop, you might need to wear a brace on your ankle and foot to hold the foot in a normal position. Foot drop makes it difficult to lift the front part of your foot, so it might drag on the floor when you walk. This can cause you to raise your thigh when you walk, as though climbing stairs (steppage gait), to help your foot clear the floor. In some cases, the skin on the top of the foot and toes feels numb. Depending on the cause, foot drop can affect one or both feet. This unusual gait [walk] might cause you to slap your foot down onto the floor with each step.' Excerpt Ends.

This description was very much an acoustic feature of Papa's highly distinctive walk on the tiled ashram floors. Particularly when wearing sandals. For those of us who had the privilege of pressing Papa's soft, beautifully kept feet, one would see that the toes were curled significantly downwards, instead of being straight. This gave Papa's walk a very distinctive sound, with one sandal slapping harder than the other as it hit the floor.



[Pictured on right: Guruji with our Gurudev, Swami Nischalananda, his disciple.]

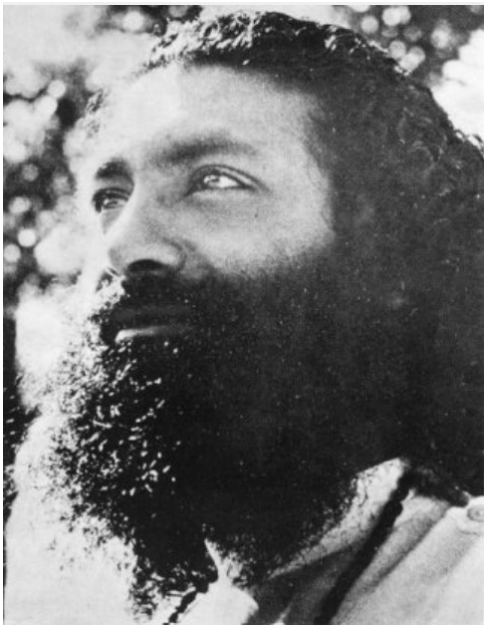
Despite this motion-limiting leg and foot problem, Papa made extended pilgrimages into the Himalayas and elsewhere in India, covering terrain that had even robust people with fully functioning limbs, struggling to make the journey.

It's interesting to note that Guruji [Swami Purushottamananda Maharaj, our spiritual 'great grandfather' – pictured] was also born with chronic leg problems. There were many parallels between Papa's and Guruji's lives.

In later life Guruji needed surgery for haemorrhoids, which he underwent in hospital without anaesthesia, choosing to use instead, yogic mind control for the pain. Papa had similar issues with his body in its early fifties.



The Divine Kick



Papa told me of an incident during his calliper-wearing stage, which might seem inexplicable to some. He was one day sitting on the floor of the veranda at the old ashram. Gurudev [Swami Nischalananda - pictured] came up quietly behind him and seemingly without reason, kicked him in the back. Inder, as he then was, spun around and clutched his Guru's feet, tears in his eyes, holding on for dear life.

On the surface, it looks like cruelty but what it did was deeply reinforce and reveal the love that each had for the other, along with the humility and acceptance of the chela [disciple]. There are many Guru-chela interactions in spiritual life which defy logic or superficial explanation. And which will remain inexplicable to people outside of that tradition.

In Tibetan Buddhism, one sees senior Llamas walking about with a flat piece of timber which they periodically use to strike the shoulders of a meditating acolyte. Papa told me this is a spiritual process of shocking a specific awareness into the devotee.

The Prostration Whack

When certain (often close, but always male) devotees prostrated to Papa on their arrival at the ashram, or as they were prostrating to leave, Papa would give them a hearty whack between the shoulder blades as they were knelt at his feet.

Inder's Childhood Days

Much of Inder's early life took place in the geographic area encompassing their family home in Wiggins Road, Mayville, and the suburb of Cato Manor, which are situated less than five kilometres apart.

When he was of school age, Inder was admitted to the Aryan Yuvak Samaj [AYS] preparatory school, located close to the Aryan Benevolent Home, where it's reported that he did well academically and was described by teachers as 'not an ordinary student.'

He exhibited what the Irish refer to as 'fey' [otherworldly] characteristics, a wisdom or insight beyond his years. This has over millennia, been a recurring pattern with holy people taking a human body.

When there were Ramayana readings, his family recalled that he made observations and gave explanations which impressed the pandits [priest-scholars] doing those readings. He was in demand as an assistant at both Muslim and Hindu functions. His distinctiveness was such that he was called, 'Panditji'. Which term means scholarly or spiritually wise and educated.

Once he reached the age of nine, when he was invested with the sacred thread, Inder attended school, got home, bathed, and then went to serve in their family temple.



Pictured: Papa with his hair still growing out after having it shaved before wearing gerua for the first time.

At that time Inder had established a firm relationship with a man who seemed to be permanently intoxicated. This outraged the man's sanctimonious neighbours because he was a devout worshipper of Sri Hanumanji, an incarnation of Lord Shiva.

The tipsy man, acknowledged for his significant spiritual powers, used to worship outside at his simple shrine to Lord Hanuman, marked by a long bamboo pole with a red flag

[Janda] on it and with a picture of Sri Hanumanji on the little altar. He was without doubt a holy man and one of several seemingly eccentric people who played a role in Papa's very broad early spiritual nurturing.

The Holy Slap

Papa told me that one day, he was sitting in the back of this same old man's car. The two were driving somewhere and the man was clearly very intoxicated. At that moment, Inder thought, 'Is it possible that this old drunkard is really a holy person?' In that instant, an unseen hand gave him a firm slap in the face. The old man caught his eye in the rear-view mirror, laughed loudly and said, 'Yessir?'

From Sri Ramakrishna's life story, we know that Paramahamsas [literal meaning: 'great swan' – spiritual luminaries] and highly evolved souls can and do appear in multiple guises and disguises. Sri Ramakrishna once saw an old man rummaging through a garbage heap looking for food. He instantly recognised the man's holiness and asked, 'Are you a Paramahamsa?' The old man gave a toothless grin and whispered. 'Shh. Yes, but don't tell anyone' – and then promptly disappeared. Leaving Sri Ramakrishna in his child-like way, immediately and anxiously asking the Divine Mother whether he too, would end up eating out of trash cans. A delightful anecdote.

Finances

Inder attended high school at Clairwood secondary school where he continued to do well. Lutchman Maharaj, their sole financial provider, passed away in 1953 when Inder was just 15 years of age. The financially dire family circumstances forced Inder to leave school on completing Junior Certificate. [Form 3, standard 8, or grade 10 as it's now known in South Africa].

While Inder was out working at local sweetmeat shops to earn money, or serving in the family temple, Bashabhai was sometimes sent by their mother to beg for food leftovers or some basic supplies from better-off neighbours. He recalls to this day, the humiliating sting of being scorned, rebuked, or shooed away, often empty-handed, by some people. His positive learning

from the situation is that they were being prepared by Papa, for the life they would live in the future. Simple and with just the necessities. Papa predicted they would have tough times.

The family was effectively practising a version of Madhukari Bhiksha, which refers to the way in which monks are taught to beg for their food. Like a bee, taking a little nectar from several flowers. A small portion or handful here, and a single fruit or item there. Never one whole meal from one person or household. Just like a bee, a little sip of nectar from several flowers. This avoided obligation to any individual.



The story is reminiscent of the premonastic Swami Vivekananda's family struggling very badly when his father passed away. The then Naren [pictured as a monk on the left] was unable to find employment and asked Sri Ramakrishna to intercede with the Divine Mother on his behalf. Sri Ramakrishna sent him three times to the Kali temple at Dakshineswar, to ask the Divine Mother to improve his family's circumstances. Each time, Naren was unable to ask for material help and instead asked the Divine Mother only for devotion. After the third failed attempt, Sri Ramakrishna reassured him by saying, 'Alright. Your family will not lack basic necessities. They will have simple food and clothes.' And that proved to be the case.

Inder As Retailer

Ramlal, a friend, made Indian sweetmeats and worked for a vegetarian café in Durban, where he sold his delicacies. He and Inder opened a little outlet in Carlisle Street in Durban, but their turnover wasn't sufficient to make it sustainable.

Inder's Family was practically destitute. Malay Muslim friends owned retail shops in Braamfontein in Johannesburg and in Cape Town. Visiting Mayville, they suggested to Mother Kossilla that she allow Inder to work with them to earn some money for the family's upkeep. Inder spent time working efficiently and helping in one of the shops but with his generous heart, he evidently gave too many people goods on credit. When taken to task about his charitable retail approach, Inder's comment was, 'So then what, if they can't pay?'

In the early 1950s these same kind Muslim people invited Inder to work in one of their Cape Town outlets. He was given charge of a shop. Now having a better grasp of cash flow and capitalist economics, versus generosity and socialism, he made a fine success of running it.

He was away for about a year and a half. The cost of travel and [being Indian] the complexity of getting permits for inter-provincial travel meant that he and the family didn't see each other for that entire period. During his time away, Inder regularly sent money to the family and when he returned to Durban, he brought gifts, including cameras.

Prescience Of His Mission

When Inder was pressed by people seeking the source of his palpable sense of self-assurance beyond his years, he would say in a jocular manner, 'You don't know me, or where I come from.' One day in a fit of pique, his Mother Kossilla said, 'I don't know what to do with you. You cause me endless worry.' To which the young man spiritedly replied, 'You don't know that one day you'll all be worrying about me, instead!'

Speaking to me about mantras one day at the old Avoca ashram, Papa said, 'Of course I knew my mantra when I was born.' That explains a lot to the discerning.

Mayville is less than five kilometres from the Durban central business district. But during Apartheid, it might as well have been fifty kilometres away, given the disinterest in it and the welfare of its inhabitants, shown by the white, Apartheid government.

Many prominent Indian people, including politicians, lawyers, educators, and other professionals, lived in Mayville at that time. The area produced a good number of Hindu religious leaders, including Sufi saints. It was also home to the headquarters of the Aryan Benevolent Home [ABH], a community service and charitable organisation, and the Aryan Yuvak Samaj [AYS], both located in Bellair road.



The AYS offered Hindi language classes from the annex of their small premises and a community member taught Tamil from his home. Religious and cultural groups lived in mutually respectful, enjoyable social and cultural harmony, and Muslim and Hindu children together, attended schools in the area.

Mayville was home to several temples, serving Hindi-speaking groups from the north and Tamils from the south of India. These communities were typically direct descendants of the British government's forced labour program to ship Indian people to South Africa, with promises of utopia. But in truth, as we now know, they were contracted as indentured 'slaves', land workers and sugarcane-cutters. As a people, adding phenomenal cultural, intellectual and other value to the fabric of South African society.

Mayville Theatre

Papa loved telling this story: Mayville had what we in South Africa in those days, referred to as a 'bioscope', a cinema or movie-house, named the Mayville Theatre. One day, Inder desperately wanted to see a particular movie. Cowboy 'westerns' were his favourite. On this day, he didn't have the sixpence [six penny coin] required to buy a ticket. He asked Mother Kali to bless him somehow, so that he could watch the movie. A few moments later, he noticed a piece of newspaper lying on the ground. Moving it with his foot, he saw underneath it a shiny silver sixpence. He was overjoyed and

got to watch the movie. Papa said that this experience increased his faith at the time, of the realness of the Divine mother, knowing that she did look after him and his needs in even the tiniest of things.

Papa told us in later years that on his family's home shrine they had a picture of Mother Kali [not identical to this one depicted] blessing Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sarada Devi. Papa didn't know who these two spiritual luminaries were at the time. But he prayed to Mother Kali with tears in his eyes, saying, 'Ma, just as you're blessing these two old people, please bless me in the same way.' And the Divine Mother certainly did.



The Family 'Adobe' Temple

It was a matter of pride and tradition that wherever a community of Indian people lived, a temple, however simple, would be constructed in short order. One sees this praiseworthy activity in our South African Islamic community as well.

Papa's pre-monastic family, along with devoted close friends and neighbours built a little temple dedicated to the worship of several aspects of the Divine Mother. It was built according to the custom of that time, using only timber, bamboo, grass, clay, mud, and cow dung. In the developing world, this would be referred to as 'adobe'. A mud, straw, clay etc. construction.

In the absence of funds for marble or other expensive materials, even the murtis [representative images of the deities] were constructed with great love, but little skilled artistry, and largely out of cow dung and clay. The

timber roof was covered with bamboo. On it, men would store pumpkins to ripen before offering them to the deities. Women were not allowed to touch or cut those pumpkins, as was the tradition.

For western reader information, cow dung has been used for centuries, if not millennia, as a smooth, durable wall and flooring covering in traditional developing economy construction around the world. It was also the traditional base until recently of joss or agarbatti [incense] sticks. Today, these sticks mostly use a synthetic, fragranced base.



The Temple Interior

Mother Kali [destroyer of ignorance, fierce protector of her devotees] and consort of Lord Shiva, held pride of place in the centre of this simple adobe temple, which celebrated five aspects of the one Divine Universal Mother. She was represented in a large, wood-framed picture, close to one metre in height. A similar depiction is seen alongside. Steps were constructed to position Mother's image highest in the temple. Her picture-image was dressed just with an orange and white cloth.

In one corner, with her back to the sun and facing south-west, was an image of Mother Lakshmi [goddess of wealth and good fortune]. In a second corner was Vani, Mother Saraswati [goddess of knowledge, music, art, speech, wisdom, and learning]. Mother's presence was represented by a cow-dung and clay mound fully covered with a white cloth.

In the third corner was Mother Durga, [protector of all that is good and harmonious in the world]. This aspect of Mother was also represented by a simple, framed picture.

In the final corner was a picture of a plain woman, holding a pot containing porridge with one hand and with her other hand raised in a blessing. This

was Sitladevi, a goddess renowned in Hinduism and other cultures as the healer of infectious diseases, including measles.

Syringa berry leaves [a non-native Asian species in South Africa but widely distributed] are traditionally used by Indian and many other cultures, for symptomatic relief of the discomfort or blistering caused by measles.

Even in Inder's family, they would make a decoction of boiled and cooled syringa berry leaves. The patient was put on a diet excluding salt, and was permitted to eat only sattwic [pure, simple, non-stimulating or spice-free] foods, and they slept on a bed of the leaves. Their bodies would be bathed with the syringa liquid.

Group Areas Act Strikes

When the malevolent Group Areas Act was implemented, and Indian people were abruptly and forcibly compelled to move out of the area, the adobe temple was regretfully desecrated and then abandoned. The actual stone and mortar community temple [constructed only later] which stood in front of it, is believed to possibly still be in existence.



Lutchman Maharaj, Family Head.

The family father, Lutchman Maharaj, was a Brahmin and Hindu priest, a ritualist [worshipping with physical, traditional items] and Tantric [mystical arts] adept and a well-known spiritual healer. People used to travel from other parts of South Africa to seek Lutchman's help.

He was the chief priest [pujari] of the family adobe temple described earlier. He too was a worshipper of Lord Shiva, Mother Kali, and Sri Hanumanji. As were Tantric practitioners, Uncle Mali Maharaj, and Inder himself. At that stage Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother Sarada Devi, had not yet made their entrance into his life.

The temple had become known as ‘Mali’s Temple’. It was in this simple shrine that Papa as a young man would serve the deities, once he had been invested with the sacred thread, ceremonially given to Brahmin boys when they turn nine years of age. In Inder’s case, the Janau [sacred thread investiture ceremony] was blessed by having five Brahmins presiding over it and lasted two full days of worship and rituals.

The adobe temple was located behind the stone and mortar temple which was built later. The larger structure served as a place for public services and pujas [prayer ceremonies]. Both were located on sloped land leading down to an un-named but deep stream, with a rich crop of bamboo growing near the water. This was in present-day proximity to Nkosi Albert Luthuli hospital, in Bellair Road, Cato Manor.

It was on the banks of this stream that Papa and his youthful ‘congregation’ of compatriots would get together inside their own private, hand-built bamboo kutir [simple dwelling place or hut] and hold satsangs and religious debates or discussions.

Behind the adobe temple was a simple structure with a Shiva stone [not a lingam in this case] where two snakes had taken up residence. From description, it seems they were both cobras with impressive hoods. The children were not allowed to go out after dark because Kossilla Ma was afraid that they might have memorable, unpleasant, or even fatal encounters with the snakes. Basha told of seeing Inder dancing at midnight with the snakes on full moon and other occasions.

Papa’s family provided priests who served in the Somtseu road temple, which was constructed in 1901 and is now known as the Durban temple. It’s one of the oldest temples in Durban. The exquisite external shrine roof detail can be seen below. The colours are glorious.



There were at least three other temples in this area, serving a large Indian community. But the evil of the Group Areas Act and Apartheid-forced removals, saw the Indian population scattered in a mini diaspora. In consequence, various other temples have fallen into decay or disappeared altogether.



Riots And Chaos

Inder would have been eleven years of age when, on Friday afternoon, 14th January 1949, the Indian areas of Durban literally went up in flames. The spark behind the blaze was reported by some to be that a black African youth had been caught stealing items from a stall in Grey Street, in the Durban CBD. The Indian stall owner promptly disciplined the youth, as would likely have been the norm at the time, because police were not interested in assisting Indians.

For some reason, that seemingly innocuous and routine action quickly unleashed a disproportionate wave of resentment and escalated into a fierce and destructive backlash from black people in the city area.

With the benefit of hindsight and knowing how the South African Apartheid government historically worked to set communities against each other, I'm not alone in being convinced that this was very likely an example of a 'third force' [law enforcement and state security apparatus] exercise. Deliberately spreading and stoking discontent and chaos among different race groups. It's been their modus operandi for decades. In recent history, even going as far as trucking in white policemen and soldiers wearing black facial makeup, balaclava head and face masks and shooting with live ammunition, to set black African factions against each other in the Richmond area of KwaZulu Natal. This was a last-ditch attempt by white right-wingers, mercifully unsuccessful, to derail the 1994 transition to democracy in South Africa.

They've used these disgraceful tactics since time immemorial, and still, thirty years into democracy, politicians of all stripes regularly and successfully play ethnic factions against each other. For more information you can go online to
https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/70-durban-riots-1949

This biographical tribute is not the place for a detailed or chronologically sequential account of what took place. But it was an unmitigated tragedy for Indian people who, without any means of self-defence or backup from authorities and law enforcement, bore the brunt.

Rioting, looting, murder, rape, and arson spread quickly from the city centre to the predominantly Indian areas of Inanda, Clairwood, Cato Manor, and Wiggins Road, where Inder and his family lived. Inder's family home was burned down, and they were forced to flee the area, as were so many other Indian families, losing most of their possessions in the process.

The unbridled mayhem, after two days of absolute carnage, carried on sporadically, for another two weeks. No holds were barred by the rampaging hordes and the police made only token interventions or stood idly by.

Sadly, some white people were seen to urge the African antagonists along, even running behind them in groups, shouting encouragement.

At the time, South African Indians had no formal ties with the authorities in their Motherland. But as matters got progressively more out of control and the destruction seemed without an end in sight, the government of India pressured the South African government via diplomatic and other channels, to intervene.

Reduced To Bare Essentials

Some Indian refugees and survivors were given space to stay near the Cato Manor police station. Desperate and homeless, they constructed wood and iron shacks or rough shelters using any materials they could lay their hands on. There was no piped water, electricity, or sanitation.



Women made do with chulha fireplaces [pictured]. Comprising a clay base with metal rods over the top on which they balanced pots or kettles. Cooking like this meant it had to take place outdoors or in a lean-to, regardless of weather. They used dried cow dung for fuel.

Some people were able to obtain wood for their chulha fireplaces. And once that wood became charcoal, it was used for warming the interiors of the shacks. What few possessions they'd managed to salvage as they fled from their homes, were used along with basic things like raw wooden planks for tables and benches for seating. Most people were back to square one in material and economic terms.

White (unbleached cotton) brown and black calico cloth bags were used in those days to store or transport rice, flour, and other commodities. Times were so desperate that people used these same black cotton bags, sewn

together and stuffed with grass, as a substitute for mattresses, on which they uneasily tried to sleep.

Papa told me in later years that he'd personally witnessed a heavily pregnant woman being hacked open with pangas (machetes). What we know today as PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder, caused by such appalling atrocities, was understandably more than some people could bear. Having lost all their material possessions and seeing their own families massacred or raped in front of them, took a terrible toll. There was no psychological counselling, and social services assistance was non-existent. Most people were totally overwhelmed and out of sheer desperation, significant numbers tragically died by taking their own lives.

After this massive and almost certainly government-orchestrated and stoked social upheaval, authorities also demolished the municipal barracks in Somtseu road and elsewhere, which had been used to house many indentured Indian labourers. The KwaZulu Natal regional lawcourts now occupy that site.

Inder's parents, in desperation, moved to Port Shepstone, his birthplace, where his maternal grandparents lived. Their hope was to make a basic living by farming vegetables.

Inder's maternal grandparents worshipped Lord Shiva, Mother Kali, and Sri Hanumanji. This family deity tradition and the mantras [sacred sound syllables] associated with it, had come down through many previous generations.

Grandmother Kalapathi was a deeply spiritual woman, who knew and used many traditional prayers. Grandfather Ramnandan had also been a priest. This tradition continues even today with family members to be found as serving priests in Chatsworth, Durban.



Inder's maternal grandparents, Ramnandan and Kalapathi Maharaj.

Enter The Guru

Inder used to attend Hindi vernacular classes after school. Initially, the classes were held under an avocado pear tree. But in 1957 classes were moved to the Candella Road Boys School, which was about 2.5 kilometres from the Maharaj family home.



The fuzzy picture shows Inder [Papa] standing, with Mr M C Moodley, a teacher, on our left, and Harry Desai on our right. They were key to establishing the Candella Road branch.

In February 1958 the boys were invited to attend regular Sunday religious services at the school. They were told to be at ease and simply sing any bhajans or kirtans [vernacular religious songs] that they knew.

Quality of voice or musicality was not going to be an issue. However, there were some talented musicians and Indian dance adepts who formed part of the gathering, and they tried their level best to inculcate some musicality and rhythm into the boys.

In April 1958 everyone was told to come early for the next week's satsang, without being told why, other than there was going to be a surprise. This had been arranged by the adults in the group. Sunday satsang typically started at eight o'clock in the morning. But on that morning, the curious children were there bright and early, eagerly awaiting the surprise. For some reason, Inder wasn't among them.

They saw a Volkswagen Kombi minibus pull up. The people from the vehicle began carrying boxes of fruit and best of all, cream buns, into the schoolroom where the service was to be held. Little tummies rumbled in delighted anticipation as the children looked forward to digging into treats which they hoped were for them. The group comprised both Muslim and Hindu children from the area.



A tall, slim, ramrod-straight figure, dressed in gerua [ochre-orange] with a superb head of curly hair and a magnificent beard, then entered the room. Behind him were ashram Mummy's husband, Jackie Pillay and about a half dozen other adults along with some younger people. The treats were packed on school desks to one side of the room.

Swami Nischalananda, our Gurudev, then told the children stories from the lives of Mother Sita and Lord Rama. He followed this up by teaching them to sing what became a Ramakrishna

favourite bhajan, ‘Sita Ram, Sita Ram, Sita Ram Jaya Sita Ram.’

This impressive monk told the children that they should come to satsang every Sunday, because he would now be there. Along with the other adults, he then handed out the fruit and those delicious cream buns to all the children. I believe there may have been a promise of more treats for the following Sunday. As Mohandas Gandhi once famously said, ‘Do not try to convert the hungry.’

Pictured below: Papa and Jackie Pillay 1967.



A few years back, I was chatting with a woman (our Sister Molly Mathias) who’d been part of that childhood group, and she told me many of the children thought Gurudev was a lady with a deep voice, because of his gerua dhoti going all the way down to his feet, and his magnificent head of hair. Somehow his beard didn’t seem to trouble their youthful gender re-assignment! Sister Molly’s reminiscences appear further on.



The service ended late. When Bashabhai and the other children got home, a concerned Inder, now nineteen years of age, asked, ‘Where have you been? You’re all so late.’ The children explained.

[Pictured left to right, Mr M C Moodley a schoolteacher, Inder with arms around the neck of Harry Desai and on the right, Bobby Parsarthi – later Naistika Brahmachari Vishnu Chaitanya].

The following Sunday morning the Hindu and Muslim children were back at the school in force, this time accompanied by Inder. Inder’s close friend Bobby Parsarthi was with him.

This friend later became Naistika Brahmachari Vishnu Chaitanya at Kailash ashram in India and regretfully passed away back in South Africa from stomach cancer, after being in India for just three years.

As Inder entered the room, a buzz went around. At just 19 years of age, he was well known and referred to as 'Panditji'. This was an honorific bestowed on him by people who held him in high regard for his knowledge of religious matters, and his wise counsel.

Inder made his way to the back of the classroom so that the front seats could be reserved for latecomers. But he was called to the front and asked to sit near the door. A few moments later, Gurudev serenely entered the room followed by bearers of more cream buns and fruit. Inder shot to his feet at the sight of Gurudev. Gurudev looked at the young man and said, 'I'll speak to you later.' This was the first physical encounter in this birth, between Guru and future chela [disciple]. The reconnecting in a momentous, mystical and socio-quake inducing relationship.

At this satsang, Gurudev invited the children to eat their fill before the service started. He also asked the people present to get some devotees together and open a branch in Wiggins Road, which would mean less walking for the children to reach the Candella road boys' school. Gurudev also told the attendees that he would start visiting homes in the area.

The devotees got permission to use a spare room next to the local barber shop in Wiggins Road. This was the birth of the Wiggins Road branch of the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa. It was less than a kilometre from the humble wood and corrugated iron structure in Azalea Road, just off Wiggins road - which was now home to Inder's family. The family owned the piece of land, but there wasn't enough money to build a brick-and-mortar structure.

The following weekend after the satsang at the new venue, Gurudev chose to visit Inder's home and his family. Mother Kossilla had to hastily prepare some simple eats to feed this holy man. As you know, during the 1949 riots,

the Maharaj family home was burned down. They had still not managed to replace much of the furniture lost to the flames. Now, in 1958, in the absence of a couch or easy chairs, the best they could do was invite Gurudev to sit on a bed. Which he did.

When he'd eaten, Gurudev said presciently to the family, but to their mystification, 'I'm going to stay in this house all my life.' The statement privately caused some consternation because they hardly had adequate room for themselves, let alone having space for the Swami. Only later did they come to understand the deep significance of that statement.

While the visit by Gurudev continued, it began to rain, at first softly and then became a downpour. It was reaching the time, being about seven thirty pm, that Gurudev needed to leave to fulfil other commitments, but the rain seemed only to increase in intensity. Mother Kossilla was insistent that Gurudev should not try to get to the ashram kombi in this deluge, much less drive in it. But Gurudev couldn't stay longer and made a dash for the vehicle. And so ended a blessed first visit that would totally transform the lives of the Maharaj family.



Their First Rally

Inder and family received a message from Gurudev [pictured in the grotto at the Avoca ashram]. It was directed to the Candella and Wiggins roads branch devotees. It alerted them to a religious rally and inter-branch competition which would take place on the grounds of the Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam, more commonly known as the Umgeni Road temple. It was scheduled for July. From now onwards, you'll see Umgeni spelled as uMngeni, which is the correct isiZulu spelling.

This was the start of a tradition which has continued through the decades. It began with a street march, each branch being headed by two people carrying a large banner, on which they would have the Ramakrishna Centre logo, the name of their branch and typically a picture of Master, Mother and Swami Vivekananda, followed by an inspirational quotation.

A spark of pride in their Sanatana Dharma [Eternal religion] was lighted in the hearts and minds of the Indian community by Swami Nischalananda – our Gurudev.

Neatly turned-out children wearing some or other insignia, marching and singing God's name in public was a first for Hinduism in Durban and South



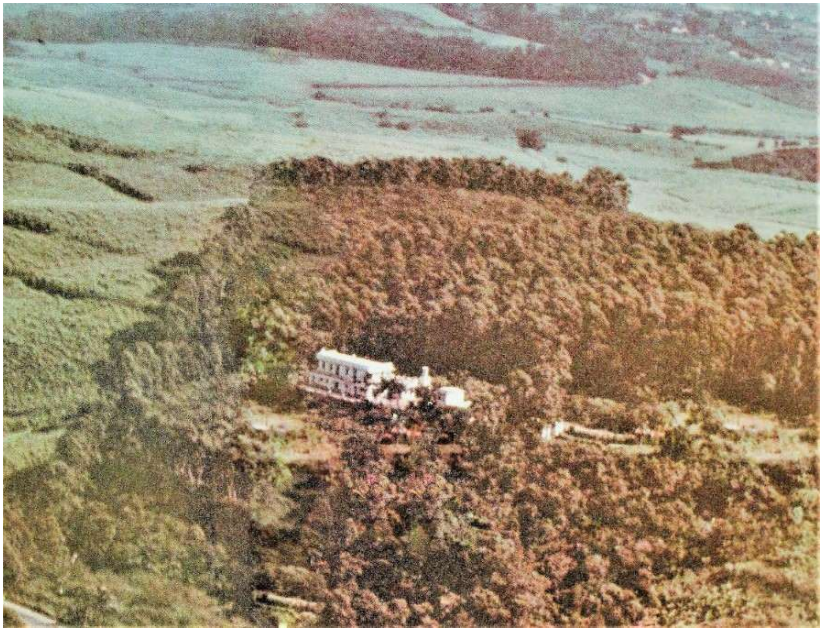
Africa. Members put heart and soul into the design of the banners and the branch that won the prize for best banner would be really chuffed.

To the amazement of branches that were already well-established, the newcomers, in the form of the Candella and Wiggins Road branches, won the first prize. This must have been a tremendous motivator for the children.



Gita Classes

Inder now began to attend the regular Tuesday, early-evening Bhagavad Gita classes at the uMngeni Road temple, started by Gurudev and continued by Papa after Gurudev's passing.



It was in 1959 that the premises and extensively forested land at number 8, Montreal Road, Avoca [pictured] were bought with the significant financial assistance of Sister Henny Schimmel, to be re-purposed as an ashram.

Fund-raising for religious projects in those days was practically unheard of, and other adults associated with Gurudev dug deep to make the purchase possible. The large and rambling white-painted, double story building had a simple grandeur and dignity of its own. It was owned at the time of purchase, by a Canadian bachelor. It was evidently he who made the life-size statues of animals that stand even today, adjacent to where Papa's meditation kutir was built in 1973.



Below is the old Avoca ashram building. Papa told me that he used to stand on the upper balcony and call for us.



The Ramakrishna Centre, Avoca ashram as it was in the early 1970s.



Evolution of the Shrine and altar

Pictured left: Papa and a devotee at the very original Avoca ashram shrine altar.

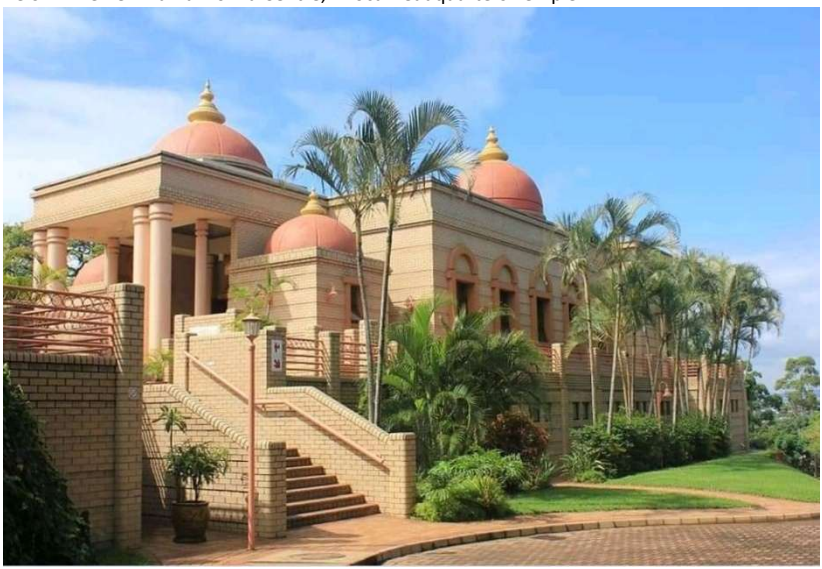


Swami Nishreyasananda, a frequent visitor to the ashram.

The old Avoca ashram shrine as it was in the mid-1970s.



The 'poolcrete' murthi crafted by Andrew Walford, was homed in the museum below the new Avoca shrine, once a marble sculpture of Master was installed on the new temple altar. Below: The new Ramakrishna Centre, Avoca Headquarters Temple.



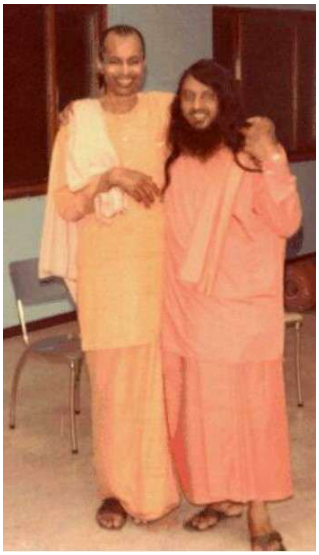


Altar in the new ashram Temple – courtesy of Master's grace and Papa's vision.



Early ashram members. Left to right: Sr Henny Schimmel, Br Bashabhai [seated] Br Ganpath [behind Basha] Brother Shah from Umhlali [head visible], Br K G Moodley, Papa, Br Bobby Jagnandan, unidentified person behind, then Br D P Soni, Br S P Singh, Sri Mummy, Br Babuji Soni, Ma Govender's son, Br Morgan, and Br Mothilal.

Papa and Swami Sahajananda of the Divine Life Society, located in Reservoir Hills, Durban, with whom Papa had a very cordial relationship. As did Papa *with all who encountered him*. He was a consistently unifying force.





Above: Papa at one of the final functions the body was well enough to attend.



Left: Papa speaking in Derby Street, Durban, at a Children's rally in 1968.

Gurudev engaged the willing help of the young men from the Sea Cow Lake, Merebank, Candella and Wiggins Road branches of the Centre, to help construct a wider, vehicle-friendly sand road [pictured]. It wound up the hill to the same level as the ashram building.



It was also Gurudev and these helpers who built the very long, continuous flight of stairs from the roadway, directly up to the veranda of the ashram building. It always reminds me of the steep staircases leading to Amazonian temples, built by the Inca people.

Gurudev was an indefatigable worker. Slim and wiry, he set an example for the helpers with his own back-breaking manual labour. He and his team of karma yogis built onto an existing double storey structure, with an outside staircase, which was close to the main ashram. Sister Henny Schimmel – more about her later – took great joy in staying in one of these small new rooms. Downstairs housed a kitchen, and the original ashram press with a large Heidelberg printing machine. Brochure, booklet, or magazine pages were manually assembled using lead letters and characters, which would be locked into place inside wooden frames. Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press, would have been impressed.



Pictured: Mother Radha and Soundalai standing in the gutted former press which had become a kitchen, which was now due to demolition as part of the new ashram construction. Both are in Master's arms – Soundalai having passed from leukaemia and Radha from a brain tumour years later.

Above is the little room with its resident population of hundreds of bats in which Brother Shyam and I used to sleep in the old days.

Premonastic Inder at the ocean with mala [prayer rosary] and possibly performing Surya Puja [water oblation to the sun].







Inder with his maternal grandmother.



Inder at prayer.

Some pictures kindly provided to Swami Chandikananda by Sister Risha of Newcastle.

In this one, Angad Bhanjan, later Swami Premananda and Krish Pillay, later Swami Chandikananda, on the morning of their initiation by Papa into brahmacharya, at the Tongaat beach yoga camp site, Easter 1969.





L-R Kneeling: Thribhuvan [later Swami Tribhuvan] Nad [later brahmachari Sevak], Morgan Naidoo (behind Sevak), Rainer Schrader, Papa, Sunjith, Jay Soni in front of Sunjith, Morgan Govender kneeling next to Jay. Seated in front, Angad [later Swami Premananda – Papa's first monastic disciple] and Krish [later Swami Chandikananda].



Sharing Papa's holy feet. From L-R, Morgan – crouching, our beloved ashram Mummy, Krish [later Swami Chandikananda], Papa, pressing Papa's right foot – Jay Soni, Papa's left foot - Rainer, behind Rainer - Tribhuvan [later Swami Thribhuvan] and Angad [later Swami Premananda].



L-R Brahmachari Gangadhar, Brother Francis, John Tunmer (crouching) Sister Sri, the late Pithukuli Murugadas, internationally celebrated blind Tamil singer, Brahmachari Sevak, Brahmachari Maharaj, Brother Shyam, Mr S P Singh, Bhabhi Singh (not related) ashram Mummy and Akka Ma.

In the early 1970s, two western Brahmacharis, Gangadhar and Maharaj shared the one upstairs, rear-facing room. Brother Shyam Whitfield and I also occasionally slept at weekends in the front upstairs room.

Inside that room ceiling lived an impressive colony of bats. At dusk, we'd see and hear them pouring out in a seemingly endless stream, to go hunting for fruit or insects. In the very early morning hours, we'd hear their rustle and high-pitched squeaks as they returned to roost during the day.

Today, I'd give careful thought to sleeping somewhere where we shared airspace with bats. But in those days, we didn't give it a thought. And we're still here to tell the story, so those were clearly not disease-bearing bats.

The ashram kitchen had some fun things going on. We were pretty much all vegetarians. But Papa had no qualms about encouraging another diet if it was essential to the good health of an individual.



Reminiscent of Swami Brahmananda Maharaj, the spiritual son and eternal companion of Sri Ramakrishna.

When Sister Nivedita, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda (pictured here with Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi), was gravely ill, Maharaj as he was called, arranged for meat to be cooked and he went and personally fed it to Nivedita. Knowing, I guess, that she would have refused to eat meat offered by anyone else, even as a vital, strength-building 'prescription'.

Our Bengali Roots Surface



But back to the ashram kitchen. Mother Henny Schimmel was craving a piece of fish. We do after all, have a Bengali Guruparampara [lineage].

Di Stott, [pictured] a delightful Jewish devotee, took it upon herself to get an occasional piece of battered and fried hake fish to Henny. She left it in a little box on a top cupboard shelf in the kitchen. The code word written on the box was 'Fenny' – Fish for Henny.

When down in Durban on one of my many trips, I would sometimes take Henny and Radha to a little coffee shop inside the Jungle Garden Nursery, in Sherwood, and they'd have either fish and chips or order an omelette. I might go to a lower loka on dropping this body, for my sins. 😉

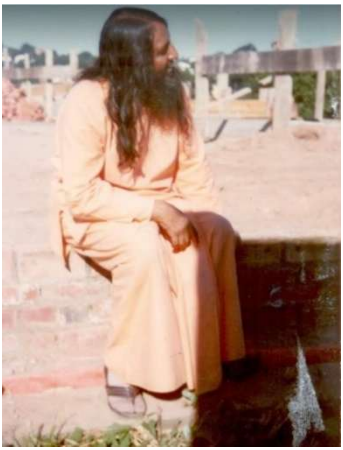
In my own case, after years of being totally vegetarian, Papa one day said to me, 'Eat a little fish now and then.' As I thought about it, the prospect seemed quite revolting. But the next moment an image of a freshly battered and fried piece of fish entered my head and to my embarrassment, I salivated. I looked up and noticed Papa smiling at me. Lesson learned. You can't win arguments with yogis and saints!

Papa once commented about people prostrating and said, 'It's like looking at glass boxes. I can see everything inside.' Many people might have been terrified at the prospect.

The Ashram Infrastructure

When the very large number 8 Montreal Road property was purchased, much of the infrastructure we encountered on our arrival in the early 1970s was not there. It was the incredible hard karma yoga of Gurudev [Swami

Nischalananda] and his teams of helpers from the branches who built the shower and toilet block, the dormitories, and the other buildings.


Papa at the Asherville ashram site.


Asherville ashram shrine.

It was Papa's drive, initiative and unstinting motivation that took the spiritual and physical foundations created by Gurudev and built on them in every way. Leaving behind at the time of his mahasamadhi in 1994, a magnificent new temple, administration, accommodation, and dining infrastructure.

This was in addition to the Sri Sarada Devi 'Mother House' ashram for women, in Abelia Road, Asherville, Durban, constructed many years before.

I had a special affinity for the 'Mother House'. I was given the blessing of preparing and embossing Master's bija symbol on a small square of copper, which was placed under the murthi of Sri Ramakrishna, before he was installed in the Asherville shrine by Papa and Swami Nishreyasananda of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society.



The handiwork and vision of our Papa – Swami Shivapadananda. The Ramakrishna Centre Avoca ashram complex of today. It includes the Swami Nischalananda Hall and the Swami Shivapadananda Wellness Centre. Papa's upstairs room at the old ashram building is just visible on the extreme right.



Our Gurubhai, Brother Gyanadayal was with Papa when he said, on surveying the almost completed temple, 'Well, Mother, my work here is done. Now it's all in your hands.' He told close ones that he would soon leave the body. And he did.



L-R Bobby Jagnandan, Pandit Mandaree, Mr. D P Soni, Papa and Mother Kossilla (Papa's pre-monastic mother) and seated, today's Swami Chandikananda.

You'll see in Swami Chandikananda's reminiscences of Papa following this, (which he has kindly promised to continue adding to, for subsequent instalments) he mentions that Papa wore the gerua garb of a sannyasi for the first time on the night of Krishna Janmashtami in 1965. Both Swami Chandikananda and Bashabhai confirmed that Papa was earlier initiated into sannyas by Gurudev at the cave on the uMngeni river which Gurudev used as a meditation retreat. And from where he later left the body.

It seems that Gurudev told Papa that he had a few family responsibilities towards his mother and siblings to take care of, before he could fully step back from secular life. This is something that both Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi impressed upon young people renouncing the world. That, if possible, they should ideally make provision for the well-being of their immediate secular dependants before doing so.

Some Disciple And Devotee Reminiscences

Some personal, multifaceted reminiscences as experienced by devotees. They're in the words of the individuals themselves.

From Swami Chandikananda Puri

[Our beloved sannyasi Gurubhai, pictured here with ashram Mummy, Sri Jayanti Devi, to whom he was very close, and who loved him dearly.]



In Swami Chandikananda's own words…

OM AIM GURAVE NAMAH

First Meetings

At the time of Gurudev Swami Nischalananda's death I was a member of the Reservoir Hills Branch of the Ramakrishna Centre. A Mr. V R Naidoo, the leader of the Branch and I determined to visit the Centre as often as possible thereafter.

On the first Saturday that we visited for the usual Saturday service, I noticed a person dressed in a white shirt and black pants limping up the stairway from the driveway to the ashram. I thought that he must be one of the usual devotees. Imagine my surprise when, on going into the shrine for the service, I found this individual conducting the service. I must confess that I was not impressed with him. His voice was shrill and sharp, and his grammar was poor.

Despite this I continued to visit on Saturdays. There seemed to be something drawing me towards him. On the Saturday following the Krishna Janmashtami celebrations, when I got to the ashram, I found Him dressed in the garb of a sannyasin. On enquiring, I learnt that He had taken Sannyasa on the night of Krishna Ashtami, on the directions of Swami Nischalananda. [Both Swami Chandikananda and Bashabhai confirmed that Papa had been previously initiated into Sannyasa via the Viraja Homa ceremony, in which the monk takes final vows of renunciation] by Swami Nischalananda at the uMngeni River cave which Gurudev used as a meditation retreat].

One day, after service He stopped to talk to me, asking me where I came from, what I was doing and who my parents were. After receiving the appropriate answers, He asked me to keep coming to the ashram. Then He asked me whether I could cook. I replied that I could somewhat. He then asked me to bring Him a bean curry, the next time I came. I was shocked by this request. Couldn't He get this from someone else? Then He went on to say, 'But it must be cooked by your own hands.' I agreed and left.

The next Saturday afternoon I started getting the ingredients together, when my eldest sister came into the kitchen and asked what I was doing. After hearing the unusual request, she volunteered to prepare the dish. I objected to this but allowed her to direct me as I cooked with my own hands. With the dish prepared, I packed it into a leak-proof container and prepared

to leave to catch a bus which was to take me to uMngeni Road, from where I would catch another to the ashram.

After the service, I presented the dish to Him. He was pleased that I had kept the appointment. He confirmed with me whether I had prepared it myself. I told him that my sister had supervised the cooking. He was pleased that I had done the preparation myself. I left the ashram pleased with myself but at the same time puzzled as to why I was giving in so easily to a stranger. When I met Him the following Saturday, He expressed his joy at eating the curry.

It was getting close to the Christmas Yoga Camp instituted by Gurudev, in keeping with the advice of Sri Ramakrishna that every now and then the householder should go into seclusion for a few days. When I went to meet Him after service one Saturday, Swamiji asked me whether I was going to attend. I replied that I would not be attending as transport would be a challenge. He gave a broad smile and said, 'You'll be there.'

On the first day of the camp a feeling of restlessness overcame me. I would have liked to be at the Camp to at least see what it was all about. At about 10 'clock that morning a car pulled up outside our house. Two men who introduced themselves as Daya and Ram informed my mother that they had been sent by Swamiji to pick me up for the Camp. My joy knew no bounds. Greater still was my joy when my mum consented to my going.



Papa leading yoga camp devotees on the Tongaat beach. Immediately behind him, Sister Henny Schimmel, and wearing a white sari and carrying sandals, our ashram Mummy.

[Editorial insert – on some of these trips to the beach, two of the taller boys, one on either side holding a handle, would carry the harmonium, which was then at a perfect height for Mummy, positioned in the middle, to play music as we all made our little pilgrimage to the sea.]

On reaching the campsite at Tongaat beach I was met by Swamiji, who, with a broad smile on his face said, 'Didn't I tell you that you will be here?' What an experience! Everyone was in a high spiritual mood. There was singing and dancing. People were getting into trance-like moods quite often. Among them were Basha and Angad (later Swami Premananda). All this was new to me. Were these people merely faking? This suspicion was soon dispelled when I myself fell into that state.

When the camp came to an end on the third day, there were mixed feelings of high spirituality on one hand and sadness that it had concluded. After striking camp, for the entire camp was conducted under a tarpaulin, we all went our way. The spiritual inebriation lasted for many days.

Becoming Fully Involved With The Centre

I continued to visit the Centre and in around March the following year, I was elected secretary of the Centre upon the recommendation of Swamiji himself, at the annual general meeting. I was bewildered at this but accepted the position as it was His wish.

Soon after this, the first Easter Yoga Camp was to be held at Tongaat beach. Swamiji asked me to assist with the preparation of the venue on the eve of the Camp. When He arrived the next morning, He was extremely pleased with the set up and arrangements. Once again there was a high spiritual atmosphere during the camp.

During the breaks between sessions Swamiji would ask me when I was going to come to live at the ashram. I could not give a positive answer in the beginning, as I had to obtain the permission and blessings of my parents. Then on one occasion I blurted out, 'In July, Swamiji.' He in turn replied, 'I know that you will keep your word.'

On the first day of the July school holidays, I packed my bag to go to the Centre, as I was to oversee the preparations and execution of the Children's Rally. I attended and participated in two rallies during the time of Swami

Nischalananda, and this was the first in which I was going to be involved as organiser.

The rally was held in the amphitheater of the Centre and several branches from as far afield as Newcastle in northern Natal, aMatikulu on the far north coast and Merebank in the south of Durban, participated. It was a resounding success.

After the rally several young people and children remained at the Centre for a children's camp. During the camp several interesting activities were arranged for them, both enjoyable and spiritual. A few days before the schools reopened, they returned to their homes. What a beautiful rapport we had built with them.



Children's camp at Tongaat beach

I did not return home on the last weekend of the holidays, and my parents grew concerned. Swamiji, accompanied by the then acting president of the Centre, Mr. D P Soni, and I went to meet my parents.

It did not take much for them to get the permission of my parents, to continue living at the Centre. My parents were given an undertaking that I would visit them from time to time. I was overjoyed, I packed all my remaining clothes and my books, for I was in Teachers Training College at this time and took leave of them after receiving their blessings. This was the beginning of 'Ashram Life'.

Ashram Life

Ashram life was by no means a walk in the park. We often went to bed after having eaten the bare minimum. Saturdays were special, for on this day we were treated by our loving 'Mummy' [Sri Jayanti Devi] to a full and sumptuous meal.

Ashram utilities had to be paid for and whatever was contributed by the few devotees who had not abandoned the Centre, often fell short.

To raise funds, home satsangs were conducted. This had a secondary yet important outcome, in that by His affable nature Swamiji was able to attract more devotees to the Centre.

The animosity against Swamiji by the opposing ashram faction did not abate. Many attempts were made to discredit Him as well as to stymie the work that He was doing. An attempt was made to halt the next children's rally. A member of the opposition, feigning interest, offered Swamiji to have handbills printed for publicising the forthcoming rally. On the date that they were to be picked up from the printers, we learnt that they knew nothing about them. Fortunately, a handbill was already set up in our ashram printing press, and this was printed out and distributed in the surrounding suburbs.

Shortly after I took up residence at the Centre, Swamiji spoke to me about initiation. He asked me who my chosen deity was and said that he would initiate me with Guru mantra soon.

On an appointed day I was initiated and instructed to meditate on the meaning of the mantra. By His grace and by the grace of my chosen Deity, I was able to understand the meaning in a short while after some rigorous sadhana. What an overwhelming feeling! For days I saw my chosen Deity wherever I looked, even seated on the bonnet of the car that I was driving.

Swamiji had a very unusual habit. At any time, He would want to visit someone, even as late as ten or eleven in the night. He would waken us (Angad and me) and announce that we were going to visit a devotee, sometimes as far away as Pietermaritzburg. At first, we would get up very reluctantly and after splashing water on our faces, change our clothes and get into the V W Kombi. One of us would drive, while Swamiji would sing and clap hands while sitting on the front passenger seat. We soon learnt

from observation, when these trips were called for, that Swamiji had received some intuitive indication that His presence was required.

On one occasion he decided to visit Sister Henny in Johannesburg. We left the ashram early one Saturday morning in two cars. The group consisted of Swamiji, Mummy, Angad, me and Mummy's children. There was no N3 highway in those days, and we had to travel via Newcastle, Volksrust and Standerton. We reached Sister Henny's flat in Saxonwold after lunch. We were all quite hungry. Fortunately, lunch was ready.



As we sat down for lunch after having washed, there was a loud knocking on the door. When Sister Henny opened the door, she was confronted by a burly policeman with a strong Afrikaans accent, who informed her that they had received a complaint from her neighbours that she was entertaining Indians. After a brief exchange of words, we heard him say that we should have our meal and leave immediately thereafter. In accordance with his order, we left after lunch. But where could we go?

We decided to go to the famous Zoo Lake area, in Parkview, Johannesburg. On arriving there we explained our position to the white janitor, who was very understanding and allowed us to stay there overnight. Sister Henny brought us our supper, and needless to say, she was very heartsore. We slept there that night, some in sleeping bags and Swamiji and Mummy in each of the cars. The next morning, we washed with water that Sister Henny had brought us, then had breakfast and left for Durban. This was my first such experience of the apartheid laws.

One Sunday morning I was busy in our printing press, when someone came to call me for breakfast. I said that I would be there shortly but became so

engrossed in completing what I was doing that I did not go. The messenger came again to call me and again I did not go.

A few minutes later the doorway was filled by the presence of my Guru. In his hands he had a tray of breakfast items. I was dumb struck. With tears in my eyes, I immediately fell prostrate before Him and asked for His pardon. He consoled me saying that he understood that the work had to be completed but that it was important that I ate in order to do more work that was in store for me. Such was His grace.



During the first Children's Rally under Swamiji, during His address to the audience, He urged them to arise and be active and not be like their ancestors who came to South Africa to cut cane. Early the next morning we were visited by members of the 'Special Branch' of the South African Police, who asked Him why He had made such a statement. He explained that when our ancestors came to South Africa, they had no provision to practice their religion, but now things had changed with temples and ashramas in existence. He was urging people to take advantage of the situation and not stagnate spiritually. They did not seem convinced, but all the same left, saying that they hoped that He did not get entangled in politics.

Yet another incident was perpetrated by the antagonists. It was the second children's rally under the leadership of Swamiji. We had received intimation from the various branches regarding the expected number that were to attend the function at the Centre.

Preparations were made to cater for the attendees. On the Sunday of the function the cooking staff was given the number to prepare the lunch for. Almost halfway through lunch, when the time came, I was informed that the food was not going to be enough.

On getting to the preparation area, we were informed that someone had come and told them that the secretary had ordered that only four pots of food, and not seven, had to be prepared. The messenger could not be identified. Hasty arrangements had to be made to save the situation. The Master [Sri Ramakrishna] had won, yet again.

Swamiji kept asking us about our progress with our sadhana [meditation and repetition of mantra or God's name]. One day he burst into the dormitory and swung open the doors of our cupboards. When asked what He was looking for He replied that He just wanted to see how neat and tidy our cupboards were. A neat cupboard, He said, indicated the state of mind of the person. I have always remembered this statement and apply it in everything that I do.



Around 1968 the Ramakrishna Youth League was formed, Swamiji expressed His desire that the youth do something to raise funds for the activities of the Centre. It was decided that we produce a play, 'The Ascetic', by Rabindranath Tagore.

[The premonastic Swami Chandikananda pictured alongside, in that role].

Immediately after the children's rally of that year, it being a school holiday, we began rehearsing the play. We later obtained the assistance of Mr. Rajmun Rambharath to direct the play which was performed at the Bolton Hall. A healthy sum of money was raised, not only from ticket sales, but also through donations from patrons who were so impressed by the performances of the actors.

I recall an incident that occurred one Saturday morning. I had to go into town to pick up some printing from Atlas Printers. I also had to return as soon as possible to collect some money which had to be deposited in the bank in Briardene.

The printed work was still in the process of being packed, so I had to wait. As soon as it was completed, I got into the car and rushed back to the ashram. The time was now 10:30 am and the banks in those days closed at 11:30. As I approached the bank on my way to the ashram, I was left aghast to see my Guru alighting from a bus in front of the bank. I immediately swung into the bank parking lot, alighted from the car and fell prostrate before Him. With tears in my eyes, I apologised to Him. He picked me up and said that He understood that I had been delayed, but the banking had to be done as money was a very touchy issue, and it was important to be above board.

On another occasion, Swamiji was given some money by devotees in Pietermaritzburg. A week or so later, a report was laid with the acting president of the Centre that Swamiji was squandering the donations to the Centre. A meeting was called with the aggrieved members and Swamiji. At the meeting the treasurer produced proof that the money was receipted and banked. This was yet another attempt to discredit Swamiji.

Initiation Into Naistika Brahmacharya

As time rolled on, Swamiji showed concern for our initiation. Although he could do it Himself, the attitude of South Africans at that time was that they would only respect a Swami who was trained and initiated in India. To this end He prepared to go to India to make arrangements in Rishikesh. He informed us about this and asked us how we felt. We (Angad and I) were prepared to renounce.

In December 1968 I resigned from the teaching profession. After the Christmas Camp that year, Swamiji left for India by sea, accompanied by two young male devotees. In India He visited Vasishtha guha the Gurusthan [place of the guru] of Swami Nischalananda, where He met the senior Swamis and presented His wishes before them.

Kailas ashram in Rishikesh

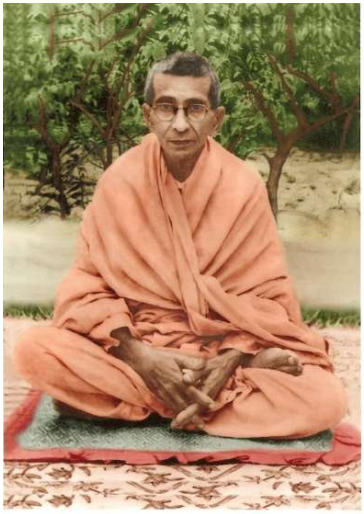


Swamis Kalikananda, and Sevananda arranged with Kailas ashram in Rishikesh for our tutelage and initiation. But Kailas only initiated Sannyasins and not Brahmacharis, so Swamiji was instructed in the procedure for Naistika Brahmacharya [the penultimate step before final, irrevocable monastic vows]. In the meanwhile, Devraj Barsarti, who was a Gurubhai of Swamiji's, left for Vasishtha guha where he was initiated into Naistika Brahmacharya by the monks and given the name Vishnu Chaitanya. He took up residence at the Kailas ashram.



L-R: Pre-monastic Vishnu Priya with Inder, our pre-monastic Papa.

After spending some time at Vasishtha guha Swamiji left to meet Monks of the Ramakrishna Order in other parts of India, especially Belur Math, the Headquarters of the worldwide Ramakrishna movement. At Belur Math He met the President, Swami Vireshwaranandaji [pictured] and had lengthy discussions with Him. Swami Vireshwaranandaji was very pleased to learn that the work of the Great Master [Sri Ramakrishna] continued in South Africa. He blessed Swamiji and the work in South Africa.



After being in India for a month, Swamiji returned to Durban. For days he related to us His experiences in India. He also asked us to prepare for initiation into Naistika Brahmacharya [penultimate monastic vows] and gave us details of what it entailed. We were tasked to learn the Ishavasya Upanishad, and the fifteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita by heart, for these were recited at Kailas ashram before the noon meal.

At the Easter Camp of 1969, after a spiritually elevating two days of singing and chanting, spiritual dancing and highly charged talks about renunciation and dispassion, Angad and I received initiation at the hands of our beloved Guru duly assisted in the preliminary rituals by Pandit Mandri. Angad was given the name of Prabhu Chaitanya and I, Chandi Chaitanya, and we were adorned with the ochre robes that were the raiment of Naistika Brahmacharis at Kailas ashram. There was much jubilation on the part of the devotees.

As is traditional we had to go out and 'beg' for food which was mainly in the form of uncooked items. On returning to the camp, these items were handed over to our Guru as dakshina [love offering recompense] and later included in our supper for that evening. The next day ended a most memorable camp.

In late July of 1969, Prabhu Chaitanya and I left for India by air. After two days in Bangkok, Thailand, we entered India via Calcutta. We left Calcutta

for Rishikesh after three days. After a train journey that took almost two days, we reached Kailas ashram in Rishikesh.

After just three years of being at Kailas ashram, Vishnu Chaitanya was diagnosed with stomach cancer. As it was in an advanced stage, the superintendent of the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences suggested that he return home, as he had very little time to live.

Return To South Africa

We arrived at the then Louis Botha airport [Durban] on a Sunday afternoon. We were met at the airport by a devotee who informed us that Swamiji was in northern Natal for a children's rally and that He would be back at the ashram that evening. Late that evening, Swamiji returned. He was shocked to see the condition of Vishnu. On the other hand, He was very pleased to see me. We hospitalised Vishnu in the Mc Cords Hospital the next day, and he passed on the next Sunday.

A week after that, my father, who lapsed into a coma after having a tooth extracted, was admitted into the same hospital. He passed on the following morning. The deaths of a close spiritual brother and my father had a devastating effect on my psyche. Added to that, my family had no senior male figure. I felt that Swamiji might not be willing to let me return home.

Early one Monday morning I had a bath and performed my usual sadhana in the shrine. Then, placing the ochre robes on the altar, I prostrated to the Holy Trio, and with mixed feelings left the ashram in civilian attire. I returned home but continued with my sadhana. I married in 1976 and had two children thereafter.

Return To The Ashram

In 1986 we moved to Woodview, some ten kilometers north of the ashram. A few of the Hindu members of the community were desirous of forming a religious organisation so the Woodview Hindu Sabha was formed, and I was one of the committee members.

For Ramayana week of 1988, the committee wanted a procession through the streets to concientise the community in Hinduism. It was decided to obtain the services of a bugle band to lead the procession. As the Ramakrishna Centre had such a band, they were to be approached. I was tasked to approach them.

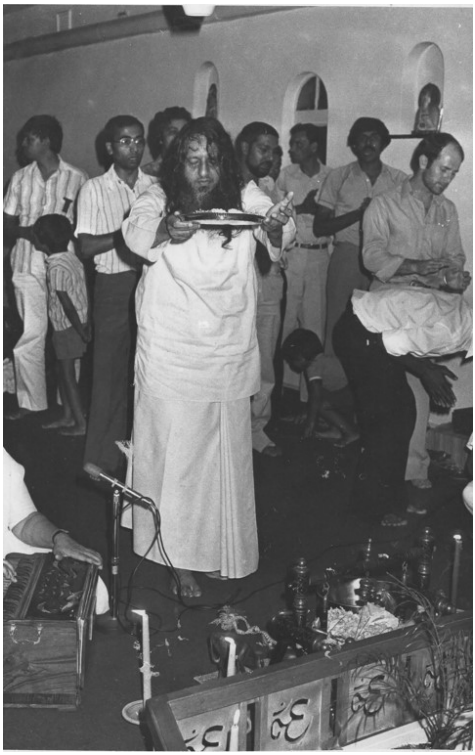


On a Saturday morning, with great trepidation, I pitched up at the Centre. I was met by my dear brother Prabhu Chaitanya, who was now Swami Premananda [having taken final vows – and pictured alongside Papa on the old ashram Montreal Road]. Our joy at meeting each other after such a long time, knew no bounds. He told me that Swamiji had been talking about me, but unfortunately, he was in northern Natal that weekend for the annual children's rally.

I then reverently proceeded to the shrine. In there I was overcome by spiritual fervor. My body shook and tears rolled from my eyes. After a few minutes there I emerged to find Swami Premananda in the foyer with tears in his eyes. He lovingly asked me to come to the ashram again as Swamiji wanted to meet me. Without giving it much thought, I replied that I would surely do so.

The next Saturday, as if in a trance, I proceeded to the ashram. Arriving there just in time for the start of the service, I took my seat right at the back. What an unspeakable experience! The singing was divine, and then Swamiji's talk was riveting. At the conclusion of the service, Swamiji followed the person carrying the aarti tray to the foyer.

He himself took the tray from the carrier. There was some tittering among some devotees, as this was very unusual.



Being at the back of the shrine, I was among those who exited first. When my turn came, I fell prostrate before Him and held His feet. Tears streamed from my eyes. He held me with His free hand and lifted me up. I saw tears in His eyes also. He held me close to Him and blessed me with the light from the aarti. He then passed the tray back to someone and took me aside. He said that He knew that I would be returning and that He was very happy. He asked me to continue to come to the ashram, for it was my home. Shaking with emotion, I said that I would. Then Mummy, Swami Premananda and Mother Govender came to meet me and express their joy that I had returned.

I returned home and immediately informed the members of the Sabha that I wished to resign. They were sad to let me go but understood that this was a calling that I should not miss. One day Swamiji told me that He had been assured by Swami Nishreyasananda, of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Harare, Zimbabwe, that I would surely return, that there were some remaining vasanas [latent impressions or desires] that I had to satisfy. I was pleased to hear this.

I came to the ashram two or three times thereafter, before Swamiji asked me to bring my family to meet Him. This I did, and he was pleased to meet them. He asked them about themselves and their spiritual practices and was happy that they all did daily sadhana and that they knew about the Holy Trio.



Around this time Swami Bhavyananda [pictured in a screen-snatch from a video] of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne, England, was a guest of the Centre. I had the privilege of meeting and having a short dialogue with him. We also had visits by Swami Vanandananda, a senior Monk of the Ramakrishna Mission, and Swami Jagadananda of the Ramakrishna Mission in Singapore, later.

For Navaratri [nine days of Divine Mother worship] that year Swamiji asked that my family sit for the puja [hawan and prayers] on one of the days. On the third day we sat for the puja with Swami Premananda officiating. Throughout the ritual I paid close attention to the procedure. What an experience it was!

On one of the evenings of the Ramayana week the next year I arrived at the ashram to be met by a devotee who said that Swamiji had instructed that I go to His room immediately after prostrating in the shrine. After prostrating, I went to His room and prostrated before Him. After asking me how I was, He informed me that as Swami Premananda was away on an errand and as He Himself was not too well, I had to conduct the puja for the couple who was going to sit for the worship.

I protested that I was not used to doing pujas. He, however, said that He was quite sure that I would be able to do it well. With His blessings I returned to the shrine and took my place on the seat of the tantradharak (officiating priest) with great trepidation. I commenced with some hesitation but soon found that everything was going on smoothly.

Afterwards the couple who had sat for the worship expressed their joy with how the puja had gone. When I went up to Swamiji's room, He was all smiles. Even before I could say anything He said, ‘Didn't I say that by Mother's grace you would be able to do it?’ This was my initiation into conducting pujas at the Ashram, as well as for several devotees.

Before Navaratri that year Swamiji called me and asked me what I did during Navaratri. I told Him that I fast over the nine days and chant the Navakshari mantra. He asked me to read the Devi Mahatmayam in addition, and then on second thought asked me to come to the ashram every morning during the festival and read one chapter per day in the shrine. I followed this instruction.

During this period, the ashram was host to Professor Lakshmi Kumari and Brother Awasti of the Vivekananda Kendra, India. Swamiji asked them to do the chanting of the Devi Mahatmayam during the Ashtami puja that year, while Swami Premananda was tasked to do the worship of the Divine Mother. The puja that year was enjoyed by all that attended.

One day, accompanied by Brother Francis, Swamiji visited our home in Woodview. He seemed restless during his stay, and I felt uncomfortable. While leaving He called me aside and advised me to plan to move out of that place, as He feared that my children would meet with a terrible accident. He further suggested that I should move to within the vicinity of an ashram. As the area around the Avoca ashram was becoming industrialised, the only alternative was Chatsworth. By His Grace and the Grace of the Holy Trio, in a short time I was able to purchase a house in Shallcross, some five kilometers from the Chatsworth ashram.

Years later, in 2002, His prediction of an accident came to pass when the two boys met with a horrific, fatal accident on the highway leading to Phoenix, just two or so kilometers from where we previously lived.

Around this time Swamiji appointed me as Liaison Officer of the Centre, together with Mr. Kissoon Behari. We were tasked to visit the various branches and guide them along the correct lines. We also had to oversee the arrangements for the Northern Natal Children's Rallies. We really enjoyed this very much. I recall an incident during a Rally hosted by the Estcourt Branch. During the lunch break Swamiji took a walk to the dining area. There he found a few men partaking of alcohol. He scolded them severely for setting a bad example to the children, as well as for disrespecting a religious function. At the end of the function while



addressing the audience, He took up the topic of alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking at such functions. He was in an angry mood and the audience was spellbound on seeing His 'other side'. [For context, Sri Ramakrishna said that the anger of a holy man is like a line drawn in water. It's an appearance of separation only, intended to achieve a specific purpose.]

Sometime in 1992 we went on a short vacation to Cape Vidal north of Richards Bay. The group consisted of Swamiji, Mr. D P Soni, me and my two young sons, Mummy, Pravrajika Atmaprana, Vimla, Krishni, Shirley Shailsunker and her little daughter. The men were lodged in one log cabin while the women were in the other.



One morning while taking a stroll along the trail Swamiji stopped and said to Mr. Soni that there would be a black government in 1994. Then with His walking stick, He inscribed '94' in the sand. This came to pass when on 17th April 1994, South Africa became a democracy led by the black majority.

Upanishad classes were held at the ashram every Tuesday between 6 and 7 o'clock. Swamiji took the class, and I did the reading of the Sanskrit text. The classes were well attended. After the class most people left for their homes, while a few remained to have further discussions with Swamiji.

After supper it was the duty of myself and another member or two, to massage Swamiji's legs while He lay in bed. This would go on for hours, during which we would have lengthy spiritual discussions. On some occasions He would suddenly get up in bed and ask that we meditate together. On some occasions, thinking that he was asleep, we would try stealthily tiptoeing out of the room, but just as we reached the door, He would give a laugh with, 'Where are you all going?' But He knew that we had to go to work later that morning, and in His compassion allowed us to leave.

As time rolled on His health began to deteriorate. Apart from the Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease [named after the medical scientists who identified it] which is a group of inherited disorders that cause nerve damage, He also had a problem with His stomach. I was instructed that every Saturday when I came to the ashram, I was to proceed to His room after prostrating in the shrine. What beautiful times I had with Him. We discussed various spiritual topics and future projects including the new ashram buildings.

He once asked me what my plans were regarding Sannyasa. I told Him that at the right time I would take Sannyas at His hands or of that of His nominee. He was pleased that I was determined to finish what I had started.

Pictured: Brahmachari Gyanadayal with his beloved Guru.



One day early in 1994 Swamiji became very ill. Devotees were informed of His condition and asked to visit Him as it was felt that He was going to leave the body. That day, and particularly in the evening, devotees streamed in to 'see Him for the last time'. The next day however He was well gain.

The construction of the new temple and associated buildings was underway at this time and Swamiji would often inspect the progress. In June or July of that year He was present at the children's cultural festival held at the Stanmore Hall, hosted by the Red Hill branch of the Centre. He was in such an elevated spiritual state. Something told me that this was going to be His last cultural festival.

The End Of An Era

In late September Swamiji became very ill again. The doctors admitted Him at the Entabeni Hospital. He remained in a semi-conscious state for a few days. It was apparent to the doctors that He was definitely going to leave

the body. Devotees who were close to Him were informed about this and permitted to visit.

In the very early morning hours of Saturday 1st October 1994 Swamiji dropped His mortal coil. We were informed about this either telephonically or in person. Arrangements were made for the cremation, which was to take place at the Clare Estate crematorium the following day. As well as for the viewing of the body at the Joosub hall, University of Durban Westville, prior to transfer to the crematorium.

On Sunday morning thousands of devotees and members of the public streamed into the Joosub hall to view the body and say a prayer. Around midday the body was removed to the crematorium where mantras were chanted and kirtans sung. An hour later the body was consigned into the furnace. In keeping with the Sannyas tradition no rituals were performed.



At first, I was heartbroken that I would not be initiated by His hand or that of someone nominated by Him. Then it entered my mind that He would definitely make the arrangements, for a Guru never abandons a disciple.

On Shivaratri in February 2014, I was initiated into Sannyas at the Sadhana Sadan ashrama in Kankhal, Hardwar, India, by their Swami Vishwaatmananda [pictured on left - not Swami Vishwatmananda of the Ramakrishna Mission who was in charge of the Avoca ashram for a time]. This ritual was performed in the presence of three senior Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission. I cannot explain my emotions on that day. By my Guru's grace I had accomplished what I had set out to achieve in this life.

Reminiscences From Brother Benny Maistry



L-R devotees Isaac, ashram stalwart Brother Nad, who became Brahmachari Sevak, Daisy and Elvis (brother and sister) - and a youthful Brother Benny Maistry.



[Here are some delightful anecdotes from long-term ashram devotee, Brother Benny Maistry. Benny concluded his career as the widely loved and admired principal of Hopeville Primary school where he served from 1998 to 2019. His retirement gift to himself was to undertake a pilgrimage to the holy sites in India, associated with Sri Ramakrishna. Pictured left is Brother Benny later in life.]

His words: I am Benny Maistry, now 66 years old. The late Swami Premananda's pre-monastic brother, the late Ashok Bhanjan and I were in the same matric class at school. During the vacation we as a group used to

study at a temple in Malacca Road next to the Red Hill Cemetery in Durban. It was the most peaceful place to study.

During our breaktime Ashok started talking about his pre-monastic brother [Angad]. By then already a Naistika Brahmachari [not yet fully ordained monk] named Prabhu Chaitanya, who was studying Sanskrit and Vedanta at Kailas ashram in India.] After some time, he asked me to accompany him to the ashram in Avoca, the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa.

We walked up a very long and steep flight of stairs to reach the ashram. After a few minutes I was introduced to Swamiji [Swami Shivapadananda]. I saw some young people working in the ashram office and Swamiji asked me to go and help them, which I did. That was the start of my association with the Ramakrishna Centre Youth League.

Swamiji asked the Youth League if we could organise a week of winter classes for the final year high school students, free of cost. I was chairman of the League and so got to steer this initiative. I was running about frantically, trying to do everything myself.

Big Swamiji*called me and said, 'Benny, come sit at my feet.' Swamiji then asked, 'Why are you behaving like a monkey? Do you think you are doing all this? Sit and meditate. Everything is happening because of Master's will.'
*[A name many used for Swami Shivapadananda – Papa – to differentiate him from Swami Premananda, who returned from his studies in India in 1977 as a fully-fledged Swami].

On the last day, after conclusion of the classes, I felt untidy and went to Swamiji to tell him I was leaving to go home and freshen up. I expected Swamiji to give me a pat on the back and say what a good job I had done. But, instead, this was his response: Swamiji asked me to go and pick up all the litter and have the toilets cleaned. Then Swamiji said I should take a bus and go home. My ego was destroyed completely.

Winter School

These classes took place for matriculants throughout KwaZulu Natal. They were free of charge, and it was the first time such classes were offered in the province. We obtained the voluntary help of senior educators and lecturers willing to offer their services. We distributed notes, and lectures lasted for two hours. We had three modules per day, of two-hour sessions each.

We had such a big response that on the first day many ashram devotees had to pitch in to cook food and serve those waiting in line. Our Swamiji used to join us for all the lecture sessions and much publicity about this was generated in all media.

Students who had travelled from long distances were offered free accommodation. We were the forerunners in the offering of winter vacation classes for matriculants in South Africa and this was all due to Swamiji's inspiration.

The Car Crash

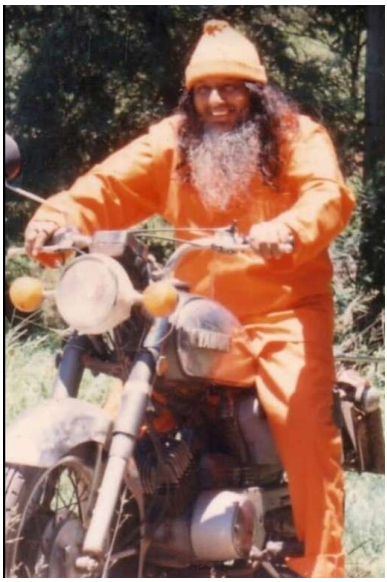
In December 1978 I was involved in a very serious vehicle accident which took place close to Christmas. I was hospitalised at King Edward Hospital in Durban. When I was admitted I put a framed picture of Swamiji on my medicine chest.

When the nursing staff came to visit me in the morning, they wanted to know from me if Swamiji was our father Christmas! At that time, Swamiji had a flowing white beard.

One evening medical doctor Naren Rana, one of the ashram devotees, brought Swamiji to visit me in hospital. I told Swamiji that I couldn't sleep, and my mind just kept replaying the accident. The nurses were also standing around me in the hospital ward. Swamiji placed his hand on my head and told me, 'Son from today you will fall easily into deep sleep.' And that's what happened.

When I had completed all my surgeries, I went to Swamiji and reported to him. His response was, 'Son, you will not have to go back to hospital again for this problem.' Forty years later and true to his word, I have not visited the hospital again for my problem. That was the power of Swamiji.

Trip To The Farm 'Ramakrishna Blessings' In rural Richmond, KZN



[Swamiji was in residence at the Ramakrishna Blessings farm for several years. The farm had been purchased by Dr Naren Rana, a close devotee, but was legally registered in the name of a white devotee to circumvent the government's race-based land-ownership restrictions. The dwelling construction was largely done by Shongweni-based pottery maestro, Andrew Walford.

A white neighbour in the rural Richmond area tried several times to create legal trouble. He went as far as jumping on the bonnet of Dr Rana's Mercedes Benz car, to stop him driving along a narrow, legally registered servitude over his property, to reach the Ramakrishna Blessings farm. This was just one of many incidents, including him setting fire to grass which then burned some of his own hay bales, so he could charge us for compensation. Not the best neighbour to have.]

Brother Benny Maistry continues:
Swamiji used my Ford Escort 1600 Sport car to go to the Ramakrishna Blessings farm in Richmond, KZN. Ashram Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi Mataji], a few others and I were with Swamiji.

Swamiji was driving very fast and suddenly he cut his speed almost to a halt. I asked Swamiji if there was anything wrong with the car. Swamiji

responded; 'No, son, the police are ahead.' And in a few kilometres the police were indeed trapping speedsters. Swamiji could sense ahead, what was happening.

Early the next morning I was walking around the Ramakrishna Blessings farm. Suddenly I saw a motorbike flying past me. Mummy said, 'Benny that's Swamiji with a big coat and a helmet on.' Swamiji had a good laugh at all of us. He was a man for all seasons.

Sitting With Swamiji On A Saturday night

Swamiji had a chronic problem with his legs, which dated back to his childhood. The late Sam Chetty and I were asked by Swamiji to massage his legs during the night. Our shift used to start at 6pm. At about midnight Swamiji appeared to doze off. Sam and I would then lie on the floor and fall asleep. And will you believe it, Swamiji would get up, take a blanket, and cover both of us. Such love he showed to us.

Durga Puja At Tongaat beach, KZN North Coast

We were all travelling to Tongaat beach. Swamiji was with me. He wanted to sit outside but we had no chair. I removed my whole car seat from the front and asked Swamiji to sit on it. Swamiji was so amused.

Yoga Retreat at Tongaat beach

Swamiji took all of us to Tongaat beach on a spiritual retreat. On that day Swamiji instructed us to maintain mouna [verbal and mental silence]. No speaking was allowed. No exaggerated non-verbal communication was permitted to compensate. Lunch time came and we were all hungry. We filled our plates with a delicious-looking and smelling vegetable biryani.

The late Sam Chetty and I filled our plates full to the brim. Immediately we started to eat we realised there was no salt at all in the food. Can you imagine everyone's face? Swamiji was watching from the corner of his eye with a slight smile on his face. No one could say a word but eat the food they'd taken.

Swamiji's Personal Letters To The Ramakrishna Math And Other Swamis
Swamiji tasked me to type all his letters. I was not allowed to make a single mistake otherwise I would have to retype it. It was such a privilege [as Swamiji taught us to say] and a pleasure doing this for Swamiji.'

From Brother Gyanadayal [Teddy Govender] our beloved expert ashram horticulturist Gurubhai, pictured on the Avoca new temple roof with Swami Premananda. His memories are in his very own words.



I had known Big Swamiji [Papa] for almost 30 years before his mahasamadhi [leaving of the body]. My first encounter was when I went to the ashram at Avoca and saw the rear of a lady Sannyasini with long, jet black hair walking very gracefully towards the ashram Shrine.

What a surprise I got when this lady turned around and asked, 'How are you, my son?' She had long black hair, also had a long greyish beard and a serene loving face. And of course, it was none other than my Guru, Swami Shivapadananda.

Later, after many years my ego was shattered by the very same Swami who was my revered spiritual mentor and a mother, in a spiritual sense.

One may ask why he was so attracted to many of us? It's difficult to say because maybe our attraction was because of his spiritual magnetism which he always possessed, or his motherly love for anyone, whether you were someone important or an outcast of society because of various reasons.

All were treated alike. He shared the same love, affection, and concern for all. Swamiji always embraced and lived in tune with nature. No insect, animal or plant was ignored if they needed attention.



[Papa with Jayce, the ashram Maltese poodle, who Mother Henny Schimmel was convinced was a mahatma in disguise.

People used to think and feel that they were more special than others when they were with Swamiji. This would reveal the type of personality Swamiji possessed with individuals.

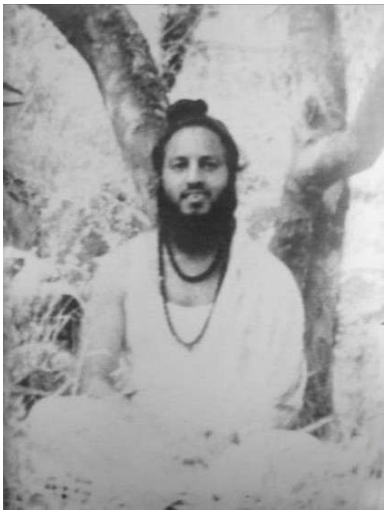
Swamiji also had a very intuitive mind, and he was able to foresee the problem before anyone came to him with their challenges. His utterance was always 'Mother knows best', referring to the Divine, Universal Mother.

He would then ask that person to go to the shrine and sit there for a few minutes and when we encountered the person with challenges thereafter, they were completely changed emotionally and physically.

When anyone, whether a first timer or a regular visitor came to meet with Swamiji, he always enquired about their individual and family's welfare. This came as a shock or surprise to many. Why is Swamiji worrying about me and particularly my family's welfare? He doesn't even know them! My answer to this, is that a mother will always concern herself with everyone's welfare. To many spiritual leaders, Swamiji was a mystic.

Checkmate

Swamiji used to suffer from excruciating pain in his legs. At these times, when it became unbearable, he sometimes had to take medicines. One of the ashram doctors who attended to Papa's body was a very good chess player and he had taught Swamiji how to play the game. It so happened that once Swamiji learnt to play chess he usually won the game.



On one occasion when Swamiji had just had an injection, Swamiji challenged the doctor for a game of chess and the doctor thought that now was an opportune moment to beat Swamiji. Alas, as drowsy as Swamiji should have been, he still beat the good doctor. How this happened is a question people will have to fathom for themselves.

Drunk Devotee Incident At Ladysmith Or Newcastle

A devout family living in Northern Natal was very closely associated with the Ramakrishna Centre. The husband, although devoted to his family responsibilities and those of the Centre, had one bad addiction in that he couldn't stay away from consuming alcohol.

Swamiji counselled him telephonically and visited the devotee's home whenever he was in that part of the province. The wife used to complain bitterly about her husband's bad habit.

The husband, because of his weakness and respect for Swamiji, then began avoiding Swamiji. This went on for some time. One winter night when Swamiji was in northern Natal, he happened to visit the devotee's home in the evening. Upon enquiring about the husband's wellbeing, the wife told Swamiji that her husband was at the pub, up to his nonsense as usual.

Swamiji then put on a long warm overcoat and decided to visit the pub. When Swamiji entered the pub, everyone became quiet, and they were shocked to see a stranger with long hair and beard standing next to this devotee.

No one knows what was discussed but the devotee then picked up his tumbler, downed the alcohol and walked out with Swamiji, never to enter the pub again. This person thereafter became a teetotaller.

News spread like wildfire and there were numerous requests from the public for Swamiji to give them that 'medicine' which cured alcoholism.

Mother's Farewell Worship at Tongaat beach

This incident occurred about four years before Swamiji's mahasamadhi [leaving the body]. On the final day of Navaratri [nine days dedicated to worshipping the Divine Mother] when the remnants of the nine days' prayer and the statue of the Divine Mother were to be immersed into the sea as in normal regular years, it so happened that on this occasion it was high tide with unusual extremely large waves, lashing right up the beach to the sand dunes. It was impossible for us to perform worship on the beach or enter the water.

There were about two hundred devotees all coming to pay homage to the Divine Mother on this, the last of the nine days. Swamiji and then Brother Chandi [now Swami Chandikananda] were to perform the final prayers. My

task was to lead the procession with the statue of Lord Ganesha seated in a brass tray carried on my head and the congregation were to follow me.

Swamiji stopped the procession and requested all of us to remain still at the edge of the car park facing the beach. Swamiji went into a very high spiritual state and picked up his hands in prayer to Mother Ganga and then took his right hand in a blessing position facing the sea. The sea waves seemed to be receding at the spot where we stood.

Swamiji then by hand signs motioned us to walk onto the beach and at a particular spot to place the murtis [images] and prepare the site for prayer. The rest of the public were requested to remain at the edge of the carpark till further notice.

Once the prayer site was prepared, and we were ready for the ceremony, the congregation were requested to go onto the beach and sit around the prayer site from the car park end, facing the beach. The astonishing incident to be observed here was that the waves were lashing all around us and the prayer site but never at any moment disturbed the ongoing prayers or posed any risk to any of us. Swamiji remained at the edge of the carpark till the end.

After the prayer was over, some of us had to enter the water to immerse the prayer items and the image of the Divine Mother into the sea. This was a potentially very risky process because of the severe backwash and treacherous waves. But all was safely accomplished.

After this was over, we brought some sea water and offered it to Swamiji who sprinkled some onto himself and thereafter we took the same water and sprinkled it onto the devotees. All were then asked to leave the beach and come onto the carpark for a gesture of prayer and appreciation.

As soon as this happened, Swamiji again turned his palms towards the sea, and lo and behold, the waves were back to their former treacherous selves – engulfing the very same site where the prayer was performed and the congregation had been seated. People were in awe. People who were close

to Swamiji did approach us to talk about this incident, but we smiled and mentioned it was Mother's Grace.

After a week, we were one Tuesday night attending to Swamiji. Swami Premananda, then-Brother Chandi [now Swami Chandikananda] and I were present. A devotee suddenly, out of curiosity, broached this topic and all we saw was a sudden subtle kick from Swamiji and all went quiet, and this incident was forgotten.

Krishna Janmashtami Night

One year during the final minutes [leading up to midnight] preceding Lord Krishna's birth, loving Mummy, Aunty Mary [Jibodh] and a few other mothers were preparing the cradle for the birth of Lord Krishna.



Swamiji suddenly went into a very high spiritual fervour and began dancing around the cradle in the old shrine. The satsang was at its peak with melodious singing from Swami Premananda. The congregation became excited, and an aura began to engulf the shrine. For some reason I was asked to manipulate the altar light switch to turn it off and on like a disco. I thought this was a joke [that he'd misunderstood the instruction] but suddenly Swamiji came over to me and with one piercing look changed my whole attitude and composure. All of us without any provocation, danced around Swamiji and the cradle. At the hour of midnight, the huge brass bell in the courtyard was rung 108 times. [This was an old ship's bell that had been installed by our late ashramite Brother John Tunmer – pictured – aka Bhoganandaji, to call the devotees to prayer and meals. Papa loved John dearly. John was the most practical Mr Fixit I'd ever met. He could repair anything.

Papa gave John the pet-name of Bhoganandaji as a loving tease. John passed away from pancreatic cancer in Australia in 2020.]



Then all became normal, we paid our homage at the cradle, took sanctified food [prasad] and went our various ways. Although some people were still in a very spiritual mood, weeping profusely and refusing to go home.

Sharpshooting With Alan Jibodh And Another

This devotee [Brother Alan Jibodh] was a very close member to Swamiji and only visited Swamiji late at night. The funny thing is that he would go to the shrine to prostrate and pay homage but only half of his body was inside the shrine entrance and the other half was outside, because he refused to take off his shoes.

Stalwart members, Mr S P Singh, Mr Paul Deoduth and the delightful, gun-toting non-prostrator – Alan Jibodh. A character of note. Or 'a case' as Papa would have called him.



When he arrived, he always carried a gun, on which he prided himself. It so happened that on this night, the conversation went around the gun and how one should go around shooting. Swamiji took the gun from Alan, walked onto the ashram veranda, and pointed it at a large gum tree near the old kitchen site, about 25 metres from where we were. He fired the gun with one hand and lo and behold, a large limb of this tree came crashing down. We were all shocked and the topic of discussion was over.

Another incident was the burglary of a car at the ashram at 3am one morning. The car alarm went off. The car was parked near the old printing press about a hundred metres from Swamiji's room. Dr Vinodh Jogessar was there with his gun. Swamiji took the gun and with one hand fired one shot right at the back of the car. The burglar ran off, screaming out of shock, promising never to ever come back again. He was later apprehended and then freed.

Driving Episodes

Swamiji would drive vehicles but did not have a driver's licence. He was a very fast driver. An incident that is worth mentioning was that he was stopped by a policeman and was asked to produce a licence. Swamiji mentioned to the policeman that he does not have a licence and requested that the policeman fine him for such infringement. The officer smiled and let him off.

On another occasion he was again stopped by the police and was asked to produce a licence and there again Swamiji mentioned that he did not have a driver's licence. The police fined Swamiji, cautioned him and requested that Swamiji go for a driver's licence. The policeman then mentioned to Swamiji that he had seen a lady with long hair driving fast in a 60km zone, but when we were stopped, he realised that it was not so. [Papa's long hair often caused confusion at a distance].

One day whilst I was driving the vehicle Swamiji requested that I drive fast because I drove very slowly. When I increased the speed Swamiji again wanted me to drive faster above the speed limit. Suddenly Swamiji cautioned me to drive at the normal speed limit and wanted me to be quick about it. Just then I witnessed a policeman hiding amongst the bushes with

a speed prosecution camera. When I glanced at Swamiji; he had his eyes closed.

Once I was driving Swamiji, Mummy, and some devotees from a parks board resort on the north coast. I had a trailer hitched onto the vehicle. The road was corrugated, and one had to drive carefully. We were late and I was driving a bit faster and Swamiji suddenly blurted out 'Watch out, you are going to have a puncture', and just then the rear left tyre of the vehicle popped, and we had to spend time changing the wheel to continue our journey. Swamiji was in a very quiet mood.

It was months after that I realised in discussion with loving Mummy that through Swamiji's intervention, a major catastrophe was averted. I always thought the interventions were coincidental, but Mummy's remark changed my outlook towards Swamiji.

Guru's Grace



Swamiji and some devotees visited Andrew's [the renowned potter, Andrew Walford - pictured] house in Shongweni. Dr Naren Rana met Swamiji there. During the evening Dr Rana wanted to take leave and Swamiji held him back. Dr Rana again requested leave and was denied permission. This happened for some time, and one could see Dr Rana becoming restless and agitated. Then Swamiji said: 'Son if you must leave; then go.' Dr Rana left and Swamiji was again very quiet. After a few minutes Dr Rana came back shaking and flustered. Swamiji embraced him. When Dr Rana was reversing his car, and although he was very familiar with Andrew's property, the car somehow ended up with its rear wheels at the edge of an overhanging cliff.



Fearsome Pets And Wild Animals

Swamiji had a very calming influence on most aggressive and fearsome pets – especially dogs. [As did Ashram Mummy, too. Pictured here with Byron, a cheetah at the De Wildt sanctuary]. When these animals were met by Swamiji they became very submissive or very happily started wagging their tails and running about. People were aghast with mouth open and looking shocked that these animals were acting so strangely in the presence of Swamiji. It so happened at the Zoo that the caged big cats always came close to their cage bars towards Swamiji to be petted.

I used to collect all sorts of snakes and leave them in my sleeping quarters and at times used to take some to Swamiji's room. Swamiji would leave them around his neck and the snakes used to be calm and just be draped around his neck with their heads swaying.

I used to carry out education demos of snakes at the yoga camp. There were quite a few youths who were thrilled and overcame their fear of snakes. One day I arrived at the ashram from work and had two youths very happily showing me a green snake they'd caught and kept in a large old glass milk bottle for me. I was shocked because it was a venomous Boomslang, behaving very aggressively in the bottle. I scolded them and asked them not to do it again.

One evening Swamiji asked me to promise him that I would not catch or deal with snakes anymore. From that day the natural fearful instinct for snakes got the better of me.

One night there was a white poodle lost on the freeway and Swamiji stopped the devotees and picked up the dog and placed it under his overcoat and brought it to the ashram. The animal was looking weak with mangled hair.

The next day when the dog was washed and groomed, the animal looked snow white. Swamiji then named it Snowy. One of the devotees took the dog away and it lived to a ripe old age.

Other Initiates And Sannyasins

Swamiji had quite a few initiates in India. There was a professor of mathematics at Vasishtha guha [Swami Purushottamananda – our Guruji's cave of residence] in India, who was initiated by Swamiji, and if you looked at him, he was a very humble and unassuming person, clad in his Indian attire, who was happily doing menial jobs such as cleaning the ashram surrounds.

When he saw Swamiji in 1993 he became so emotional that Swamiji embraced him and let him know that it was the last time Swamiji would be visiting India. [Swamiji left the body in 1994]. There were many other male and female devotees scattered throughout India.

I also recall that besides brahmachari and lay initiates in South Africa and Zambia, there were others, elsewhere, also. Two that come to mind are a Christian Pastor who became a Swami that lived in East London. [Bob Grantham, who received sannyas from Papa and was named Swami Madhavananda.] Then Brother Chandi's [now Swami Chandikananda] mother who lived at the ashram here where Mother Radha's kutir [dwelling place] used to be. She practiced Ayurvedic health sciences.

Members Held in High Esteem

One day Swamiji scolded Mother Henny [Schimmel] for seemingly no reason and it became a joke amongst us young ashramites. Swamiji got hold of us and cautioned that we should respect Mother Henny because if it was not for her selfless sacrifice, we would not be here at this ashram. She was a pillar of strength who came to Gurudev's [Swami Nischalananda's – Papa's Guru] assistance in procuring the ashram site. And that we should revere her like the Rani Rasmani who paid for the construction of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar in India, where Master went through his spiritual practises. Swamiji said, 'When the members had no financial assistance nor food

during Gurudev's as well as my own early years at the ashram; Mother Henny was the saving grace.'



As for loving Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi – pictured] Swamiji had no words to describe her but emotionally said that she is the minstrel of the Divine Mother, whose presence and guidance we should not question, but revere.

About Brother Peter [van Den Berg] Swamiji said that he was like the mad Monk from Russia [Rasputin] a proper karma yogi [the yoga of physical work and action] who sacrificed his family and joined Swami Nischalananda. He would do any work at the ashram from cleaning a toilet blockage to gardening and building maintenance, without being asked to do so. He was erratic and rude at times, but he represented the good and bad of our human nature. Show me any one here who would that faithfully sit for meditation regularly, morning and evening?

Political Activism

At one time whilst us close devotees were having an audience with Swamiji, someone asked why is it that this ashram is a refuge for anti-government [Apartheid] objectors, bad elements, people with criminal records and members of society who are troublesome. Swamiji said that this is Thakur's [Sri Ramakrishna's] abode, and we are just visitors, irrespective of race, colour, personal beliefs, or any other issues we have. All are welcome here. Whether you are a criminal, a political objector, or a troublemaker; in the eyes of God, we are all equal and through his grace they would change for the better.

Over time you would see all types of people visiting from within South Africa and overseas. We didn't know who or what they were. Some may be genuine lovers of God whilst others may have been the Security Police [who visited to check on why a multi-racial cluster of people were together], chancers, well-wishers, thieves, and beggars. Papa said, 'What do you want?

For us to discriminate? Never! All are his children, and He [Master Sri Ramakrishna] knows best.'

Swamiji once again responded, when he could see that some of us were not satisfied with the explanation. His explanation was, 'This is Thakur's abode and whoever comes to his abode is here because of their love for Master, and who are we to question their presence here?' He also mentioned that the ashram has its rules and regulations and code of conduct which all of us should abide by. If there were any infringements, then the management of the ashram would intervene.



After some thought Swamiji said, 'See, this place is like Master's washing machine; all sorts of people come here to be cleansed. Some will be cleaned immediately whilst others need more washing. Of course, some of them that have been cleansed will still have stains – and we should not judge. But by their own perseverance, Master's grace and our love, those persons would become better equipped for their future birth. You, including myself have all been there. Ask yourself where you were a few years ago, emotionally as well as spiritually, in thought, word and deed, and where are you now? So, we should be very cautious when judging others. As Mother [Sri Sarada Devi – pictured] says, look at yourself within before passing judgements on others.'

There were ashram devotees and members of the public who denounced Swamiji, used abusive words towards him and we were told that some even physically manhandled Swamiji during his early years, whilst the ashram was going through a turbulent change. These people kept away from the ashram.

In later years I witnessed Swamiji embracing some of these people, asking them to come to the ashram and telling them that the ashram is Thakur's

abode and not his. Some of them became emotional and asked for forgiveness. All Swamiji said with all his love is that he has no ill feelings for anyone and may Mother's grace be with them.

I questioned Swamiji on how he could be so forgiving, and his answer was that he was so much stronger for these experiences and realised that as a Sannyasin, one is just a penniless beggar relying on Master for all their sustenance both spiritually and materially. And if anyone did wrong Swamiji's immediate reaction was to ask Master and Mother to shower their grace on these individuals. For all to learn from the teachings of Jesus Christ who uttered 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

Swamiji also mentioned that this is the way one should turn negative into positive. One should look at the negative and see what positive could come out of it. He also mentioned that excessive addiction to materialistic wants, greed, avarice, and gluttony would lead to misery in this life.

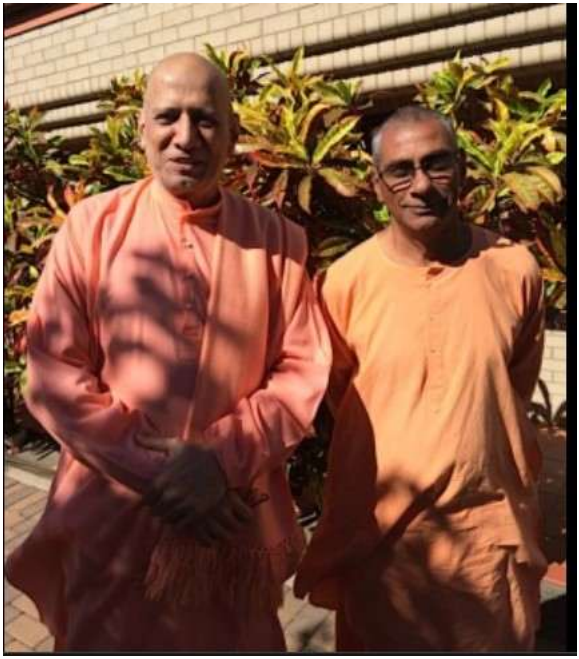
'We were born alone. We came here with nothing and when we die, we go with nothing. All that materialistic gain we have today was someone else's yesterday and that which we have today will be someone else's tomorrow. We won't even bother about those who are fighting over our possessions. Only the legacy you leave behind and the spiritual evolution you experienced, will go with you.'



When Swami Premananda [who was given Diksha mantra by Mummy – with whom he's pictured here] was coming back to South Africa [from Kailas ashram in India where he studied for nine years] and a welcoming ceremony was being organised; I could see Swamiji beaming with happiness and telling us that his loving son is returning with the grace

of the Mother and now the ashram would be blossoming. He also acknowledged how appropriate Swami Premananda's name [meaning bliss of the supreme love] was.

One must also acknowledge the contribution Brother Chandi [now Swami



Chandikananda – pictured here with Swami Vimokshananda – the 4th President of the Ramakrishna Centre in South Africa] made by filling the gap whilst Swami Premananda was away. He continued with his selfless service even whilst Swami Premananda was here in South Africa. The Navaratri functions were memorable with the presence of Swamis Premananda and Chandikananda, especially at the final beach ceremony.

Swamiji's first Group visit to India

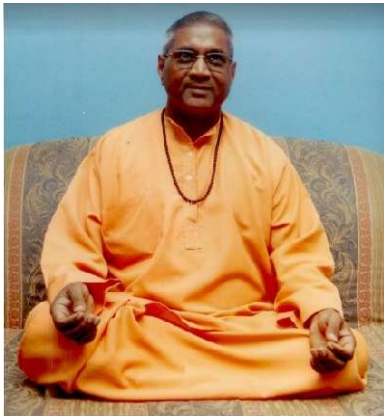
Whilst at Vasishtha guha, Swamiji met with a senior monk, Swami Manishananda [a Gurubhai of Swami Nischalananda], who was a very loving and saintly sadhu [holy man] who had come down from Lucknow. Swami Manishananda blessed Swamiji and predicted that by [the Divine] Mother's Grace Swamiji will be giving lectures with confidence on all scriptures.

Swami Tribhuvan Papaya Incident



It was Ekadasi and Swamiji wanted all devotees at the ashram to refrain from eating anything except one fruit. [Ekadasi means 'eleventh'. It's also spelled as Ekadashi and is the eleventh lunar day, or tithi of each of the two lunar phases which occur in a Vedic calendar month. People typically fast on the day.]

Everybody was okay with that but Swami Tribhuvan, who was then a brahmachari, was in a big predicament and wondered how he would survive the whole day with just one fruit. He then decided to choose the biggest pawpaw [papaya] for himself. This thereafter became a standing joke with the renunciates [monastics].



Swamiji was very appreciative and grateful to Swami Premananda, who with all the challenges went out on collecting trips to raise funds for construction of the new ashram. At that time other religious organisations were also raising funds, and some donors were hostile. But despite these difficulties and being away from the ashram for a month at a time, Swami Premananda was able to bring in donations. These collection drives were a great undertaking but with his love and perseverance, he was able to overcome these obstacles.

Swamiji [Papa] had no qualms about money. If any donations or cheques were given to Swamiji personally he used to leave them aside and ask the

treasurer to come and collect them and arrange for letters of appreciation to be sent to the donors.

Once, when clearing Swamiji's room of all the letters and papers that were stored there, we came across cash monies in sealed envelopes that were over six years old, as well as cheques that were long over their expiry date. When this was brought to Swamiji's attention; he brushed it aside with a smile, telling us that it was not meant for ashram use at that time or that it was money from unethical sources.

Swamiji also was very generous when accepting gifts from devotees. If any other devotees saw the gift and expressed an interest in it; he would give it to that person. This raised the ire of many devotees. Their feeling was that they brought the gift for Swamiji with all their love and Swamiji would invariably give the gift to someone else. At times these were expensive gifts. When questioned about this behaviour; Swamiji mentioned that once a gift was given to him, the donor had no control of it. It was now Swamiji's, and he had the free will to do with it whatever he wanted.

Reminiscences of Swamiji

This incident occurred in 1977, on a Saturday. We were youngsters then and some of us went to Durban and met with other students at the Himalaya Hotel. During the lunch break some of the students were consuming alcohol. Some of us had only Coke [Coca Cola].

A few of us decided to leave early to attend the Saturday satsang. By this time, several were inebriated and decided to remain behind. I was accused of being a spoilsport because I do not consume alcohol, and I wanted to go early to the ashram. My response, in a jovial mood, was that we are all at the Himalaya Hotel rejoicing with spirits. I am now leaving this place and going high up in the Himalayas to climb up the steep stairs, to rejoice with another kind of spirit, which is far more tranquil and soothing. All laughed. They knew what I was referring to.

We got off the bus at the main road near the ashram and ascended the stairs with the intention of going to the ablution facility to wash and then go and

prostrate at the shrine and then come back to meet with Swamiji. When we came up to the ashram grounds, we saw Swamiji and some visitors from northern Natal sitting on the lawn.

We had to pass them to go and wash before going to the shrine. When Swamiji saw us, he remarked 'So what type of spirit are you going to rejoice here?' We were shocked, and the visitors also were caught unawares because they were not sure what Swamiji was referring to. One of the visitors asked Swamiji what he meant, and his remark was 'Ask them, they know'. This was a lasting memory for most of us up till today. Some of the people referred to are now deceased.

There were two strongly anti-Hindu advocates, one a Christian; Pastor Rowlands and a Muslim; Ahmed Deedat. Pastor Rowlands was on a mission of mass conversion of Hindus to Christianity and always requested the converts to denounce Hinduism as the devil and to throw their prayer lamps into the sea. When this was getting out of hand, Swamiji intervened and met with the pastor and challenged him in defence of Hinduism. The pastor relented and apologised to Swamiji. Thereafter this conversion issue was slowly phased out. Swamiji even asked that these [abandoned] brass prayer lamps be given to the ashram.

As for Ahmed Deedat who denounced Hindu idols, 'idol worship' and Hinduism as fake, he was also challenged by Swamiji. Ahmed Deedat was given a sermon on Hinduism and was told that it is a living religion which does not instil fear and Hindus are given the freedom to choose Whom to or how they pray, and that it accepts all religions as true. Not because of fear or dogma as compared to Islam. This is when Swamiji recited to them that God is One, But for Everyone.

Belief In Miracles

Swamiji challenged a religious Hindu body who always advocated about miracles in worship. To them, miracle worship was everything. Swamiji asked 'What does seeing ashes appearing from the air, or gold idols and trinkets appearing suddenly out of the blue, do? Does it make you any more spiritual? No, it limits your rise in spiritual evolution. Don't look at the

appearance of miracles as religion, which is limiting, but rather look at the spiritual or religious teachings of this very saint and practice it.'

This raised the ire of some followers, but they later realised what Swamiji was saying and relented. Swamiji did not ask them to denounce their fellowship but encouraged them to become better practicing Hindus from a spiritual point of view.

Ashram Gardens

Brother Peter [van den Berg] used to keep the ashram gardens in beautiful condition with regular maintenance. He used to lose his cool if he saw devotees plucking flowers from the ashram grounds. Devotees used to come to the ashram and pluck the beautiful flowers from the garden and give them as a love offering to Swamiji. One day Swamiji announced in the shrine that the beautiful flowers in the ashram gardens were for use in the worship of Master in the shrine and devotees should refrain from plucking flowers. Some continued doing so and Swamiji would comment, 'Look at this rogue, plucking my flowers and then offering the very same to me.'

My Personal Changes

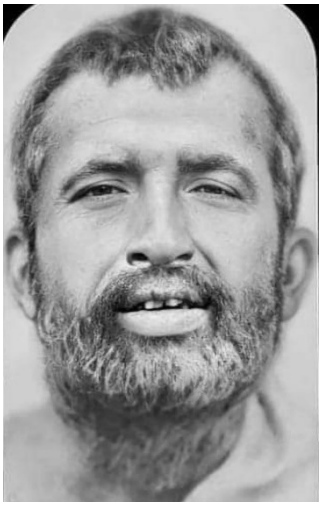
When I first met Swamiji I was stubborn and did not prostrate to Swamiji nor bear any gifts for him. One day when I visited Swamiji he asked, 'What did you bring for me son?' I remained quiet and did not respond. He then said 'Look; whenever you visit a holy man always bring something as a love offering for him.' I thought in my mind that I can't even afford bus fare, and this man wants me to buy something. Then Swamiji began discussing Lord Krishna [in the Srimad Bhagavad Gita] talking about offering a leaf, fruit, flower, water or even oneself. He further emphasised selfless service and sacrifice. He further went on to discuss the law of action and retribution. I learnt my lesson from then on.

Once Swamiji asked me to massage his feet and I refused to do so and Swamiji said nothing. Then loving Mummy asked me, 'You know Swamiji is unwell and why did you refuse Swamiji's request?' I did not respond. Swamiji then said, 'Mummy, don't worry – leave him alone. He will have his

day.' My inner thought was I don't even prostrate to my parents nor massage their feet, and this man wants me to do so.

One day my stubbornness was shattered. Swamiji asked me to sit next to him and whilst talking to the audience he placed his foot on my legs and I was shocked by this sudden action and grabbed his feet with both my hands. What happened I won't discuss but I just burst out crying. All I heard Swamiji saying was that they should leave me alone and I would come right. After some time, I composed myself and Swamiji asked me to go and wash my face.

From then on, I always massaged Swamiji's feet without being asked to do so. I must admit that a person with impure mind usually gets an electric shock if one has a wandering or impure mind. This is why so few devotees were allowed to touch Swamiji's body. I am aware of devotees being angry or disappointed because they were not given the opportunity to massage or serve Swamiji.



From the time I came to the ashram I did not recognise Master [Sri Ramakrishna] as God. To me Lord Shiva was everything. When I prayed; it was to Lord Shiva or the Divine Mother Kali because this was my family deity and upbringing. Even when I was aware of Master's teachings, I did not change my attitude. Swamiji would always speak to me of this but as stubborn as I am I would not change.

After a few years I was sitting for satsang on a Saturday afternoon. Someone was singing a song on Lord Shiva, and I was in a very happy mood clapping my hands with my eyes closed. I then heard Swamiji's voice whispering in my ears to open my eyes and look ahead. I knew Swamiji was in front of the shrine, and it was not possible for him to get up, walk halfway to the back of the shrine and whisper to me. I still had my eyes closed.



Suddenly I received a slap on the back of my head, and I opened my eyes. Lo and behold I saw Master suddenly get up from his seat and take up the posture of Nataraja [Lord Shiva in the Nataraja dance pose – pictured] and move to and fro on the shrine. Swamiji as usual was sitting in front having his body bent forward and looking at me with a smirk on his face. This again made a lasting impression on me, and I thereafter embraced Master as the embodiment of all the Gods and Goddesses.

After the satsang I went to prostrate at Swamiji's feet as is the norm for all devotees to do so; It was my turn and Swamiji with a smile said 'You!' and smacked me on my back whilst I was prostrating. Nothing about this was discussed thereafter.

A year before Swamiji's leaving of the body; he asked me to go to the Pietermaritzburg ashram [about 80 kms from Durban] to carry out the pujas [ritual worship and prayers] and maintain the ashram. I was hesitant to go. He then said that I must not worry, he would always be there for me, and he was a phone call away.

Swamiji, together with two other devotees and Swami Premananda took me through one Saturday night, after satsang. I sat at the back of the car in the middle with two of the devotees sitting either side of me. A joke was going around in the vehicle that Swamiji had to get two henchmen to sit next to me, in case I opened the car door and jumped out. When we got to the ashram there were two devotees awaiting my arrival. Swamiji took hold of

my hand, led me to the shrine and said, 'Master here is your child to do your work here.' He then turned around and walked out and went back to Durban. I was later told that Swamiji had tears in his eyes when he left. Love, love, love uncompromised.

A week later Swamiji had a telephonic conversation and mentioned that this post was not an easy one. He said that people would want to rule, persecute and admonish you, but son don't despair; you are there to do Master's work only. At times you would want to get out of this rut but it's just a test. Be bold, be strong, after all you are Master's child. Whatever Swamiji said did happen, not only to me, but to Swami Premananda and Swami Thribhuvan. Householder disciples at the time somehow thought they oversaw the ashram, and they made life difficult for the monastics.

Making Ancient Scriptures Appealing To Modern Man

Regarding Katha and Janda, [ritual prayer ceremonies – typically presided over by a Pandit or Hindu priest] a question was posed by a devotee about why one should listen to this prayer year in and year out, but nothing changes. It is an old story and antiquated.

Swamiji said that it may be so, but this prayer is now a publicity campaign. If a person took heed and practiced what was recited in the Ram Katha, many spiritual changes would have taken place. Even those people officiating the prayer have not changed. He mentioned that one could make the Katha recitals appealing by modernising them to suit the trends in the present day.

Some members did not agree, so Swamiji suggested that if one took old mango pickle that been sitting on the shelf for a long time and repackaged it to make it more attractive; people would buy it. The same would happen with a modernised and updated katha. It does not necessarily have to be a Ram Katha, it can be Shiv Katha, Hanuman Katha, Ganesha Katha or even Sri Ramakrishna's katha. Some members were still sceptical.

Swamiji further elaborated. He said, 'Look when a car was first invented, what did it have?' The audience responded by saying four wheels, an engine,

steering, doors, seats etc. He then asked, 'Is there any change from what it had then and now?' Some responded no, not much.

Swamiji then continued by asking 'If you were given a 1948 vehicle and asked to drive to Johannesburg [600 kilometres away] and be there within six hours would you be able to manage?' The majority responded by saying no. When he enquired why, they responded by saying that it was slow, uncomfortable, not fuel efficient etc.

Swamiji then said, 'Well, there is your answer; modern cars are a pleasure to drive because they are comfortable, fast, with modernised engine system, fuel efficient, have ergonomically designed seats, may come in automatic or manual, have ABS braking systems, and side mirrors with efficient adjustments. So what's the difference? Same four wheels! Same steering! Same engine! So you can see that it still has the same major components but has been modernised and repackaged to suit the demands for this present-day society.'

'Now if this is so; why can't we repackage our ancient scriptures to satisfy modern society? There must be a paradigm shift in our thinking, and we must not hold on to the age old stories which were pleasing to man and society during that period.'

Thief Of Hearts

Swamiji always referred to me as 'Rogue'. He used to call me, 'Hey, Rogue, come here.' During Yoga camps Swamiji was fond of referring to me as such and always used my name to set an example to others. At times I was disappointed or angry because I now became a laughingstock. I mentioned this to Swamiji, and he always remarked don't worry son, it is a learning curve for all. I never realised what he meant.

Only after Swamiji's mahasamadhi, did three different people confirm what he meant by 'Rogue'. It was Swami Tribhuvan who brought this to my attention. I did not believe him, and whilst arguing, Swami Premananda arrived and reconfirmed this. Later Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi] also mentioned this to me, just to clarify my doubt. Swamiji referred to me as

rogue because I for some reason stole his heart! And this is why he affectionately referred to me as Rogue. But I must honestly admit that by Swamiji referring to me as a rogue in the presence of people; it shattered my ego and made me a humbler devotee.

Incident In The Upanishad Class

Before Swamiji went to conduct these classes, my duty was to read to Swamiji the chapter and verse in English and he would ask me to underline some salient points. Sometimes Swamiji would discuss these verses with us to ascertain whether we understood what they meant.

On one occasion I was reading a verse to Swamiji, and he made a comment that this verse was not conducive to some people and shouldn't be read. I challenged Swamiji as to how could this be so. He then explained that during the class discussion, certain students would not concentrate on this verse owing to [the Divine] Mother's grace. Of course, I, as the know it all; just laughed. The discussion was forgotten and a day after, on a Tuesday; during the class session, Swamiji allowed Brother Chandi [now Swami Chandikananda] to read the Sanskrit verse and thereafter the English transliteration. Then Swamiji would further elaborate and make it easier for the students to understand.

When this previously debated verse was discussed, Swamiji bent forward looked at me, and said, 'What did I tell you, son?' I looked around and witnessed quite a few members fast asleep, yet when the next chapter was read; they were up and alert as if nothing has happened. Even to the extent of asking questions for clarification of the very next verse. This shows us that the key to spiritual awakening and understanding is only apt according to our spiritual evolution, through Mother's Grace.

The New Temple And Shrine

Swamiji always maintained that he would not be here when the new Sri Ramakrishna temple on the ashram site was complete. Some of us would get concerned and Swamiji would make a joke about this, and we never realised that this statement was true.

After Swamiji's body was cremated; we went to the beach to immerse half the ashes. I then carried the clay pot with the remainder of Swamiji's ashes in it, on my head back at the ashram. Whilst Swami Premananda, Swami Tribhuvan and [then] Brother Chandi were reciting the eleventh chapter of the Durga Sapta Shati; we burst into tears. All were embracing me as I was halfway up the stairs in the ashram, with the intention of leaving the ashes in Swamiji's room. This was a very sombre and emotional moment for all of us, because we put up a brave front in front of the public, but as we are also humans, our emotions took over in private.

In the beginning, this void caused by the absence of the physical presence of Swamiji did bring about changes in the ashram administration and acceptance of the new president, which is a norm in any changing society.

Swamiji's Final Farewell To The New Temple

Before I was posted to Pietermaritzburg ashram, Swamiji always, after breakfast, would walk around the new complex looking at the progress, enquiring about the building, and checking for any technical issues. If Swamiji didn't like anything he would always ask that they be changed. Of course, this raised the ire of the builders and the wrath of an ashramite who had to abide by Swamiji's request.

The building structure neared the rooftop, and the dome of the new shrine was being built. Swamiji requested that I should take him up on to the temple roof so he could see what was happening. I remonstrated that this was a difficult and challenging climb and that Swamiji should refrain from doing so because of health reasons. Nevertheless, Swamiji insisted. [Papa went onto the temple roof several times, so this account is not a duplication of a similar instance recounted further on, by Brother Vasan Govender.]

Mother Radha, Mother Henny, and other devotees were there, and they were concerned about Swamiji going up on to the temple roof, but Swamiji reassured them and refused assistance stating that my help was sufficient.
I then began asking the construction staff to give us way on the side ramp for me to take Swamiji. After some time, the path was cleared and with

difficulty we managed to take Swamiji onto the roof. Swamiji regained his breath and then became composed, and his face became radiant.



He began to mumble mantras whilst walking from one end of the temple to the next, in a circular motion. When, at the end he went to the domes where the main shrine would be – the Sanctum – Swamiji asked that I leave him alone for some time. Swamiji began praying and after about fifteen minutes he called me to come and fetch him.

Whilst descending Swamiji commented, 'Well Mother, my work is done and it's all in your hands now!' Swamiji thereafter went back to his room looking very radiant and I could see a faraway look in his eyes. He asked to be left alone. This was a vivid moment in my life, which I will never forget.

Some other interesting anecdotes were when someone asked Swamiji why all this fuss is about so many religious festivals and observances every year. The reply was, to recharge one's spiritual batteries. Further elaboration was that at times we need these observances to be like a doctor's syringe, filled with spiritual grace, to rejuvenate our spiritual quest.

I had some nail and hair clippings of Swamiji, as well as a picture of the day Swamiji took Sannyas with his clean-shaven head. I gave them to an inmate to place in the basement [museum] of the new shrine downstairs, as a memorial for visitors to see but I am not sure what happened thereafter.

Everyone I met from doctors to labourers always felt the special attraction they had for Swamiji because of his unflinching relationship with each of them. I witnessed the same in India at train stations, ashrams, temples, and side streets, wherever Swamiji went.

From Brother Vasan Govender – in his own words.

The red cloth [featured elsewhere in this series and which Papa used for specific worship and blessing purposes] I have seen a few times. It was kept in one of the drawers in Papa's shrine. He had told us never to play with it or take it out. On a few occasions when devotees came upstairs Swamiji asked for the bag in the shrine which contained the cloth. He used it to bless the devotee. Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi Mataji] who was present, once told me it was called 'brushing'.

When alone once, after one of these brushing episodes, Swamiji mentioned that doing this by normal priests and some temple folks would not have its desired effect. He warned me against this. Which I had never done previously or after that incident. I did protest to him that I had never done such a thing, and he laughed. Replying, 'Listen to the Guru's word, you sala!' [affectionate term for silly person] He ended by saying that not all good would come out of it, if done by the wrong person.

Little story. Swamiji met my parents once. He asked me to bring them to the ashram. They went up to Swamiji's room, alone. Swamiji asked for me to attend to something, so I was not present at their meeting. When they had finished, they had lunch and left. Driving them home I asked about what had happened and nothing much was said, except that Swamiji had mentioned he would look after me.



A few weeks later, Vinesh Singh from Umkomaas [a coastal town in KZN] brought Swamiji a large sphatik [crystal – example alongside] Shivalinga from India. Swamiji did a prayer and installed that in his shrine. That evening when I was alone with him, Swamiji went into the shrine and came back with his brass Shivalinga and a little kamandalu, or water jug. He placed it in my hands and asked me to give to my mum. Thereafter mentioning I would never know the number of deaths and rebirths that would be washed away from them because of my closeness to him. Tears ran down from my eyes. I knew what it meant. But did not understand why.

Every day since, my mum begins her day with worship to the Shivalinga at home in her shrine. The only time this does not happen is when she's not at her home. So, my mum was given the brass Shivalinga by Swamiji that he used for prayer in his shrine, and ashram Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi Mataji] gifted me with hers that she prayed to, which I use daily.

Memories Of Swami Shivapadananda

When Brother Francis brought up the idea [Project Papa] a few weeks ago it was a moment filled with immense joy and excitement. A question I have asked myself, Teddy, and even Late Mummy, if this undertaking will ever happen and with no answer. Now that the question has been answered I cannot wait to see the completed work or works. My input might not have any spiritual significance or add value to this project but will be an insight into my daily life and the time spent with Swamiji, which I am still trying to fully understand.

It must be said that from all the contributors I am the one who spent the least amount of time with Swamiji in terms of number of years in his presence. My actual years of contact with Swamiji were from 1991 to his passing in 1994. But during this time the contact was almost constant [daily] at times.



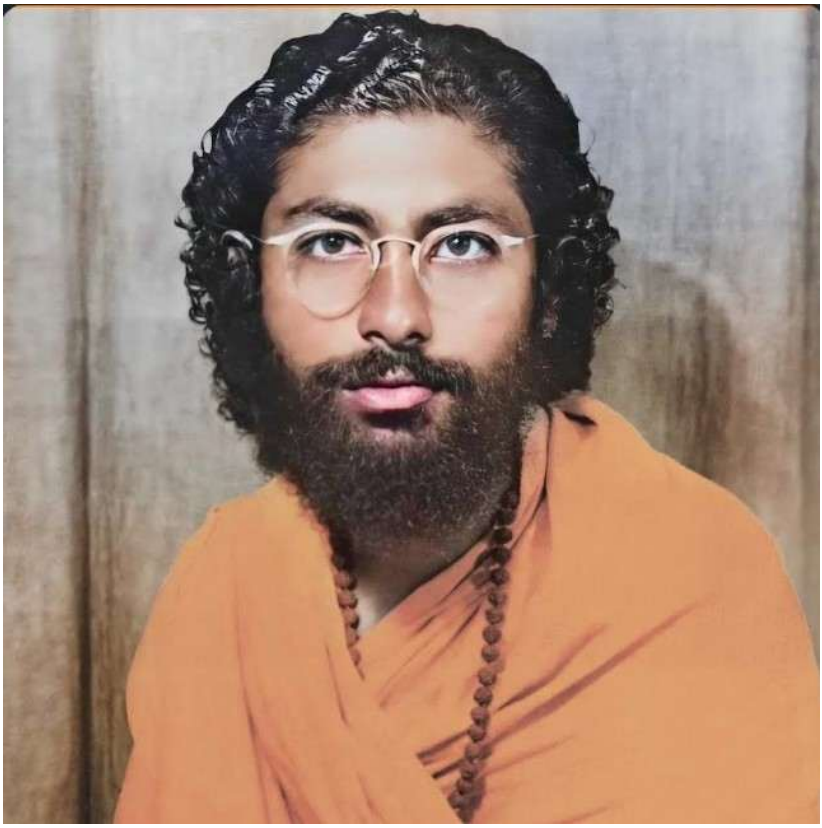
I came to Swamiji as a mischievous teenager at home and left a humble disciple of the Guru and holy trio of Master, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda. [pictured above]

When speaking of this project a few weeks ago, I had made mention to Brother Francis that I am least read in scriptures and had not documented talks or diarised daily happenings.

I have however since Swamiji's passing, lived my life to the best of my ability by his words and my memories of being in his presence. And true to Swamiji's lesson I get a periodic [metaphoric] slap across the back of the head.

'Do things not for name and fame' are words constantly mentioned to me by Swamiji, and something I try to live up to or by. This is my story: Teddy [Brahmachari Gyanadayal] was at the Pietermaritzburg ashram. This left a few of us youths to spend a lot of our free time with Swamiji. The new building project of the ashram was envisioned and set in motion, rapid change. Swami Premananda was on the road on collection drives.

As I was between study and work my contact began to become more frequent. Swami Saradaprabhananda was busy with ashram activities, thus allowing me even more time with the Guru.

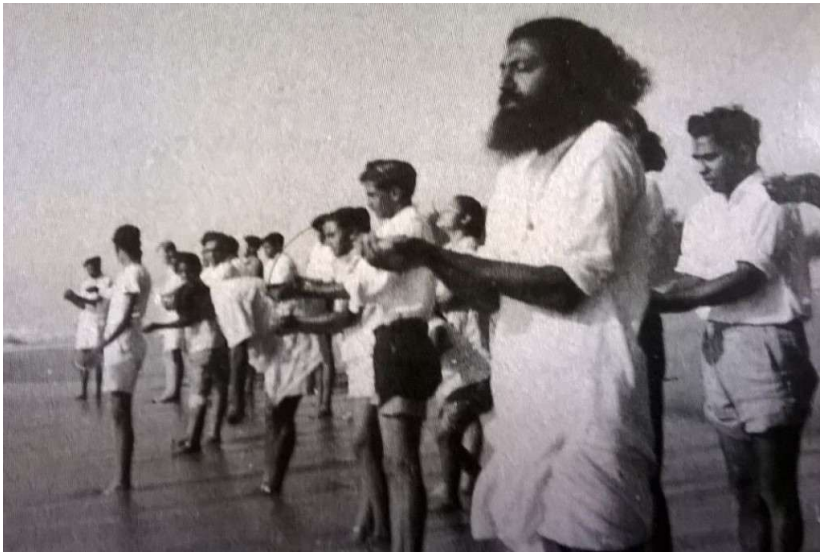


Swamiji never wanted us (myself, Desan, Bhupendra, Yutesh) to be idle when at the ashram. He always stressed sadhana [spiritual practise], karma yoga [physical work] and ensuring that we never let His Guru's name [Swami Nischalanandaji's - pictured] and the ashram down. This was further detailed to us by both Swami Premananda and Mummy. As both Swami Premananda and Mummy were great at paying diligence, we very quickly knew what immense responsibility was on us and tried our best to follow through.

Swamiji's day was never the same, few things were. Swamiji's physical body did not allow him much sleep, but I guess he was on an elevated plane far greater than we could comprehend. At the best of times Swamiji went into a deep sleep just before sunrise or at times when the morning birds began

to chirp. But spending those nights in his presence was surreal and others (from the close circle of people around him) will attest to this. There was a sense of calmness that filled the room and sometimes a type of electrified atmosphere. During these times there were a few devotees around till the late hours, and at times alone, just Swamiji and me.

When Swamiji awoke in the morning the routine always happened, as we all heard the ringing of the [inside, electric] bell in the morning. It was to make us aware that Swamiji had risen and gone into the bathroom. Then followed a sequence of events that almost always happened. Amongst the few teenagers of my age that were at the ashram, we used to tidy up Swamiji's room and prepare flowers for the morning puja in the shrine in Swamiji's room. By the time Swamiji was out of the bathroom, the curtains in his room were all drawn back, allowing the morning sun to filter into it. Swamiji began his day with Surya Namaskar [salute to the sun] (not the full sequence) followed by a few Hatha Yoga [physical yoga] exercises before going into his shrine for morning sadhana.



Gurudev and group doing Surya Namaskar at a Tongaat beach yoga camp in the early 1960s. Papa is the fourth person from the right.

At this stage, the ladies who at that time lived at the ashram, were meticulously preparing Swamiji's breakfast. Breakfast was prepared by Akka-Soundalai, Mother Radha and Sister Henny.

There was a glow to Swamiji coming out of his shrine. Swamiji would consume his breakfast radiating a sense of calm and sometimes be in deep thought. Swamiji spent part of the morning with readings, at time aloud and at times would have us or me read to him. I always found it fascinating that the pages of the book being read always had a direct meaning for what my mind was thinking about. I felt that my time spent with Swamiji was a time where the lessons he had taught me were practical lessons of how we should live life. Do not be idle, Perform Karma Yoga, Do not think ill of others, even in one's dream, Do not bring the ashram into disrepute, Do not do things for name and fame.

Swamiji And Devotees

On leaving the tarred road one entered a gravel stretch, driving up to the ashram. On one side, lined with tall eucalyptus trees, on the left a big embankment, green with trees and shrubs. Rounding a wide bend, the grotto was to the left below an embankment (now Swami Nischalananda Hall) and a little further up was an open-air stage (now a main parking lot). A little further up and a final turn, led to the main driveway leading to a walkway and the Shiva fountain.



[Pictured: Gurudev, Swami Nischalananda]

This green forest type environment put one into a different frame of mind on every drive up to the ashram.

You always had the feeling that you were now on hallowed ground. Even long before one would meet with Swamiji one would feel a different type of happiness.

Swamiji's presence had an aura of mystery. His gerua coloured garb added to that splendour and respect.

Swamiji wanted every devotee to be and feel welcomed to his Master's [Sri Ramakrishna's] home. His loving and compassionate personality brought people again and again to the centre. Devotees of the centre, dignitaries, well-wishers, and religious scholars would rarely leave without meeting Swamiji.

Swamiji's love for the devotees was unparalleled. Everyone was welcomed with love and time spent with Swamiji always left them leaving uplifted and encouraged. Swamiji had the ability to melt the heart of any devotee, making him or her often question deeply, their purpose in life. It was not possible for a quick run-in contact with Swamiji, as even a simple meeting would lead to an hour or more of lessons in practical Vedanta.

Swamiji always insisted that we treat the devotees and guests visiting the ashram with the utmost respect and never allow them to leave without taking Prasad [sanctified fruit or delicacies] or a meal. Swamiji had unconditional love for all devotees and did not have any favourites (although this was sometimes perceived to be so, by some devotees).

Saturday evenings were special. The old shrine was often filled. Satsang [the spiritual and prayer service] was an emotionally charged affair with devotional bhajans and talks. Devotees would then make their pranams [prostrations] to Swamiji and take their leave.

A few devotees, numbering around thirty to forty people, would remain and pay witness to the Guru's words and teachings. These events were often audio-recorded, and we are thankful for those recordings by Mother Radha, whom I and other devotees knew personally. On evenings like this, one left the ashram complex with a feeling of immense joy and happiness, walking

through the wooded footpath, back to their cars and homes. Swamiji, with his commanding voice, love, and special presence, would always leave a message of note that we will all, at some time in our life, remember and go back to.

Special functions and prayers, like Navaratri, Krishna Janmashtami, Shivaratri and Ram Navami, brought about a change in environment at the centre. Swamiji was always in a different state of being during these times. The ashram became a hive of activity. Each observance for each festival felt better than the previous one. Even being in the presence of Swamiji during this time was different. It was at this time that I have fond memories of how the late Swami Premanandaji and Mummy had taught us the decorum of being around Swamiji and in the ashram. As it was Swamiji's goal and message to spread the word of Master, these special festivals did just that. Sometimes on Maha Shivaratri night Swamiji would visit other centres in Durban. Each visit bringing with it a different facet of Swamiji and different emotions. It is something words could not really describe. With the grand finale ending back in Avoca. On seeing Swamiji entering the shrine, it was like Lord Shiva himself had come home.

Like Shivaratri, the Navaratri [nine days of Divine Mother worship] celebrations brought with it an even greater sense of celebration of the Mother. During the Navaratri weeklong celebration, Swamiji's loving presence was felt even more. It's my personal belief that the various Ramakrishna centres, through Swamiji, propagated the worship of the Divine Mother aspect more than any other religious organisation at the time.

Swamiji's emotionally charged talks and persona had devotees wanting for more. The entire festivities ending with Vijaya Dashami – immersion of the deities in the ocean. For this a few devotees crafted a meticulously built palanquin [transport platform] for the Deities to be carried on. Quality approval was lovingly done by Swami Premanandaji, Mummy and finally Swamiji. On this day, the Divine aspect of Mother was joy personified for Swamiji. I watched an episode of National Geographic once on the Kumba Mela, where the narrator said it is a once in a lifetime 'must' for a Hindu to

see. I would say that in my years at the ashram, having seen and been part of these functions was a once in a lifetime gift.



Whilst driving this evening I listened to a short recording of Swamiji, where he had spoken about 'Worshipful Service – Seva'. This brings me to my next chapter 'Mummy' [ashram Mummy – Sri Jayanti Devi] as few could have defined this better in practise. (The timeline for this can best be pinned by Br Francis and Shamolia). I am bad with dates I refer to the moment as it was and relive it in my mind in real time.)

[Pictured: Papa with Shamolia.]

Around 1992-1993 Mummy moved out of Carlisle St (Mummy's flat) [in the Durban CBD] whilst her beautiful little A-frame home at 10 Dawnwest Road, Newlands West, was being built, or in the process. Lovesh and I assisted in relocating mummy's belongings to store in the prefab building at the Ramakrishna Centre and took a few items to Mummy's daughter in Bakerville [a Durban suburb].

As we were about to complete moving out the last items, Swamiji visited us at the flat. Sister Soundalai and Mummy prepared tea for Swamiji. Mummy was relating to Lovesh and myself the history she had spent growing up and living in the Durban CBD. Swamiji had driven himself to the flat and before

leaving pointed to the big bay window and asked us to remove it and bring it to the ashram.

Swamiji left with Mummy and Soundalai, leaving both Lovesh and me dumbstruck. We were 18 or 19 years of age, had no clue about shopfitting and how we were to remove this second-floor window, sticking out and enclosing the balcony. Lovesh, with his mechanical skills, figured out a way, and we removed the huge window without any damage. That huge bay window today encloses what used to be Swamiji's upstairs room balcony which we turned into a little office.

During the time of the building of Kanti Nivas (Mummy's home), Mummy and Soundalai lived at the Avoca ashram in little quarters tucked behind a wooden log cabin. I never took notice of this building until they moved in. This was the beginning of a relationship with Mummy until her passing in 2015. Mummy was a true encyclopedia on Guru Worship, selfless service, serving Master, Mother and Swami Vivekananda and service to the ashram.



She started her day with sadhana [spiritual practise] and ended her day with sadhana in the shrine. Her 'group of ladies' as I would call them (Aunty Di [Stott], Di's mom, Barbara [can't remember surname], Peggy [Verbaan] - pictured alongside - Kalyani and Effie Bompas visited at least twice weekly. They were busy planning for a collection drive, jumble sales etc. for the ashram building project.

Mummy always stressed the importance of not letting down the Guru's [Swamiji's] name. She instructed me on how to serve Swamiji's meals and our etiquette

when being with Swamiji around devotees and guests to the centre. She never wanted to see us being idle in the centre, the shrine to be always kept clean and cleaned up in the evening and ensure all was ready for pujas [ritual worship] for the next morning. She had spoken to me a lot about the importance of keeping up the Guru's name and not letting him down. As I was constantly in the presence of Swamiji any fault of mine would reflect badly on Swamiji.

With Swami Premananda being on fund collection drives across the country, Mummy was the person that taught us how serving the Guru should be done. The building of Kanti Nivas [the little house in Newlands West] was somehow delayed and then once again started and in progress. During this time Mummy travelled to spend time with some family members in Australia. As Mummy's return home was getting closer, the building was falling behind on progress.

Swamiji had mentioned to me a few times the immense service that Mummy had given to the Centre, Master, Mother, Swami Vivekananda, and himself, and it saddened him that the building might not be ready on her return.

It must have been a day or two prior to Mummy's return. On that night Swamiji played the role of Project Manager (wearing his long beige 'Columbo' coat). Carpenters were hanging cupboards, tilers were tiling, I was installing burglar guards on windows.

Devotees of every discipline had come to help complete the house. (I would like to say that I think most of us selflessly assisted in completing the house because of the love Mummy showed us). On Mummy's return she was overwhelmed with joy on seeing her beautiful little gerua coloured, A-frame house. I would frequent Mummy's home often in the years to come. With Mummy moving to her new home, I was in contact with her even more, and her loving guidance was ever present and never ceased until her passing. Her lessons to me became entrenched and will never be forgotten.



There were times when Swamiji reprimanded me for my shortcomings whilst we were alone with Mummy. At this point mummy [pictured here with Papa in their more youthful days] would lovingly take my side to 'calm' Swamiji. But I never got off lightly. My driving Mummy back home was a rude awakening of her anger. In anger her loving words would have my insides turn as if a sharp object was being pierced into me. She did not like it when and if I had disappointed Swamiji in any way. Because that was seen as a disservice to the ashram, and a bad portrayal of Swamiji's teachings to us. In these situations, remaining quiet was the best way out, but the sadness of disappointment lasted long.

[Pictured: A physically youthful Papa and ashram Mummy.]

On my return to Swamiji he would almost always have a little wink and smile. With my head down I apologised, with Swamiji remarking 'Don't ever disappoint the Mother.' This happened only a few times, but the lessons learnt were never repeated.

Mummy always loved the fact that we were doing selfless work at the ashram. Be it cleaning the grounds, washing the floors, helping in every which way, that we were doing work for the Master and Swamiji. In the many years to come thereafter, Mummy constantly reminded me of Swamiji's words spoken to me in her presence, 'You will always be happy.'

Something I hold very dear. Even in my darkest and lowest of times I think of these words and have never actually been sad. My personal note: I have seen pictures of Hindu deities and read very few religious books but was blessed and fortunate to have met Swamiji and Mummy. I have never asked them for material wealth but in prayer, sincere prayer, whatever I have asked them for was answered.'

'Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy – by one, or more, or all of these – and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.' – Swami Vivekananda.

To me this best epitomised our Swamiji [Papa]. He had the ability to bring out the best in everybody that encountered him. Be it a devotee that entered the ashram for the first time, to regular devotees of the centre, a non-Hindu or person who did not follow teachings of Master, Mother and Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji made them feel special. With us teenagers (those of us that were always present with him) he stressed the importance of sadhana [spiritual practise – meditation, japa – repeating God's name], not being idle, doing selfless work, karma yoga and promoting the teachings of Master [Sri Ramakrishna]. Swamiji saw this potential divinity in us all and by his actions to us, made us work to manifest it in ourselves.

To me he was a living Vivekananda, I never saw what Swamiji had seen in me. I was just a teenager (16-20 years of age) had not found the correct career at the time, was not a learned Hindu scholar, I had no professional credentials, nothing. But his ever-loving nature has brought out the best in me and other teenagers at the time that today has made us become men and women of character, where we have the knowledge of the teachings of the Holy Trinity, that allow us to survive in this mundane world. This never-ending love and persona brought together hundreds of devotees who worked selflessly together, to work and spread the teachings of Master [Sri Ramakrishna] throughout the country. Swamiji had continued what Gurudev [Swami Nischalananda] had started in 1942 and propelled the centre to the milestone of a Golden Jubilee year (1992).

To me, every day was a milestone for Swamiji, but the Golden Jubilee was special. The social development work that the centre had undertaken across communities was immense and growing. Feeding schemes increasing and spreading of Master's [Sri Ramakrishna] teachings through different ashram sub centres was drawing bigger crowds. Children's rallies had become a multi-day event. Preparations were being planned for a big Golden Jubilee event at the Durban city hall. It was during this time that I once remarked to Swamiji that he had taken the start of Gurudev's work and turned it tenfold. He lovingly smiled and replied he had done nothing; it was all [the Divine] Mother's Grace. Swamiji's selflessness was such that in all my time with him and the milestones of the Centre, he did not at any time, make mention that he had done it. He always gave praise to his Guru. Or it was Master's Grace, or Mother's Grace.

1993-1994

During this time Swamiji had come back from a trip to India, Swami Premananda was initially based at the original Johannesburg ashram [pictured] in Starling Street, Lenasia, south of Johannesburg, and Brother Teddy [Brahmachari Gyanadayal] was based at the ashram in Pietermaritzburg. With the new Avoca ashram building project in full momentum and changes happening at a swift pace, I began spending a lot of time with Swamiji.



With progress being made on the building construction, all former sleeping and living quarters away from the main building were demolished to make way for new infrastructure. Female ashramites relocated to the Sri Sarada Devi Asherville ashram. With Mother Radha and Soundalai coming through

every morning and spending the day at Avoca (at times accompanied by Mummy. Householders, on a roster, used to prepare lunch for Swamiji and bring it through daily (Monday – Friday). In the evenings Swami Saradaprabhananda, Swamiji, one male householder devotee and I would typically be at the ashram. It was during this time that I was asked to perform evening aarti and sadhana in Swamiji's personal shrine.

The shrine was at the north easterly corner of Swamiji's L-shaped room. It was approximately 2.5 meters long by 2 meters wide and approximately 2 meters high. [It was originally the base for a large external water tank.] A sweet fragrance always permeated the shrine (the reason for this could have been a huge beehive that was present between the ceiling and roof sheeting). The shrine was just large enough to accommodate one person.

On the small altar was a beautiful light-box image of Master and a Shivalingam. A tiny lamp stayed lit like an eternal flame which went out only when we replaced the wick. In that five square metre space the peace and serenity could only best be described by the people who entered it. I felt a certain amount of joy, calmness and strength when performing sadhana in the shrine. With my little time that I spent with Swamiji I have seen only a few going in to perform puja, sadhana or aarti – namely Swami Premananda, Swami Saradaprabhananda, Swami Chandikananda, Brother Teddy [Gyanadayal], Bhupendra, Yutesh and myself.

It was during those evenings when few devotees were around, that Swami Saradaprabhananda retired for the night, Dr Anoop Seebaran would come through to visit Swamiji and leave, and I would eventually be alone in the presence of Swamiji. Swamiji was always deep in thought or discussing progress of the building project and master's work that still needed to be done.

I can sit today listening to the recordings of Swamiji made by Mother Radha and other devotees that enable us all to learn from Swamiji's teachings and say that Swamiji often spoke volumes without mentioning a word. His smile spoke volumes, at times alone in his presence my mind used to wander off.

Swamiji used to look, smile, and answer or comment on what I was thinking about, and I am sure that I was not the only one that experienced this.

It is about times like this that I sit back, reminiscing and it produces immense joy and happiness.

Fridays were special and different. Swamiji's supper was prepared by the sisters of the Asherville ashram. On Friday Evenings Pravrajika Atmaprana Mataji - pictured, and Pravrajika Ishtaprana Mataji [the sannyasini nuns from the Sri Sarada Devi ashram], and Sister Vimla [a Brahmacharini and long-time resident at that ashram], used to visit.



This night was serious yet there would typically be a bit of laughter. There were times when Swamiji would lead us into meditation and sometimes Pravrajika Atmaprana Mataji [pictured – whom we continued to call Didi – elder sister] would do so. There were serious religious discourses between the senior Swamis and Swamiji. It was always a joy when there was a little laughter in the room. It was also during occasions like this, especially when Swamiji's physical body was not well, that you could see the sadness in all of us.

Mid 1994 – the exact date I cannot remember. One day during Swamiji's site walk of the building accompanied by Mother Radha, Soundalai, Pradeep and me, construction on all new buildings was underway and at or almost roof level. The main shrine structure was complete with fully constructed domes.



On nearing a builder's constructed ramp (very steep and leading up to the main shrine roof) Swamiji decided to ascend the ramp up onto the roof top. I was scared and cautioned Swamiji that this was not safe for someone not accustomed to heights and the steepness of the ramp, as well as Swamiji's leg being unsuitable for the climb. Swamiji looked and smiled and continued to ascend the ramp with me accompanying him. (I guess I was more scared that I might have to account to everyone, should something go amiss). We reached the top (accompanied by Mother Radha and Pradeep to the best of my recollection). Once at the top Swamiji walked around without any fear and from the aerial view, surveyed all below.

To me today and years that have gone by, that point in the day was Swamiji's Martin Luther King 'I have been to the mountain-top' moment.



L-R Swami Premananda, Pravrajika Atmaprana, Swami Saradaprabhananda, Swami Thribhuvan at the foundation laying function.





L-R Mr. Harry Rupnarain, a deeply devoted, major benefactor and member of the Centre, Kido the electrician and Papa, at a new ashram site inspection.

[A brief story about Uncle Harry Rupnarain, before Br. Vasan continues.]

Years after Papa left the body, Brother Harry Rupnarain, now widowed, was in frail health. His family were concerned that he was refusing food. Mummy asked me to drive her through to visit him at his home.

He was alone that morning, except for a housekeeper. Uncle Harry, as we younger folks called him, did look frail. He'd lost a lot of weight. Although there was no diagnosed illness, he'd clearly lost interest in being on the planet.

Mummy sat and chatted gently with him for some time. Mummy's presence always radiated calm and serenity. Uncle Harry was clearly pleased and grateful to see Mummy. Both were very longstanding ashram family.

As we rose to leave, Uncle Harry was still seated. I then saw Mummy do the most unexpected thing. Exactly as Papa did to some people when they were near to departure, Mummy took his head in her hands and gave him a kiss in the middle of the forehead. We took our leave and drove back to Kanti Nivas in silence. But I knew there was significance to the kiss. A few days later, we received news that Uncle Harry had peacefully passed on.

But Back to Brother Vasan…

Swamiji had a smile of fulfilment and joy. He then led us back down the ramp and into the inner shrine.

The main shrine was still in an incomplete phase. The superstructure was built, but plastering was in progress. Windows and glazing and all finishing touches were yet to be completed. Standing at the main door entrance looking in, Swamiji proceeded to the left main pillar and asked us to stand at different vantage points in the shrine. (Mother Radha, Soundalai, Pradeep and I). Swamiji then proceeded to recite various Sanskrit hymns, filling the shrine with a great echo of his melodious voice. We acknowledged to Swamiji that we could all hear him clearly which made him happy. Swamiji smiled and left the shrine. This day I will forever cherish, together with many others.

Last Days With My Guru – September 1994

I should have detailed my time with Swamiji but unfortunately, I was young, I guess immature, and in hindsight it was a big lesson learnt to have an exact chronological timeline. My point of reference after 1/10/1994 was loving Mummy, who always kept the eternal light of Swamiji burning in us all that were close to her.



During the second last week of September 1994, Swamiji's physical body was not well and in a lot of pain. It was around this time that a composer and violinist Dr L Subramaniam [pictured] visited South Africa. He came to the ashram to seek blessings from Swamiji. Swamiji spent a little time with him, thereafter, returning to his room. Dr Subramaniam was playing at a concert that Friday at the University of Durban Westville (UDW) Cultural Centre, and at the time asked if Swamiji could be present.

It was around mid-week that Swamiji was experiencing severe pain. A decision was made by doctors and senior respective parties that Swamiji undergo a laparoscopic procedure to remove gallstones. During the next couple of days Swamiji was in great pain and being treated with medication. He slept little and was still ensuring that ashram building operations were on track and checking that we were still performing our sadhana and continuing with our normal activities at the ashram.

On 23/9/1994 a concert was scheduled for that Friday evening at UDW Temple Hall. As Swamiji was in no condition to attend he had requested that Swami Saradaprabhananda and Mr. S P Singh attend. Later that afternoon, just as they were about to leave Swamiji had instructed me to accompany them to the concert.

As I had spent most of the day with Swamiji I was reluctant to leave but did so with much sadness. We had gotten back at the latter part of the evening (9-10pm). Atmaprana Didi, Gargi [Ishtaprana] Didi and other devotees from Asherville [ashram] were leaving. A few of us (Dr Seebaran, myself, Lovesh) were present with Swamiji. Dr Seebaran retired in the early hours of the morning, leaving me with Swamiji. It was in this moment of aloneness that Swamiji acknowledged that I did not want to leave his side, but it was his lesson for me to learn non-attachment [to the Guru's body]. He was also happy that I followed his instructions and made representation for the centre. During the weekend, the normal routine Saturday Satsang took place, and devotees stayed till late, leaving in the early morning hours.

Thinking about it deeply though, I would now say that it was different. With Swamiji not being well, he did not speak much and was deep in thought. Devotees close to Swamiji remained till late as possible and left only on instruction by Swamiji.

A few remained massaging his feet hoping to ease some pain and we were in our own deep thought and sadhana. At times one of us dozed off and Swamiji would nudge us with his feet with a slight wink and smile. Those that could, did not want to leave and eventually I took leave to accompany Mummy home [to Newlands West] and then drove back to the ashram.

Sunday was like the day before; I spent most of my day with Swamiji and was hoping for the new day to start and Swamiji to undergo the procedure in the hope of things getting back to normal.

Monday morning was not like the previous days. Swamiji was in pain but had a feeling of immense strength. I drove Swamiji, accompanied by Mummy and Lovesh, to Entabeni Hospital for the surgical procedure. The trip to the hospital was bittersweet (as I think about it in the present). I do not think that there was a thought in anyone's mind that a risk to the procedure might occur.

Swamiji was chanting a few Sanskrit mantras. Along the route Swamiji became his jovial self and said, 'You boys will suffer when I'm gone. Mummy,

look after them.' He said this with a smile and pain in his face. Swamiji had said this to us often and twenty-eight years later I think myself and a lot of others wish Swamiji was around during our times of pain. Swamiji would have taken us over the abyss with the greatest of ease. On arriving at the hospital, we were met by Dr Seebaran, and soon after, Swami Saradaprabhananda.

After admission formalities, we accompanied Swamiji to his room. As time was nearing for commencement of the procedure, I was asked to accompany Mummy back home. On the trip back little was said. Mummy mentioned that Swamiji admired us the youth, and we should never let his name down. The entire mood and scene seemed to have changed later that afternoon. Swamiji had come out of procedure and was later moved to the intensive care unit (ICU). [We were told that the surgeon had to switch from laparoscopic surgery to an open incision for removal of the gallbladder.]

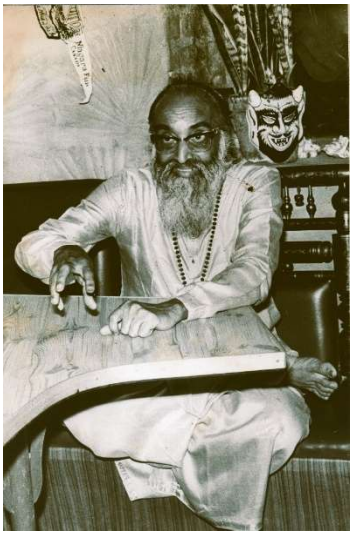
I remember taking Swami Saradaprabhananda that evening to the hospital. I visited Swamiji in the ICU for a little while, meeting Mummy and Shamolia and few other senior officials of the centre. The next morning Swami Premanandaji and [Brahmachari Gyanadayal] Brother Teddy arrived. Soon after, devotees out of Durban started arriving at the [Ramakrishna Ashram] Centre. In the coming days, the ashram was a hive of activity with devotees arriving, spending time, performing sadhana and waiting for news of any kind on Swamiji's condition. There was a sense of sadness amongst us all.

Swami Premanandaji had instructed us (ashramites) to perform sadhana and also to ensure that guests were welcomed accordingly. Time seemed to stand still as we all waited for a bit of good news or a turn in the chain of events.

I clearly remember that in the early hours on Saturday the 1st of October 1994, Swamiji Premanandaji entered my room and instructed that we bathe and go immediately into the shrine. Swamiji had attained Mahasamadhi [left the body]. I entered the shrine to chanting by Swami Premananda and other ashramites. Devotees began gathering in numbers and us being human, we

could not hold back tears. A chapter in all our lives had ended abruptly (something we all never ever thought would happen).

Arrangements were being made by senior officials of the centre for the funeral ceremony. After the funeral ceremony, focus was then moved to the completion of the building project and official opening of the new ashram temple and complex in 1995.
Ends.



Guru's grace on the Reddy family

We had the joy of meeting Swami Saradaprabhananda's pre-monastic mother several times. She was a gentle presence who gave two sons to monasticism – Balan and Kosi, who both became monks. First Balan – now Swami Saradaprabhananda and then Kosi – who had a career in the hospitality business, but who later became a monk in the order founded by Swami Chinmayananda [pictured].

Rosemary Oosthuizen, who became Brahmacharini Sri who became Sannyasini Pravrajika Atmaprana Mataji, had a sister who became an Episcopalian minister in Newfoundland, Canada. So their mother was a similarly blessed woman who gave her two daughters to the service of the Divine.

From Brother Atmaprakash – Pre-Ashram Name Albert Kramer

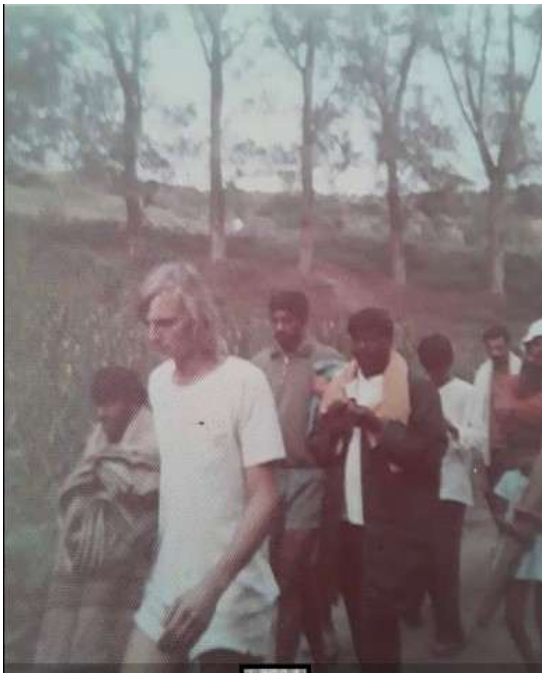
The Power Of Ganga Water

Swamiji's travel party brought back an earthenware jar from a visit to India. It was placed in the ashram dining room, filled with Ganga water, and Swamiji specifically told us assembled ashramites that taking a little of this water will heal, or lead to a place of healing.

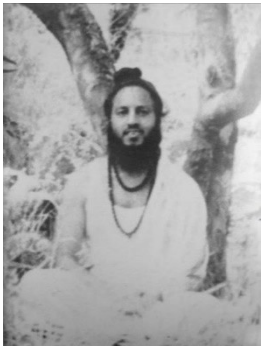
I came back from a pilgrimage to India in 2005 with some Ganga water I collected myself from the source in Gangotri and remembered this incident. So gave a little to my wife's mother who had been seriously ill for a long time. I told her what this water can do, and she was admitted next day to hospital, where she recovered after a couple of days.

[Here he is, dressed in white, in his younger ashram days, walking to the beach from the Tongaat beach yoga camp site.]

At The Tongaat Beach Yoga Camp



We were at one of the Yoga camps at Tongaat beach in the early 1970s, the only one I attended. I was staying then fulltime and working at the Avoca ashram. These were spiritually charged days for all of us. On the last day of the camp Swamiji sat at the entrance of the large tent, Mummy was next to him, and all people attending the event got a Certificate [of attendance].



Swamiji sat cross legged with his hair caught up in a bun, like Shiva. In a highly charged state, he read out my surname 'Kramer' when handing me over smiling the certificate, he joyfully played on my surname and said: 'Shiva will burn your Karma.'

Swamiji Scolding Me

We, the then permanent [residential] ashramites were staying at different places at different times, as the accommodation situation required. One time I stayed briefly in the common ashram dormitory rooms, which were where also day visitors used to stay. One fine sunny morning Swamiji came into my room, after breakfast and looked around and mentioned to me, that he was not happy about some untidiness of the room. I in turn, looked at him in disbelief, never heard him saying that to me before, so I just broke down in tears, being an adult, but sobbing like a schoolboy. Swamiji had many strange ways to test us then.

Richmond Farm Road Rescue

After leaving the ashram after a few years, I was a photographic representative and did a lot of long-distance driving, so was fond of good cars. Those days I lived in Johannesburg and heard that Swamiji would be at [the Ramakrishna Blessings] Richmond farm. I arrived at night there on a rainy day, had a lovely satsang meeting and was leaving blessed.

Once outside it was still drizzling and my heavy BMW did not make it up the steep, slippery dirt road. After trying several times, I thought I have to spend the night there. I then went back inside the house and after explaining, Swamiji said to me, 'Come, let's do this' and with that he took the keys of the car, got in the driver's seat, me next to him, and drove us, with a few wheelies, out of the muddy area, right up to the safer ground on top of the farm.

On the 'Road Rovers' with Swamiji



On weekends we had the duties of helping out stranded people on the roads at night. Sometimes John Tunmer (pictured here in later life with his wife, Jane) went in his old black Peugeot (with one front fender missing) and I remember he had a makeshift orange warning light on top of the car.

We were called the 'Ramakrishna Road Rovers'. I went once with John and another time Swamiji asked me to come with him. So normally that could take maybe two hours or more, driving along the main routes right up to Stanger [north coast of Durban], and back to the ashram by some other routes. We sometimes helped stranded people with car breakdowns and they were relieved to receive assistance.

Yet I am amused now, noticing some strange looks at us, Swamiji dressed in his orange robe, and myself a tall, blonde German in a white shirt and dhoti. We drove silently for hours, and all my many questions I always wanted to ask Swamiji did not surface at all. I was then just in blessed, godly company, there was no more need for questions or answers.

[Compiler: I also went on Ramakrishna Road Rovers trips with the 'Two Johns' (Tunmer and Whitfield) from time to time. Being mechanically deficient, my contribution comprised mainly of eating the delicious sandwiches prepared by Shirley Whitfield, and holding the torch as directed, when John Tunmer magically got people's cars started again.]

From Sister Val Whitfield.

The only clear memory I have is of Andrew [Val's late younger brother] taking his vicious-looking, very large pet house-snake to the ashram. Swamiji would hide it in his sleeve and when anyone prostrated, they would look up to find the snake in their face. Much merriment caused, and Swamiji would roar with laughter. **Ends.**



Pictured: Val's mum Shirley Whitfield and Val.



The Ashram Snake Charmer

Snakes would quite frequently visit the ashram, which in the early days was surrounded by deep forest. That is, until land was expropriated by the provincial authorities to construct a freeway right through the centre of the property. John Tunmer – pictured and jokingly and very affectionately referred to by Papa, as 'Bhogananda' – who was something of an amateur herpetologist, would pick up non-venomous visitors and take them into Papa.

Papa once pushed a snake towards a female devotee, who shrieked and ran away. But the moment Papa pretended as if to take the snake towards her child, she was back in a flash to position herself between the child and the snake. Papa used it as a teachable moment with us, illustrating that a mother's own fear takes second place to her instinct for protecting her child.

I once said to Papa, as he was holding a small, slender, green snake, 'Perhaps he's come for initiation.' Papa's response was, 'Maybe Master has spoken through you.' He then went out to the Shiva fountain and quietly did just that. A really blessed snake. I often wondered who or what might be inside those little bodies.



Animals, birds, and reptiles are regularly drawn to sadhus [holy men]. Swami Thribhuvanji, pictured, our beloved sannyasi [Swami] brother, was once at Vasishtha guha – Guruji's cave on the Ganga near Rishikesh, with Papa. Some birds were making a tremendous racket on a nearby tree branch. Thribhuvan commented, 'My, but those birds are noisy.' To which Papa responded, 'Yes, they are noisy, but they're not birds.'

In the eastern tradition it's readily accepted that souls wanting proximity to or association with holy people, may incarnate into a variety of bodies making it convenient to be in their vicinity.

The Naming Of 'Brother Jennifer'

Val Whitfield's brother John, and John Tunmer, and I formed a tight-knit trio at the ashram. Papa periodically gave people an 'ashram name' to inspire their spiritual journey.

One night as Papa, Mummy, Brother John Whitfield, and I were driving home from Pietermaritzburg to Durban, Papa said, 'I think tonight is the night we give Brother John a new name.' Mummy and I responded enthusiastically, and I could see that Brother John was excited by the prospect. My ashram name from Papa was already Brother Francis. Papa said, 'I think we must give him a name from the Franciscan order. Maybe

Brother Jennifer.' It was all that ashram Mummy and I could do, not to burst out laughing. We knew immediately what Papa was up to. He was deliberately mispronouncing Brother Juniper, who was one of Saint Francis' fellow monks.

John was of course horrified at the idea of being called Brother Jennifer. The more Papa asked him what he thought and the more he politely protested, the more we laughed. This was Papa's mischievous sense of humour at its best.

Then Papa added to the pressure. We were just a few kilometres from the ashram and Papa said, 'We have to decide on this name before we get to the ashram.' I can't begin to describe the hilarious mix of horror by John and merriment by the rest of us, in that vehicle. Brother Jennifer seemed to be inevitable. And poor John would carry that cross until his dying day.

Just as we were about to turn off Old North Coast Road into Montreal road, where the ashram is located at the top, Papa said, 'I've made a decision.' We held our collective breaths. Papa said, 'We're going to call you Shyam [a name of Lord Krishna] and then roared with laughter. A profoundly relieved John thus became Shyam. Although I'm convinced that he would have been delighted with any name that night, except 'Brother Jennifer.'

Guru As Physician

I've always had lumbar spine issues. It's part of our poor family gene pool. But I went through a phase at the ashram where my lower back was, as the saying goes, 'killing me'.

Papa one day called for a piece of cloth and several fists full of coarse salt, instructed me to like down on the kitchen table and after heating up the salt in a dry pan on the old ashram stove, Papa folded it into the cloth and applied it to the aching spine. Papa even did this when we arrived back at the ashram close to midnight one night. I could see that his body was exhausted, but like the amazing Mother that he was, his love knew no bounds.



From Sister Molly Mathias, then Molly Athmaram – who lived at number 2 Montreal road, Avoca, just as one entered it off Old North Coast road, to reach the end at the ashram, which was number 8.

In her words:
Memories with Beloved Swamiji, Swami Shivapadananda. The mystical and mysticism of my spiritual journey.

Initiation Of Swami Shivapadananda
Our Beloved Swami Shivapadananda was initiated into monkhood in the very year that our Beloved Gurudev entered mahasamadhi on 11th February 1965. Swamiji took monkhood [As we now know, Papa was already initiated into sannyas but donned the gerua garb for the first time in August 1965] on Krishna Janmashtami that same year.



Pictured: Papa front right, D P Soni next to Papa. Behind Papa, Molly with arms folded and next to her, Rupa.

The Student
My narrative starts on this following tone. Every morning my siblings and I waited at the bus stop to catch our bus to school. We travelled north going to primary school in Mount Edgecombe. A young student from the ashram would cross our path every morning, very pleasant and

with a friendly attitude. He would greet us warmly and walk hurriedly because he had a further distance to walk to his bus. He travelled in the opposite direction to us. Judging by his school uniform, he was a high school student attending a school in the Durban area. He would invite us timeously to come for service at the ashram.

I did attend a few Saturday services during Gurudev's [Swami Nischalananda's] time from the age of six years until he left the body. At that time, we lived a long distance away from the ashram and as children we had to be accompanied to the ashram by older kids or adults because of safety. It was a long walk, and we had to cross a busy road.

By the time we got to high school my family moved to No. 2 Montreal Road which was so much closer to the ashram. [In the very same short road, in fact. The ashram was number 8].

One morning the pleasant student was so excited on seeing us at the bus stop. He was beaming with joy and greeted us with a very warm smile like he always did. He announced that 'We have a new Swami now. Please come to the ashram on Saturday for service'.

Back in those days we called satsang, 'service', and devotees, 'members'. This student whom we met every morning was none other than our [future] revered Swami Premananda Maharaj. He stayed at the ashram with Gurudev and became an ashramite [as the residents were called] at a very early age together with Brother Peter van den Berg.

Attending Service

I was excited at this news and yes, I told my Mom about it. 'Momma, can we please go to the ashram for service and meet this new Swami?' I was always keen to attend service because I enjoyed the spiritual ambience of the ashram during Gurudev's time. My Mom had no objection and allowed my siblings and me to go to the service.

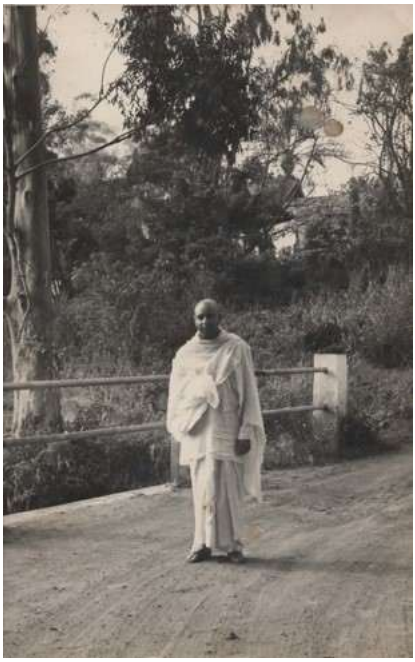
This was my first attendance after Gurudev's passing. The shrine was permeated by a beautiful fragrance of incense which instantly captured my

soul and kept me focused on the altar, where our Holy Trinity was seated and alongside was Swamiji's asan [seat] and so was Gurudev's.

A huge picture of Gurudev was placed on his asan upon a leopard skin. It seemed like both Gurudev's radiant eyes and the eyes of the leopard kept a watch on us. Gurudev's eyes were so striking and alive in the picture, that one felt his presence.

During this period the numbers of members had dwindled to a small group. At the end of the service Swamiji asked me to offer aarti to our Holy Trinity. I was truly elated to be given this opportunity of making my spiritual connection with the Holy Trinity with this little lamp and embracing the love and light of the powers above.

My First Impression Of Swamiji



My first impression of my Swamiji was 'Oh my! Such a Divine Being.' He exuded warmth and divinity. The ochre garb he wore made him look supreme and his shining bald head exuded divine light. In all, he reflected this vibrant energy of the cosmos. I instantly fell in love with this 'Divine Being'.

[Papa's head was shaved for his taking of the garb on Krishna Janmashtami 1965. In almost all other pictures he's seen with long hair. Here he's seen on the bridge of Montreal road after going for bhiksha – begging for food – as is customary for monks after initiation].

He took us into his fold like a mother and made sure that we were comfortable. He lovingly invited us to attend the weekly services since we lived so close by and instantly became fond of us. He would stop at the house when leaving the ashram and ask us to join him for home services when he was invited by members. During school holidays he would do the same. This gave us the opportunity to spend lots of time with him and attain the spiritual benefit that he showered upon us.

Tough Days

In the initial days of sannyasa [monasticism], Swamiji was faced with some tough issues. There were disagreements with senior members after Gurudev's mahasamadhi, and this caused divisions amongst the members. Many of the disgruntled ones left. There were great financial difficulties which Swamiji inherited. The essential services were disconnected at times because of lack of funds. Swamiji and the ashramites had to cope with no water, no lights, but the daily routine of the ashram continued as usual.

Despite the adversities Swamiji made sure that he would bring back the ashram to its glory. He would hold yajnas [and hawan prayer ceremonies with recital of mantras] for the powers above to intervene in these difficult times. For instance, a yajna was held for about seven to nine hours on a Sunday with reciting of the Gaayatri Mantra.

Together We Stood By Swamiji

Swamiji was only 26 years old, and he had this huge responsibility as a Sannyasi, taking care of the ashram, and doing his spiritual work and putting up with negative forces. Swamiji had to prove to the naysayers that he was going to make a success of the ashram. Those of us who stood by Swamiji in those tough days were mostly youths (pre-teens and teenagers) students in schools, in colleges and university. We were a devoted team who travelled this difficult journey with Swamiji, graced by our Holy Trinity.

Financial Difficulties

Funds were hard to obtain for the daily running of the ashram because most of the members could contribute very little or nothing. Termination of electricity, water and telephone was the norm. Candles for light and a

paraffin stove for the kitchen was used. Swamiji and the ashramites used to go without food at times. But when word got around, members who could afford it, would donate 50kg bags of rice and lentils and 20-litre cans of oil for cooking, and castor oil for the lamp in the shrine.

Despite those difficult days of not having enough for meals etc., our stay at the ashram was always jolly and full of fun.

The Children Of The Ashram

We also got to know the other youngsters and members who attended service regularly. During this time the group of members was small. Swamiji loved having children at the ashram and often asked us to stay over for the week ends and school holidays. We would be delighted at this request.

Spending time so often at the ashram, we built strong friendships with each other, including the ashramites and the Mothers. These were the early days of Swamiji as the Spiritual Head of the Ramakrishna Centre. People would invite Swamiji, and he would take us to these functions.



A Sri Sarada Devi [Holy Mother] shrine and a kutir [accommodation place] was built for Swamiji in Umhlali by a devotee we all just referred to as 'Shah' – the father of Neil and Shirley Shah, and a very close member of the ashram. His full name, however, was Ramsunder Shah. Service was held in this beautiful shrine every Friday evening and the shrine was always filled to capacity with children. The children of the ashram also spent many a weekend with this loving family.



Sunday mornings and Tuesday evening services were held at the uMngeni (standardise spelling throughout) Road Temple. The black-coloured idols [murtis/images] standing in the front didn't look too friendly. Most of us were scared to even look at them. Swamiji would say, 'Okay don't look at them, or just have your eyes closed'.

Before the onset of Deepawali and Christmas, Swamiji would obtain greeting cards for the respective celebrations. Swamiji and the older youths who were licenced drivers would take us to the suburbs, away from the ashram, to sell these cards. We were grouped in pairs and walked long distances to sell these cards [to raise funds].

We would proudly tell people that we are from 'The Ramakrishna Centre'. In the early 1960s many people did not know of our institution. We went on our selling spree on Sundays. The money received from the sales of these cards went towards the welfare of the ashram and building of the Abelia Road [Sri Sarada Devi] ashram in Asherville. The children who spent time regularly at the ashram were called 'The Children of the Ashram'.

A Mother, whom we lovingly called Aunty Hennie [Henny Schimmel] resided in Johannesburg back in those days. We always looked forward to her arrival. Whenever she visited the ashram, she would bring all kinds of treats for the children and a separate pack for Swamiji. Auntie Hennie treated 'The Children of the Ashram' with love and fondness.

She would meticulously arrange the sweets on a tray and distribute the treats by herself, making sure that each child got what they preferred. One had to acquire a taste for Aunty Hennie's spread of treats. They came in different flavours and tastes, they were bitter, sweet, or sour. They were expensive treats so she would like us to have one of each, so none remained in the tray or was wasted.

The children of the ashram also had the opportunity to spend lots of quality time with Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi]. Mummy was the epitome of a mother. Kind, loving and nurturing. She treated every child as her own. Mummy was the core to the activities of the ashram. She assisted with everything that needed a mother's touch. She was genuinely graced with the blessings of Holy Mother to perform her duties so conscientiously and caringly.

There were other Mothers too, who came to the ashram regularly and shared their pleasant moments with us. Some of them stayed at the ashram during holidays. We were very fortunate to live this life with such inspiring and caring elderly souls.
The senior members together with the older youths who were at tertiary [education] levels would help in the production and directing of theatrical plays. One of the first and biggest productions during Swamiji's leadership was 'The Ascetic' by Rabindranath Tagore. Many plays followed thereafter. Tickets were sold widely to the public to attend these events. The regular children from the ashram and visiting children joined the cast for these productions. The plays were produced to raise funds for the ashram. Sometimes when Swamiji was invited to a function he would request Mummy to prepare a 'skit' [short play or excerpt from one] so that a few children would be asked to take part and perform at the function.

Children's Rally, The RKC Brigade And The Winter Camp
The highlight of the calendar year was the Children's Rally and the children's camp during the July school holidays. A day immediately after the rally was the start of the winter children's camp. Children from all the provinces [of South Africa] were invited to the camp which was held at the ashram. This was a fun time, with so many children with different characteristics and personalities staying together.

Lots of preparation took place at the ashram for the rally. The local children who attended the ashram regularly, stayed over at the ashram to help with chores and preparation as per Swamiji's request. These children belonged to different branches of the Ramakrishna Centre so they would have their rehearsals for their skits at the ashram. These skits had to be rehearsed in separate areas so that the children from other branches would not have a

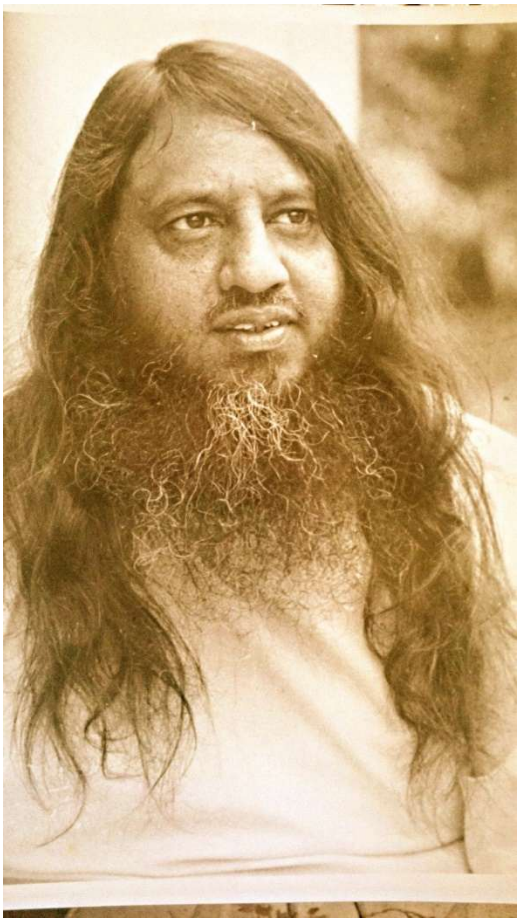
clue as to what the skits were about. This was done to prevent another branch from copying or having the intention to jeopardise the skit on the day of the rally.

Children from various branches were members of The Ramakrishna Centre Brigade [RKC Brigade]. There were lots of activities taking place on the ashram grounds during the July school holidays. Fortunately, the ashram was situated on a very large property and so could accommodate all these activities. On the day of the Rally, the march of the Brigade took place in the Durban CBD around Carlisle Street and its surrounds, from about 7:00am to

8:00am and then we proceeded back to the ashram to the amphitheatre. The rally took place at the amphitheatre at the ashram with all the formalities led by Swamiji. The stage, the sound system, the lighting, and the décor were all prepared by the youth of the ashram and the resident ashramites. The rally consisted of skits and recital of verses from the holy scriptures, kirtans, dances and bhajans. Refreshments and lunch were provided for all.

This function was so huge that it attracted many people from all the provinces. The entire amphitheatre and its surrounding area were filled with adult members and visitors, whilst the youngsters sat in their respective branch groups. The driveway at the ashram including the amphitheatre and the road was layered with white ash which looked so refreshing. To add to this beauty, a huge banner with the words reading 'The Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa' was erected at the entrance of Montreal Road [leading up to the ashram]. The whole area was so overpowered by the grace and beauty of our Master [Sri Ramakrishna]. These must have been moments of anxiety and excitement for Swamiji too, being the Spiritual Head of such a large organisation, all the preparations had to be precise. Every detail had to be exact, to protect Swamiji and the ashramites from the naysayers' negative comments.

During the period of the winter camp [very mild in Durban's sub-tropical climate], Swamiji would invite a couple of the mothers to stay at the ashram to assist with the daily running, help with the cooking and see that all the



youths adhered to the rules of the daily timetable. The morning started at 5am and all members had to be in the shrine by 6am for the morning prayer and yoga exercises and the evening prayer was at 6pm. If one did not abide by any of the rules of the daily timetable, then one would be punished. A thousand or more written [likhita] japa, the symbol of AUM must be completed. No help was to be provided by another. Should one help another and get caught she or he would be punished two-fold. We had to be very careful minding our own business and keeping up with the daily routine of the timetable.

The most interesting time of the day was discussion time, the last item on the timetable. After the evening meal Swamiji would be sitting in the lounge waiting for all the youths to join him. We would complete our evening chores, washing up dishes and tidying the dining area and the kitchen, switch off lights in areas not needed and then proceed to the lounge where Swamiji was expecting us. All of us varying in different age groups would sit around in the lounge, some of us would scramble to sit close to Swamiji's feet, so that we could reach out to massage his feet. This was a time when all of us got attention from Swamiji and we enjoyed this quality time.

There would be questions, answers and serious discussion of the day and some lighter ones with anecdotes. Swamiji loved to listen to the relaying of the daily activities, especially the funny incidents. The youths always played pranks on each other, especially performing ghost acts on the younger ones and scaring them out of their wits. The evening was always rounded up with some humour. The discussion would go on for about thirty to forty five minutes and then we would be dismissed to go to our respective dormitories to retire for the night.

Deepavali

The Festival of Lights [that's the translation] was celebrated in full force at the ashram. Children living in the city would come to the ashram to celebrate. Those children living close by were not to go home but to join in the celebration. Swamiji, together with the youths would display their skills with some amazing fireworks. We would watch these spectacular fireworks flying up in the sky.

Another beautiful evening that we celebrated, was the coming of the New Year. On New Year's Eve, the youth would make a huge bonfire [a Dhuni fire, really – typically kept burning by wandering monks and mendicants] welcoming in the New Year. We would all be merrily singing and dancing around the fire until midnight.

Yoga Camps

The yoga camps were another highlight for some of us youngsters. We were fortunate to be invited by Swamiji to the yoga camps which were for the adults. The yoga camp was held at the Ramakrishna Children's Holiday Home in Tongaat beach, situated in a hilly area across the freeway and opposite was the Tongaat beach. This camp was held twice a year, during Christmas and Easter holidays.

At 5am we all would be ready to proceed to the beach for the morning service, meditation, and yoga exercises. The yoga camp was rigorous, and every member had to participate in all the events. If Swamiji noticed any member not amongst the group when ready to leave for the beach he would

call for them. There was one member who loved sleeping, he could miss anything just to have his extra sleep. Swamiji would send two or three youths to physically carry him from his dormitory. He would be carried to the group still asleep, causing much hilarity.

The evening service and meditation session was held at the camp site under a tent [of very large tarpaulins]. At the yoga camp we would observe silence (mouna) as per Swamiji's instruction for a few hours in the day and a saltless meal was served for lunch at least once during the camp.

The daily activities at the yoga camp were so invigorating and the atmosphere so peaceful. The Govender family, who were members of the ashram lived in the adjoining property of the camp site. We as children loved playing on the sandy hilly slopes in the area and running after the cows. During the afternoon siesta when the adults had their break, we would explore the area.

Discipline

Discipline was Swamiji's fundamental basis of rearing the youths at the ashram. It didn't matter, male or female the treatment was the same. Swamiji was very observant when one was doing chores, be it in the kitchen or the shrine.

He would advise us with little details like setting prasad on a tray. 'If any items fall from the tray, do not pick them up from the floor and put them back on the tray,' he would say. 'Whatever duties are to be performed must be done with love.' He preferred duties to be done silently but we were young and being away from each other for a whole week, we couldn't be quiet. We would have so much to catch up on with each other, so we would unintentionally break the rule. The moment we heard Swamiji approaching we would keep silent and continue working. Amongst us we had some pranksters too.

If any of us caused loud laughter or amusement we would be cautious not to get caught, because we could be separated from the group and given a task to complete on our own and that wasn't fun. It was amazing that we as

children never told on each other. Should an accident or any damage occur through someone's negligence or carelessness, when questioned by Swamiji or an elder, 'How did that happen?', we would all take the blame for the incident. But Swamiji was too smart, he knew we were covering up for each other. Many times, we got away with such a situation.

There was one time that Swamiji was not going to entertain a misdeed from the children. During the winter holidays after the children's rally the amphitheatre area was used as a camp base for Boy Scouts. They were not affiliated to any of the ashrams or their activities. One Saturday evening Swamiji and a group of members had gone to a function and some of the children remained at the ashram under the supervision of a kind and gentle mother.

The children were very helpful after dinner, washing the dishes, tidying the dining room, and completing the evening chores in the pretence they would retire early to bed. The reason for this was as soon as mother fell off to sleep, their plan was to escape to the amphitheatre to attend the Boy Scout camp. Apparently earlier in the day the Master of the Scouts had invited some of the youths for a bonfire. It was the last night of their camping.

So these youths decided all the children from the ashram, (girls and boys) should go to the bonfire. They waited for the mother in charge to fall off to sleep and they all escaped through the dormitory doors facing the balcony. None of the older youths knew about this invite. Anyway, these happy ones went to the bonfire and enjoyed the function.

The next morning was icy cold, all the children, the older youths and mother in charge for the night were called to meet with Swamiji on the lawn in front of the dining room entrance. This was serious, there was never an experience like this before. Swamiji was fuming with anger in the winter morning sun, standing on the dew settled lawn, waiting for all to arrive. He was very angry having heard that the children from the ashram had been to the Boy Scout bonfire without his permission. Every child staying at the ashram was his responsibility and they had to abide by his rules. This behaviour was not acceptable, so he had to deal with it in a strict form.

Although Swamiji was so angry he spoke to the children kindly and advised them never to do anything like that again, without his permission.



The Shrine

The most time-consuming task was cleaning the shrine every Saturday. On his way to fetch flowers for the shrine, Swamiji would stop at my house and ask me to be at the ashram before he arrived with the flowers, so I could start with tidying the shrine. The brassware, the altar and the lamp had to be cleaned, polished, and shone before Swamiji arrived. Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi], arranged the flowers for the shrine. She was accompanied by her young children and a few others. We were a compatible group of children, spending most of our time at the ashram during weekends and school holidays.

The most tedious job was brushing the carpet with hand brushes [there was no vacuum cleaner]. There were only two brushes to work with and the shrine was huge and there would be about six of us to clean up. We would share the chores and work quickly so that the shrine would be ready in time for service. So we would still have time to discuss our school activities, the likes and dislikes of school etc. When walking into the cleaned shrine the peaceful vibration of the powers above and the tranquil lights in the shrine, the fragrance of the incense was so captivating to the heart. At the ashram we played just as hard as we worked.

When all of us were together no work was too much because we had fun doing the chores in a group, we also had some mischievous ones amongst us who would get up to funny pranks in the absence of Swamiji or the elders.

One evening after service a group of us sat in the shrine and for some reason one of the youths began singing a bhajan, which was usually sung by an elderly member. These bhajans were sung only by him. Whenever he attended service Swamiji would ask him to sing, and he sang with so much devotion and force that his voice and the musical instrument would reverberate through the shrine and into the open atmosphere of the ashram. We decided to perform these songs like he did, singing one bhajan after the other and playing the instruments to perfection.

There was an inter-leading door from the shrine to the lounge. We didn't realise that Swamiji was having discussions with some visitors in the lounge, and we were having fun imitating this old devotee.

We were so engrossed with our singing and playing the musical instrument and amusing ourselves, and there Swamiji was at the door not looking impressed with our action. He asked us to stop and leave the shrine immediately. We were so embarrassed getting caught by Swamiji at this despicable behaviour that we shamefully left the shrine. Children were not allowed to be lingering in the shrine when service was over. During service when Swamiji noticed us getting playful, fidgety, or giggling in the shrine, he would separate us from the group and make us sit right opposite him so that he could keep his eye on us.

Swamiji's Footsteps

Swamiji had the most distinct footsteps. When he walked, his one foot dragged on the ground and the sandals made a scratching noise. The noise was so distinct that we heard it from a distance. Knowing Swamiji was around we would quickly fix whatever we were doing or find something to do. Or best was to quickly run towards him and greet him if we hadn't seen him on our arrival. It was not good getting caught by Swamiji, being idle.

As a youngster Swamiji suffered from muscle-wasting and this was the cause of his irregular footstep. He walked with walking aids [braces and calipers] when he was young. We also offered to massage his feet, whenever we could, to ease the discomfort he experienced with the faulty foot. This was a favourite time to spend with Swamiji, taking care of his feet.

Ghosts

Some of us saw paranormal activity at the ashram, whilst the others felt or heard it. The conspiratorial narrative was that the spirit of the previous owner of the property roamed about the premises very frequently. It was told that the members of his deceased family were buried on the property where the statues of the buck [still there] stood at the ashram. The troublesome spirit would also visit Swamiji sometimes during the night in his room. He did the same to Gurudev. Gurudev tried warding off the spirit by holding night vigil prayers that didn't seem to help.

[This is not an uncommon experience. Many holy people are approached by dispossessed or 'lost' souls, asking for guidance or liberation.] The spirit continued with his malicious behaviour with Swamiji. Swamiji and the ashramites observed prayers and performed yajnas at night to set free this troublesome spirit.

At the end of school holidays one January, after cleaning up the entire ashram, we were waiting for lunch, which was being prepared by an older youth, to be served. It was the last day of school holidays and most of the children had already left the ashram. Swamiji was out on a road show with a group of members. We all sat at the dining table waiting patiently for lunch to be served, and suddenly beautiful music began playing in the shrine and there was no one in there. The children at the table were eager to know what was going on, with no one in the shrine and yet we could hear the music. Before we got to the shrine door the older youth in charge of us shooed us back to the dining table. He spent a lot of time at the ashram with Gurudev and Swamiji, so he was aware of the paranormal activity.

One night, Swamiji and some of us were arriving late from a function. As we drove around the bend approaching the grotto, where the Swami



Nischalananda Hall [on the extreme right of picture] is now erected, a group of haggard faces, some with teeth missing and some with heavily stained teeth and scraggy grey unkempt hair and scary grins, appeared right in front of the vehicle windscreen with their hair swaying across their faces. They seemed like they were floating above the ground. Swamiji stopped the Kombi for a moment. It was all so quick. Swamiji softly asked us 'Did any of you see this?' Nobody answered, the fear of seeing these faces gave us such a shock that we were momentarily silenced.

One Tuesday evening Swamiji left for the uMngeni Road Temple for service with a few ashramites. We were busy working in the lounge and heard furniture being moved about aggressively in the ladies' dormitory on the floor above. The pulling and pushing of the furniture on the wooden floor was quite noisy. It felt like a very angry person was busy re-arranging furniture there.

We ignored that and continued with our work and immediately after that there came a cold breeze flowing down the stairs which passed through us in the lounge. Feeling the breeze on our skin gave us goose bumps and raised our hair on end. The older youth who was in the bookshop adjoining the lounge must have experienced the same and he came out to see if we were okay but didn't say anything to us. When Swamiji arrived, he told him about that experience. Swamiji was concerned and he asked us the next day if were we okay.

Arrival Of New Members

In the early 1970s the number of members visiting the ashram began growing. Swamiji was always warm towards new members and gave them

his blessings to visit the ashram regularly. Swamiji continued with his road shows to raise funds and encouraged more members to join the ashram.

During this period Swami Premanandaji returned from India and he too, got involved with the road shows and reviving of branches. The financial crisis began easing because there were members now who could contribute bigger donations. The ashram was now able to afford printing its own calendars and diaries to sell to the public to add to its funds. The result was phenomenal with the presence of two Swamis at the ashram. Swami Premanandaji's return from India also escalated the numbers of members. The shrine was filled to capacity for Saturday service and other functions.

We, The Children of the Ashram had finished our studies by that time and as adults we went out into the working world, choosing different paths in life. Some of us left the country, some of us moved further distances away from the ashram, some married, some even chose to follow other faiths and some are no more. At this stage our presence at the ashram was very limited or none at all. Our attendances at the ashram became rare, but the Swamis and the old members remembered us fondly. I believe that our bond as The Children of the Ashram was a blessing from Gurudev and Swamiji so that we remain connected to each other always, as a spiritual family.

We were very fortunate to have been blessed with the grace of both Gurudev and Swamiji. The words of wisdom from our Swamijis will continue to resonate within us. The love and warmth that exuded from them will be cherished forever in our hearts. The scripture says that one has an eternal relationship with one's Guru if one is blessed to have a Guru and this is very true. From the experiences I had, not a day goes by without remembering the lessons attained from my Gurus. The compartment in the brain stores all the spiritual lessons given by Swamiji which pop up in relevant moments.

A very beautiful memory that resonates in me recalling my last visit to Swamiji with my mom and my sibling. Swamiji was sitting under the mango trees at the ashram, with Ma Radha and her family. He asked us to join him. We spent some time with them. My mom always had a rift with Swamiji –

the reason was, she felt we spent too much time at the ashram, and she didn't entirely support that.

Swamiji was pleased to have us in his company. He was in a very pleasant mood, exuding so much love. When we said our namastes and were ready to leave, he gave us his blessings and told my mom this, 'You have very good daughters, Ma. They take good care of you.' He knew very well that with his teachings and blessings we had not faltered and grew to be responsible children of our parents.

This narrative is my compilation of a short period only as a teenager, about the very beginning of Swamiji's life as a monk.

From Brother Kissoon Behari

BIG SWAMIJI

The Guru

When the yearning in the seeker intensifies, God becomes, as it were, compelled to respond. Of course, it is all his divine play, and so he arranges for circumstances and events in such a way as to conduce to the seeker's spiritual welfare, and to bring into his life (or move out of his life) those people who would hold back the spiritual progress of the sadhaka. Then when the seeker is ready, that is, he has intense yearning, is studying the scriptures, is increasing his devotional practices, the Lord comes to him. That form in which he comes is called Guru. In other words, the Guru is the salvific expression of the infinite and compassionate Lord. The seeker has not seen God, only heard, or read of him. But in the Guru, he realises fully that it is God who has come into his life.



When the Lord comes in this way, he does not come for the sake of a single individual. He comes for a group of them. And apart from the serious seeker, there are many who have great spiritual potential, but have lost their way in the maze of the world. The Guru arrives to redirect their lives into new channels, towards a spiritual awakening. In the large number of the devotees of Big Swamiji [Papa], I have seen both these types.

First Sighting

It was on a TV program, perhaps in 1976 when television first came to us here [in South Africa] that I caught a part of a programme in which I saw a man, who had the majesty of a king and yet who projected a divinity that I could feel in the depth of my being. I cannot recall what I heard then, but this much I remember saying to myself: He knows what he is saying, for he spoke of God as if he had an intimate and immediate relationship with him. Who was this man, I wondered?

In His Presence

It was only a decade later that I was destined to meet him. I had come to the Sri Sarada Devi ashram for the first time, and I was to speak on three verses from the [Srimad Bhagavad] Gita. As I was speaking, I noticed some people enter the shrine. Then I saw him. He was walking down the steps against the wall on the side where the females sat. I was stunned, and my speech stopped. It seemed as if a mountain of gold was moving there, shining in a spiritual glory, all divine majesty. He came to the altar, bowed down and sat facing the devotees. At the end of the satsang, he addressed us. The party had just returned from Zambia, I think. He was telling us about their trip. There was a near accident, but they were all safe. He said that before they left, he had prayed to 'Him' (and he looked at the image of Sri Ramakrishna on the altar) and said he had asked for a safe journey. They were safe by the grace of the Lord, or in his words, 'He, too, had to save his face!' I was struck by this familiarity. At another time, I would have counted it an outrage – given my religious background. I was to see this intimacy between him and God over and over again. At one Yoga camp, lunch was offered to the deities. And Big Swamiji said, 'Eat Mother' and with a large smile added 'and grow fat!' It was neither audacity nor frivolity, but an intimacy which we can only understand if we see it.

First Meeting

After the satsang Big Swamiji met the devotees in the lounge. I was escorted to him by a devotee whom I knew and who was well-known to Swamiji. He gave a brief introduction said that perhaps I could write something for the ashram magazine. Then with a cheekiness which can only be attributed to my inanity, I asked if I would receive a royalty for writing. 'Don't ask for royalty,' he said. 'Ask for reality.'

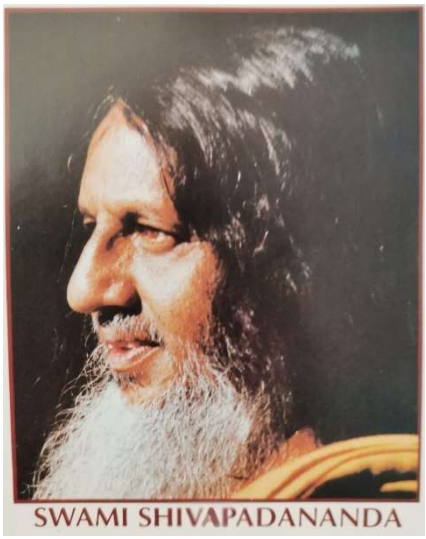
After some talk, he became indrawn, and his eyes were almost half-closed. He said to me, 'Son you must write and give talks.' Subsequently, I was to speak at the two ashrams (Headquarters and the Sri Sarada Devi ashram) on many occasions. During the time of Big Swamiji, I delivered talks at almost all the yoga camps. Big Swamiji very much appreciated my Vijaya Dashami talk on the Devi Mahatmayam, in which I traced the spiritual evolution of a seeker. He asked an inmate to get the copy of the talk and to print it. But it was never done. On another occasion, the printing of the children's magazine, Dipika, was very much delayed. This laxity and lack of concern on the part of the inmate distressed Big Swamiji. He asked me to prepare articles for the Dipika for the rest of the year. I completed the work in a short time, and it was given to the inmate for printing. But, again, it was not done.

My First Upanishad Class

Initially, I attended only the Saturday Satsang. I did not know that Big Swamiji held classes on the Upanishads on a Tuesday. When I heard of it, I of course attended. That evening, I found the shrine full. Most of them, I think, had copies of the text, and many carried writing material. I cannot say what Big Swamiji discussed and explained. But I can tell you of the effect of the class on me. When I came out of the class, it was quite dark, and I saw the world as if in a haze, my feet did not seem to touch the ground. I floated, like a disembodied sprite. I vaguely saw the people leave the class or heard them. I stayed in this state for some time, and when I could, I drove home in a cloud of euphoria. But this feeling of something ethereal, a subtle spray of bliss, stayed with me for many days. Later, when I mentioned my experience to Swami Premananda, he smiled, very pleased.

I cannot say clearly how Big Swamiji taught the Upanishads. But this much I can say. The teachings of the Guru come from the ocean of knowledge to the disciple in a stream which enters him and flows into the lake of his mind. If he is a good sadhaka, that knowledge is always easily accessible. If he becomes undisciplined and slack, he will have much difficulty in recollecting and expressing it with accuracy.

First Guru Purnima



It was the first Guru Purnima since I had met Big Swamiji just a few months earlier. It was a weekday, and towards the afternoon, I felt a strange restlessness come upon me. At best, I felt the need to see a holy person. As I revered our family priest very much, I thought I should meet him, though it was already late in the evening. But as I was driving, something marvellously strange happened. Just for an instant, I saw clearly the face of Big Swamiji before me! I felt I had to see him, and I determined then and there that I would go to the ashram after meeting our priest.

It was quite late when I reached the ashram. But there were still many cars about. Big Swamiji was seated in his large seat, and the lounge was full of cheerful devotees. Then Big Swamiji saw us. He was very pleased to see us and it seemed as if he were waiting for me.

Dispelling The Clouds

Seekers always have a need for clear explanations of the problems that they become aware of and which are obstructing their progress. Many of us would come to the ashram and when we had the opportunity, would ask our questions. But there were many who did not have the luxury of meeting

Big Swamiji always, mostly due to work commitments. So they would come to the Saturday satsang with their questions uppermost in their minds. On so many occasions I have heard devotees say: This satsang was for me. 'Swamiji answered my questions' or 'He cleared my doubts' or 'He has pulled me out of a dilemma.' The wonder of it is this: That many devotees would say this after the same satsang!

Once Swami Premananda was going to Northern Natal. Brother Chandi (now Swami Chandikananda) and I were with him. On the way, I started a discussion on the Adhyatma Ramayan which I had just acquired. I wanted clarification on the concepts of ghataakasha and mataakasha. But despite a long discussion, I was just as clear about it, as when the discussion had commenced. The question remained a thorn in my mind. I was still restless on this issue when I met Big Swamiji the following week after our return. He was speaking to some person whom I did not know. Though my eyes were fixed on Big Swamiji, my mind was flying like a wounded bird in the space of the pot and the room and the sky. I did not hear anything that he was saying. Then, suddenly, he broke off in mid-sentence, turned to me, and spoke a sentence or two that explained ghataakasha and mataakasha. Understanding flashed upon me, a lightning flash that lit up the sky of ignorance. And that flash still lights up my mind! [Explained as follows: Ghataakasha refers to air in a clay pot (ghat) and mataakasha refers to air in a space or the 'ether' inside the pot. The air in the pot is the same as, and connected to, the air in the room. Likewise, the individual soul is the same as, and connected to the universal soul.]

There are many such instances that devotees will recall. But I have one more thing to say. I was going through a very difficult patch at work and there seemed to be no solution to my problems. Then I found a way out: There were some teachers who, though in good health, had found a way of getting boarded [prematurely retired for medical reasons]. And they were out of the system with a handsome package. If only I could find a doctor who could certify that I was too sick to continue to work.

That, though, went against the grain of my usual thinking. There was a lie in it. And yet I could see myself heading towards a mental breakdown, or worse

still, suicide. I had to tell Big Swamiji. But that night, though I stayed with him the whole night through, the opportunity to broach the subject did not arise. I left his room at about three o'clock in the morning. Seeing the light in Teddy's [Brahmachari Gyanadayal's] room, I went to meet him. I sat on his bed as he went through the morning ritual of brushing, etc. beside the bed was a shelf on which was the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. I randomly picked up a volume, opened to a page as randomly, and started to read. And then I was so emotionally overcome that Teddy came to me and asked me what had happened. I could not answer. My body was convulsed with sobs. That one paragraph that I read was a definite answer to my problem.

But the situation at school did not ease off. On one occasion, I was called to the office and given a severe dressing down by the two demons that occupied the positions of principal and deputy principal. I left the office, shattered, disillusioned, and totally lost. I broke down and wept bitterly.

Mr X, who led a strict religious life, came upon me. When he learnt what had happened, he consoled me and uplifted me and motivated me to continue. I felt a surge of strength awake in me. I was ready to face whatever came to me. The following day, I went to his office, and started to thank him for his kindness and advice and guidance to me the previous day. He looked surprised. 'Kissoon, I don't know what you are talking about. I was in the classroom at that time.' All I can say is the ways of the Guru are marvellous and beyond our comprehension.

All Knowing

The Guru can see through one as clearly as one can see the contents in a transparent glass box. Not only that, but he can see the past as well as the future. Now this may seem to be a rather far-fetched statement. Let me indulge you. I was still being introduced to the spiritual culture of the ashram. We offer our food, for example, before we eat. On one occasion at school, I had eaten half a sandwich and put it away. Later, I repeated the prayer and ate the sandwich. In the evening when I met Big Swamiji, he looked at me with those piercing eyes and said, 'Don't offer me eaten food.'

It was often that Big Swamiji would foresee an event. Once a devotee wanted to take leave and go home early. But Swamiji asked him to sit. He sat down; his unhappiness obvious on his face. He asked two or three times more, and each time Swamiji told him firmly to stay put. Eventually, the devotee, all exasperated, resigned himself to an unhappy fate. After some time, Big Swamiji turned to him and told him that he could go.
The devotee quietly left but still showing his displeasure at having been detained for so long, and that too, without any obvious reason. But he was to inform us later as to the reason: had he left when he wanted to, he might have been involved in a terrible accident on the way to his home.

Take Me To The Mountain Top

In the everyday world and in the corporate world in particular, success depends not only on one's competence but on the extent to which one is able to show that the successful completion of the task or project was the result of his doing. One's promotion depends on the acknowledgement of this. It is a point of irony that often it is that a person does less and claims more – and gains a promotion.

In contrast, the progress of a sadhaka depends, inter alia, on his giving up the sense of 'doership'. If he feels proud at his successfully completing a task, it is a serious obstacle for him, which he does not realise but the teacher recognises. Once I had completed some task at the Chatsworth branch of the Centre, and I was really pleased with myself. Now I was waiting for Big Swamiji to give me another task. This thought was uppermost in my mind as I sat before him while he was talking on some important subject to some devotees. Suddenly, he turned to me and asked sharply, 'Can you pick us all up and take us to the top of a mountain where I can continue this talk?' I was stunned by this question, and my face fell in total embarrassment. I was still to learn that a disciple is nothing more than an instrument in the hands of his Lord that all the work is done through him, and not by him. The realisation of this is accompanied by a sweet bliss.

On a similar theme there is another episode that many devotees who were present remembered for long. I was drawn into a committee that provided

meals for children at some schools. The committee presented themselves before Big Swamiji and introduced me as the new recruit. He was happy to see me join in. However, I quickly added that I could not go about asking for the donations, but I could write letters requesting for assistance. He looked at me and perhaps he saw what the obstacle was. 'Son, he said, go to seven houses and say you are begging for one cent in Swamiji's name.' Bowing to him, I left quickly – so quickly that I forgot to put on my shoes.

The furniture in the first house that I went to and the dressing of the two women there (I took them to be the mother and daughter) indicated to me that they were not well-to-do. After hearing me out, they gave me, not the one cent I asked, but a few Rand in coins. Elated, I went to the next house. I met a man who was working in the garden. He heard me out and told me to speak to his son inside the house. The son heard me and asked me to speak to his dad. Again, the man sent me to his son. I saw their game. In a calm voice, I gave them both a fitting reply. When I turned to walk away, they both stopped me and filled my hands with some coins.

At another home, the man there started to lecture to me about what religious organisations were doing and not doing. I listened patiently, then told him some of the work that we were doing. More coins came into my hands. By the time the seventh house had been visited, my palms were full. I returned to the ashram. Big Swamiji was pleased with me and asked me to go into the shrine and offer the money to Master [Sri Ramakrishna]. The sense of shyness or feeling of shame to ask for a donation left me. In the week that followed, I went to a few shops and was surprised with the readiness to help our project. And they asked me to return. Another thing, the smell in a butcher shop really repulses me. But on many occasions, I stood for twenty or thirty minutes in a butcher shop, waiting for the owner – without any queasiness!

Lesson From The Cup Of Tea

Advaita Vedanta has a special appeal for westerners and those others who are intellectually inclined. And thus, it was with me. I found the propositions a breakaway from the main-stream Hinduism that I knew. Such a concept as this world is unreal had a strange attraction for me. And though at first

almost outrageous, the notion that I was Brahman, that nothing else beside me existed, had a strange fascination for me. So, almost thoughtlessly, I became a new addition to the followers of Advaita Vedanta. But it was all theory, of course. And the books did not give a full and proper explanation of the ideas, as I was to discover from Big Swamiji's Upanishad classes in the years that followed. An important requirement in Vedanta is discrimination: one should be able to discriminate between the Real and the unreal, reject the unreal and accept the Real only. Now a word on western and Indian philosophy. The former is largely intellectual, whereas the latter means direct experience of reality/God/the Self.

Now listen to a delightful episode, valuable for its practical import and entertainment as well. It was late at night and the lounge was full of devotees, among them Pravrajika Atmaprana and Sr Gargi (now Pravrajika Ishtaprana). Surprisingly, Big Swamiji asked me if I could make tea. When I answered in the affirmative, he asked me to make him a cup of tea. One of the female devotees accompanied me to the kitchen, showed me where the necessary articles were, and left me to myself. I carefully prepared the cup of tea, silently chanting all the time. Then I took it to Big Swamiji. As I entered; a hush fell in the room. He took the cup, looked at me with a smile, and took a sip. It seemed that all were waiting expectantly. Again, he smiled and said, 'The boy makes good tea.' Was it a look of relief that I caught in the face of Atmaprana Didi? Then he asked me to make tea for all the devotees.

I was accompanied by another devotee this time. She was the bossy type, and virtually took over the task allotted to me. She put in the tea bags, I added the milk, and she added the sugar. Alas! It was not sugar as she almost immediately discovered, but it was fine salt which could not be distinguished in the not-so-well-lit kitchen. So, we started all over again. Big Swamiji sent someone to ask why the delay. When it was all ready, we went in with the tray. No doubt, I had an embarrassed look on my face. We passed the cups around. Big Swamiji looked at me with his piercing eyes and said, 'It is not so easy to make a cup of tea. Do you think it is easy to get knowledge of God?'

What he said struck me with a great force. In the path of knowledge, the seeker must discriminate constantly between the Real and the unreal. If I could not discriminate between sugar and salt, two such familiar items, would it be easy for me to discriminate between what is Real and what is not?

Punishment Or Boon?

In our spiritual literature, we find many instances of angry sages cursing some poor offender. But we eventually learn that what was a curse was not really so but a means of removing some obstacle in the person that was not conducive to his spiritual progress. Among the prerequisites for being a disciple is obedience. If a disciple chooses to act on his own impulses and fancies, he is paving a path away from the Guru, who then takes an appropriate measure against him.

Once, during a retreat, Brother Chandi [now Swami Chandikananda] had to go into town. He had Swamiji's permission, of course. No one was allowed to leave the campus during a retreat – the worldly environment would negatively affect him, and the spirituality that he was building would be lost. When I saw that he was going alone, I thought that I should accompany him. That, of course, was the height of whimsicality, for I had not Swamiji's permission, nor did I inform anyone. When we returned and Swamiji discovered that I had left without his permission, he was most displeased with me. As punishment he asked me to write a mantra X number of times and hand it to him the following Tuesday when I would come to the ashram.

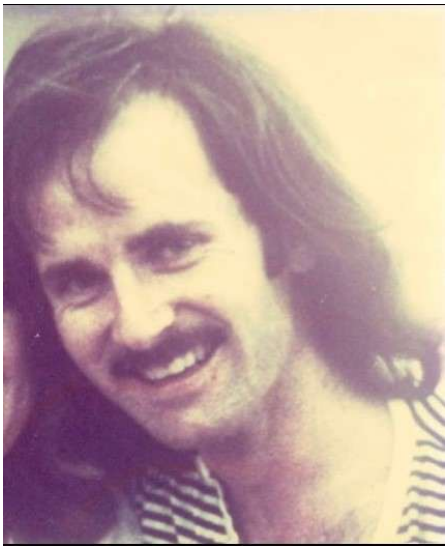
I thought that I would write the mantra in Devanagari [Sanskrit] script. That would impress him. Again, my ego had come to the fore! When the task was completed, I found that I had written it incorrectly. I had omitted the long maatra [extended vowel] in a word. Now I had to start all over again. This time, I was very careful. When I was halfway through, I began to experience something wonderful. As I wrote each letter slowly and deliberately, I felt a bliss envelop me. The mantra became 'alive', as it were. I was still bathed in this blissfulness when I met Swamiji and handed him the sheaf of papers. He looked at me and smiled. That limiting adjunct that had been with me was shattered once and for all. No more disobedience.

Powers Of Concentration

Swamiji's powers of concentration can only be described as super-human. One night I was alone with Swamiji when a devotee came. We were to serve Swamiji that night. After bowing to Swamiji, he took off the gun that he was carrying and was keeping it aside. Swamiji said, 'Give it to me.' With the gun in his hand, he stood outside the doorway. He took aim and fired. The branch of a tree a few hundred metres away broke.

He once played golf with a seasoned golfer, a champ, in fact. And he beat him. We remember his loud remonstration – Swamiji must have used some mantras and magic to win. There was also a person who was a chess champ. And Swamiji beat him much to his disbelief. I myself played against him once. In those days, I was no mean player. I beat him in the first game, and somewhat easily. In the second game, I chose to play defensively. I could not see any strategy in his game. But I was – so I thought – keeping myself in an unassailable position. Then suddenly – checkmate! I examined the board carefully, went over the last moves in my mind – still I could not understand what had happened. I think my befuddlement quite amused him, judging by his smile.

From Brother Francis.



I was living and working in Johannesburg and almost on a whim, due to a change in circumstances, decided to move to Durban in KZN. Once there, I found a job as a retail store display artist. One of the young women with whom I worked, out of the blue, suggested I might enjoy reading Autobiography of a Yogi, by Paramahamsa Yogananda. I'd never heard of him and much less, of a Swami. I was deeply absorbed in reading Yoganandaji's autobiography, which was very much a western world first. I was interested to learn, many years later, just how many people had been influenced by Yoganandaji's book to explore spiritual life more deeply.

I was particularly intrigued by the technique of Kriya Yoga to which he referred, and which was the preferred method of sadhana [spiritual practise] which he encouraged his disciples and followers to use. In a nutshell, it's a breathing and sound-based system, which awakens psychic forces and is said to speed up spiritual evolution. But at the time I didn't know that and wanted to find out more.

I phoned [there were no mobiles in those days] the Hindu institute in Durban to ask where I might learn more about Kriya Yoga. The helpful person I spoke to said that there were two major Hindu religious organisations in Durban. The Divine Life Society [a branch of the Indian movement founded by Swami Sivananda] and the Ramakrishna Centre of Southern Africa.

Without being consciously aware of why, I decided to call the Ramakrishna Centre ashram in Avoca. I realised later that Sri Ramakrishna's name was

mentioned in Yoganandaji's autobiography. He tells the story of how he encountered 'M' – the single letter name referring to Sri Mahendranath Gupta, sometimes also referred to as Master Mahasaya, who was the recorder of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. M had touched Yoganandaji on the chest and given him his first experience of samadhi [superconsciousness].

I dialled the number, and the phone was answered by a cordial voice. I introduced myself and explained why I had called. The person said I'd be very welcome to come and visit the ashram and get further information. I got the address and then said, 'Should I ask for anyone in particular, when I arrive?' The cordial voice answered, 'There is only one Swami here and you are speaking to him now.' You could have knocked me over with a feather. I didn't even know that there were Swamis in South Africa. I'd somehow thought they'd all be in India.

At that stage, I didn't have any personal transport. Avoca is on the north coast of Durban, and I was staying with friends in Amanzimtoti [meaning 'sweet waters' in isiZulu] on the southern side of Durban. I've just asked Google how far 'Toti [as we referred to it] is from Avoca. It's almost forty kilometres. I took a train into Durban. This was 1971 and because of Apartheid [legislated racial separation] there were no trains for white skinned people from Durban to the Avoca station. Only 'third-class' trains. Theoretically, I was not allowed to travel on one. In those days there were railway police and had I been discovered on board; I'd likely have been unceremoniously booted off the train or possibly even fined.

With divine grace no such thing happened, and I got out of the train at the Avoca station. I was confronted by railroad tracks between me and what was then North Coast Road. I picked my way across the tracks and [no GPS, Waze, or Google maps in those days] hoped that I was on the correct road to get to the ashram. It was prime sugar cane land all the way. Tall, lush cane stalks not yet ready for the burn that would precede their harvesting.

Durban has a sub-tropical climate. It was a blistering hot day and with the humidity, I was soon replicating a Chernobyl meltdown. I still don't know

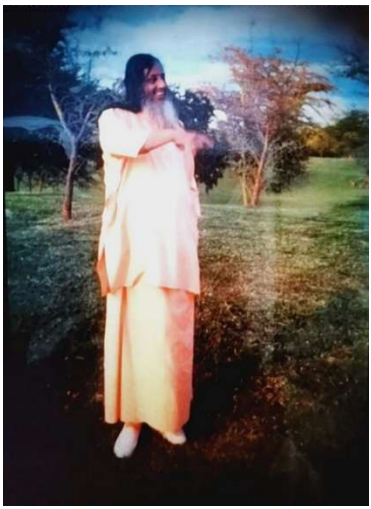
exactly how far the ashram is from the station, but that day it certainly felt like a long way. I turned off the road at a slightly weather-beaten sign reading 'Ramakrishna Centre.' I crossed a little bridge onto a dirt track with the rather odd name, Montreal Road. This wound upwards and looking up, I caught my first glimpse of an imposing white building with a balustraded balcony on its second floor, to my right.

Between me and building was a steep, narrow, and daunting flight of stairs. Today, this seventy-five-year-old body would need a funicular to get up there. But my then twenty something legs got me ably to the top, with just a few huffs and puffs. There, across a paved veranda, was a set of wooden French doors. They were open.

I tentatively approached and poked my head in to see several people in the room. The very first thing I heard were the crisp British-educated tones of one who became a dear friend, Mother Radha [Betty] Hoare. She was declaring in a clarion voice to someone, 'That's all very well and good, my dear, but what about the divine mother!' I fleetingly wondered who the divine mother might be. Whoever she was, it sounded like she needed to be included in any decision-making.

I told someone [not the redoubtable Radha, though] why I was there, and they said they'd let the Swami know. A few minutes later, through the door into what I came to know as the ashram library, came Papa. My first impression was how physically tiny he was. I'm only 1.64 metres tall and Papa's body was a teeny bit shorter, still. He was dressed in what I came to know as gerua or saffron-coloured robes. With long black hair, a long beard and twinkly, penetrating eyes, which he fixed on me. His presence radiated gravitas. The easiest understanding of that word is an appropriate weightiness or impact of presence.

I introduced myself and having greeted me with a handshake, Papa asked, 'Would you like to have a wash?' I was aghast. I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm all hot and bothered from trekking here from the station and I must look dirty or sweaty.' Of course, it was nothing like that, but rather the caring and traditional Hindu offering of inviting the weary traveller to freshen up.



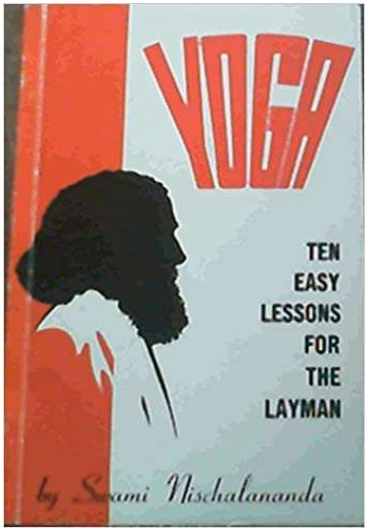
I rinsed my face and hands at an outside tap near the Shiva fountain, which features in so many pictures and memories of the ashram. On my return I was offered refreshments and Papa suggested I have a chat about Kriya Yoga, with Guru Shakti [the late homoeopath Fred Brown] who was a very knowledgeable devotee. I joined Guru Shakti [literally 'power teacher'] in Papa's ashram office and asked about Kriya Yoga.

He didn't enquire about my understanding of the term or why I was interested in it but launched instead into an explanation of the word 'kriya' which means in Sanskrit [the ancient classical language of the Hindu scriptures and sages] 'preparation'. I was rather nonplussed. If I told him that he had the wrong end of the stick, he might have been offended. But at the same time, I wasn't getting the information I'd come for.

After my somewhat unproductive meeting with Guru Shakti, I re-joined the small group of people with Papa, who then told me about the satsangs [religious services] held at the ashram and invited me to join them on the coming Saturday afternoon.
The comical aspect of this enquiry is that about twenty years later, Papa gave me a booklet containing the precise 'secret' details of the Kriya Yoga technique, but I no longer had any interest in it, whatsoever.

I was given a lift back into Durban by a kind devotee going that way and caught the train back to Amanzimtoti. This visit was the beginning of a special chapter of my life. Looking back, those years of the 1970s were without doubt the happiest of my life.

The episodes and anecdotes which follow may well not be in chronological sequence – and may never be. I make notes of these little encounters or



learnings as they pop up in my mind and will likely share them pretty much in that order.

My First Saturday Visit

I got myself back to the ashram for my first Saturday afternoon satsang. I arrived early enough to be dragooned into a hatha yoga class by the diminutive and bustling Norma Harmon. She had been named Narayani by Swami Venkatesananda of the Divine Life Society in Mauritius. She was a bubbly, kind person with piercing blue eyes, and she constantly radiated joy and energy. In addition to running a homeopathic clinic at the ashram with Shirley Whitfield (pictured earlier), she taught a basic hatha [physical] yoga class. At home she nursed a husband, named Colin if memory serves me, in the last stages of emphysema.

All I remember from this class (being the couch-potato that I am, I bunked all future sessions) was Narayani going around teaching people to do 'yoga breathing.' When she got to me, she said, 'Oh, you're doing it already.' It's basically diaphragmatic, intercostal breathing adopted by singers and speakers. No shoulders involved. The belly must rise and fall with each breath.

Swami Nischalananda [Gurudev] had published books on Hatha yoga. The first entitled titled, 'Yoga - Ten Easy Lessons For The Layman' and the younger, somewhat hippie clan of white youngsters arriving at the ashram at that time, took it eagerly to heart.

Ian Glennie, who was at that stage an aspirant homoeopath and potter, also conducted yoga classes. But they were more advanced.

The First Saturday Satsang

This satsang took place in the old shrine of the Avoca ashram. It was painted a pale blue and we all sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor. Men on the left facing the altar and women on the right. The Swami's asan [seat] was on our left at the front and a slim lectern to our right of the altar.



Papa entered just on 4pm and having prostrated to the photographic images of Master, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda on the altar, took his seat, facing us. In front of the altar were trays of delicious, diabetes-inducing Indian delicacies along with fruit and open containers of milk. These would all be offered to God and at the end of the service, they'd be distributed and consumed by devotees or used in the ashram as 'prasadam' [sacramental food].

Holy Hullabaloo

My memory of that first satsang is that it was tapasya [austerity or suffering] of note. My western joints and spine were not accustomed to sitting on the floor, and certainly not for a two-hour stretch.

I had someone next to me who clapped his hands like Thor generating thunder. The music and singing were loud, and the cymbals sounded strident to my uninitiated ears. Late-comers, and there were plenty, didn't sit unobtrusively at the back. They'd simply squeeze themselves into impossibly small gaps between existing worshippers. This made any stretching of legs completely impossible.

I've also marvelled over the years how God somehow gives the loudest voices to people who sing out of tune. This indicates a ribald sense of divine humour.

Dashed Decorum

I had brought my biased western concept of quiet decorum at religious services into the shrine with me. And I had all my sensibilities shattered in one loud bang that afternoon. Of course, in time, I eventually came to love – well, adjust to, might be more accurate – all the hustle and bustle of a Hindu religious function, but that first exposure rattled my sensibilities.

I recall someone saying to Papa a few years later, 'Brother Francis doesn't like crowds.' To which, with a twinkle in the eye, Papa responded, 'Oh, don't worry, we'll get him used to it.' I learned to accommodate it, but in my old age I have become a hermit once again. I'm booking timeshare in a Himalayan cave for any future births.

My First Yoga Camp

After the satsang we were all listening to Papa speak, over a cup of glorious, pukka Indian masala chai and I was absorbing a multitude of new impressions on this, my second visit to the ashram.



Alan Jibodh [now in heaven] and his wife Mary, [pictured with Papa] very kindly offered me a lift back into town. As I was leaving, Papa said, 'We won't be having a satsang next Saturday, because we'll be off at our [Easter] yoga camp at Tongaat beach.' Without thinking, I burst out, 'Ooh! I'd love to come.' Maybe it should be called camp-crashing. I momentarily felt like a real idiot because nobody had invited me. But Papa assured me that I'd be most welcome, and arrangements were made for me to join Rosemary Oosthuizen as she then was, a resident at the ashram, in her beige Volkswagen for the trip. That was

the beginning of a very special friendship as sister and brother on the Sanatana Dharma [Hindu] path. Rosemary went on to become Brahmacharini Sri and then took final vows as a Hindu nun, to become Pravrajika Atmaprana. And then head of the Sri Sarada Devi ashram in Asherville, Durban. We all called her Didi after that – meaning 'big sister'.



In the 1970s, Sri lived at the Avoca ashram, in a doorless stone hut with a fibre-glass roof in what we called the amphitheatre. It was at a good distance and isolated from the main buildings and must have had all sorts of wildlife and insects meandering by. Not to speak of a gazillion mosquitoes harassing her every night. She was a qualified radiographer and one of the kindest, brightest sisters anyone could want. She outstripped all of us, when it came to IT, digitally scanning, composing, printing, or managing publications.

The Avoca ashram complex was unfenced in those days. And with the construction of a freeway about a kilometre to the north of her little kutir, it wasn't the safest place for her to stay. Even if it satisfied her penchant for being a tapasvin [ascetic, or one who practises austerities]. Impressed though we were with her willingness to live in such rustic accommodation, we threatened to remove the fibreglass roof unless she took up accommodation in one of the rooms nearer the main building.

The ashramites at that point all made do with cold water showers or had to heat water for an early-morning bucket bath. I recall once saying to Sri, 'I wish you showers of blessings.' To which she wittily responded, 'With hot water, please!'

Her preferred outfit was hand-sewn lilac tunics which you'll see in some of the pictures of her, until she became brahmacharini Sri, when she started wearing saris to satsangs as you see in this picture.

Sri's gentle mother, whom I met, must have been a very worthy soul. She gave birth to two daughters. One went on to become an Episcopalian priest in Newfoundland, Canada, and Rosemary [Sri] became a sannyasini.

Arrival At The Yoga Camp

Sri and I arrived at the Tongaat beach yoga camp site on the north coast of KZN at the start of an Easter weekend. It was already a hive of activity with brahmacharis Sevak, Maharaj and Gangadhar scooting about co-ordinating, organising and constructing. The dominant feature onsite was the shrine. It was large, open sided and roofed with gigantic tarpaulins. The altar was a replica of that in the ashram shrine, with a shallow hole dug in the ground in front of it, for a little fire pit in which lobaan [frankincense] was burned. I immediately fell in love with that fragrance. It was the olfactory equivalent of holiness for me. In all the years since, my favourite agarbatti [incense] has been lobaan. Or I've bought little bottles of the resin from the House of Isis in Johannesburg to melt on charcoal. It's the same incense used in Roman Catholic churches. It always gives me joy to see Pope Francis vigorously swinging a censer to get the charcoal to burn brightly and melt the resin to give off what we as children called, 'holy smoke'.

Loo lament

My immediate major concern at the camp – being a bathroom privacy freak, was the fact that there was precisely one flush toilet, prominently perched at the top centre of the campsite. I felt instant constipation creeping up on me. Early mornings were a complicated affair involving a very long and public line of devotees waiting to use said loo.

The yoga camps were started by Swami Nischalananda, Papa's Guru. They were the long weekend equivalent of the three days that Master Sri Ramakrishna frequently urged people to set aside, in solitude, to progress on their spiritual journey.

It proved to be an astonishing crash course of talks given by Papa and others, bhajans and kirtans [singing of religious songs], hatha yoga [physical exercises] meditation sessions (fake in my case), recitals by children, and karma yoga [work as worship] during which we tidied the campsite, swept the shrine, and helped peel veggies in the makeshift, partially covered kitchen. And periods of mouna [which is pronounced like moaner] which made us moan and groan internally, as we weren't allowed to talk during those periods.

The best part of the camp, for me, was the early morning walk to the beach – perhaps five hundred metres away as the crow flies – where we wannabe yogis would go through the motions of meditating. We'd also do this on occasions, in the late afternoon.

I vividly remember the first morning on the beach. Papa gave people instructions on sitting and contemplating, then concentrating and for the few disciplined and practised sadhakas [spiritual aspirants] I guess some did get to actually meditate because there were several adepts in the group.

Everyone else was seated on the beach and Papa was standing. For some inexplicable reason I didn't sit but joined him as he walked slowly along the beach. I felt completely at ease with him, even though I'd only met briefly, twice before. I had a deep inside reassurance that he was God in some shape or form, in a human body. I asked him, 'How is it that one knows if someone is an incarnation?'

There was dense mist between us and the ocean. Papa's gentle answer was, 'It is by God's grace that you know that. Just as we can't see the ocean from here because of the mist, but we can hear it, in the same way, it reveals itself to you.'

Mother Radha once asked Papa in her delightfully direct way, 'Are you an incarnation, Swamiji?' Papa answered her by saying, 'Not exactly' and the matter rested there. Many years later, Papa said to me in conversation, 'This time I have come for the householders.'

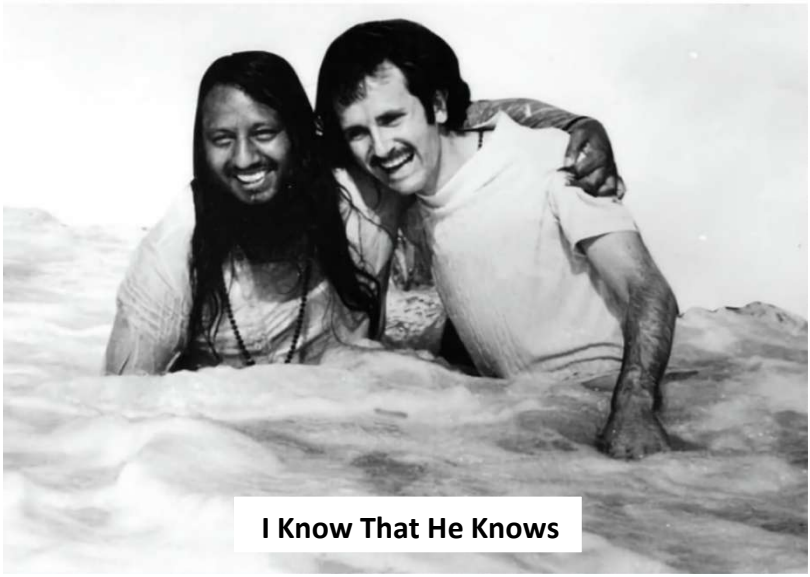
The lotus posture



On the topic of beaches, I recall Papa asking the group of us at one of the yoga camps – either Christmas or Easter, 'Who's never sat in the lotus posture?' Along with a few other people, I rather rashly raised my hand. Papa came over to me, took my lower legs and before I knew it, I was seated in a rather uncomfortable full lotus position. Being short with well-developed calf muscles, my legs didn't exactly lend themselves naturally to this impressive yoga posture. I looked and felt like a badly made pretzel. Much hilarity ensued at the expense of those of us thus locked into position. Laughter and fun were a feature of being around Papa. He had a spontaneous, delightful, and at times, wicked but benign sense of humour.



My 25th birthday at the ashram.



Sister Sri took this picture of Papa and me in the ocean. Papa later said the picture held great significance. I had the picture enlarged into an A3 landscape poster. On the bottom in large Letraset (press-on letters), I printed 'I Know That He Knows.' So many people over the years asked what that meant. In my deep, innermost being, I knew from the get-go that Papa knew God. Not only knew God but was a manifestation of God in human form.

The Surya Namaskar [Salute to the Sun]

Our early morning yoga camp sessions on the beach always started with a Surya Namaskar – saluting the sun god. Standing in shallow ocean water and hoping a big wave wouldn't come along, we'd chant the Surya mantra three times. Before each repetition Papa took water in his cupped hands and at the end of the repetition would offer the water back into the ocean.

Imagine my horror when I opened my eyes to offer the water to Lord Surya and realised that I hadn't properly sealed my fingers together and there was no water left? There's undoubtedly a philosophical metaphor in that

outcome. I then took care in the future to close my fingers and cup my hands in such a way that there was at least a little water with which to greet the god of my ruling planet [according to eastern astrology].

Yoga Camp Ecstatic Moods

At one of the Tongaat beach, KZN yoga camps, people were going up to Papa one at a time in the open sided shrine. He was stroking his hand upward from the base of their spines as they prostrated to him. Possibly encouraging the awakening of the Kundalini [spiritual power stored at the base of the subtle body spine, or Muladhara chakra]? Some people were tottering or rolling about the place laughing or weeping in bliss. When it was all over there was a huge wet patch from devotee tears, on Papa's lap. He looked at us, pointed to it and mischievously said, 'I didn't do this!' How we laughed.



Initiation

Brother Peter van den Berg stirred the pot with me, prodding me to ask Papa for initiation, which I simply could not and would not do. And so, initiation became a big of a bugbear for me.

That’s the process where the Guru takes eternal spiritual responsibility for an aspirant. It involves the Guru taking the karmic burden of the disciple and giving a mantra comprising a sacred sound syllable, which is designed to purify the body and mind and awaken specific spiritual nadis [currents] in the aspirant.



Somehow it became a significant topic of conversation among our batch of devotees. Some devotees swanned about ostentatiously wearing a mala [prayer beads typically of Rudraksha beads [pictured], Tulsi [basil], sandalwood or other beads, or if you were very privileged, sphatik [quartz crystal beads.] 108 beads strung together with a little tuft of cotton threads at the end, representing the Guru's beard. And a whole protocol given by Papa for handling them respectfully. Just by the by about real natural crystal, Papa said that it's the closest substance to the human mind.

One day we were scheduled to go to Umhlali, up the north coast from the ashram to the home of great devotees of Holy Mother Sarada Devi – the Shah family. The younger family members being Neil and Shirley, on whom Papa showered love.



When we arrived there, I picked up that Mummy [Sri Jayanti Devi] was bustling about, preparing fruit and flowers for Papa to initiate someone. For some utterly irrational reason, I assumed that was me. And imagine how miffed I was when Heather [who is my beloved ashram sister, Gulabma - pictured] and Jimmy Boyd [her then husband] were the two who got initiated, instead. I laugh at the thought of my

presumptuousness. Papa has a way of quietly stoking the flames on an issue until you become obsessed about it and yet he wouldn't fulfil it there and then. Only when you had completely let go of it. This was an early lesson in vairagya [dispassion].

I felt it was a bit like you weren't really a sadhaka [spiritual aspirant] or true follower if you hadn't been initiated. And of course, you wouldn't dare ask who had or had not been given that grace. So, you never knew whether the malas worn by some were purely decorative or given by the Guru.

One night as a few of us boys were sitting with Papa, he said out of the blue, 'What initiation can I give you? You are the very sparks of Sri Ramakrishna.' That wasn't what I wanted to hear. I finally reached the stage where I dropped the thought of initiation and a mala.

Cometh the hour

At my second yoga camp, there was a palpable spiritual vibration in the open-sided shrine. My scattered mind was fortunately caught in that current. In a state of deep contemplation, with closed eyes, I saw in front of me the slightly built, luminous figure of a woman, facing me and seated cross-legged on a low platform. She was dressed in white, her sari-veiled face obscured.

From my same seated position, I leaned forward, with folded hands, to offer my pranam. My forehead touched her left knee. She stretched out her right arm and I felt the light touch of her hand on the nape of my neck, as she blessed me.

Literally one second later, Papa called me to come to him at the front of the shrine. My legs felt wobbly and as I reached Papa, I plopped down in front of him, again in a cross-legged position. Papa pointed to the Roman Catholic rosary I was wearing. I guess it was my own form of anti-mala protest campaign at the time. He asked, 'Can I have that?' 'Of course, Papa', I responded, taking it off and handing it to him. He then put it down and quick as a flash, took the Rudraksha bead mala off his own neck and put it around mine, saying, 'There, do some japa with that.' I recall hearing ashram veteran uncle D P Soni exclaiming with delight. I couldn't rise to prostrate; I

just leaned forward and rested my forehead on Papa’s left knee. His right hand touched the nape of my neck in blessing.

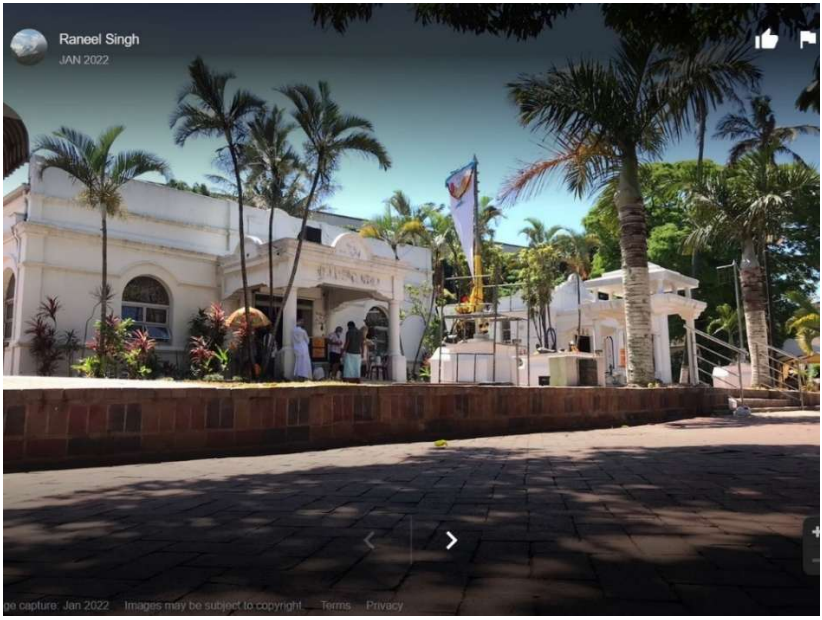
I hadn't thought until working with our little team on this tribute to Papa, who that obviously holy woman was. In telling this story to a sadhu, he told me that it couldn't have been the Holy Mother Sarada Devi, or my life 'would have been transformed' in an instant. He in fact suggested it might have been a hallucination. But given that the exact same scenario was replicated in posture, knee and hand on nape of neck just moments later, it definitely wasn't a hallucination.

I can now only wonder whether that blessing was Papa putting me into the hands of our ashram Mummy, knowing that our lives would, years later, become very close and intertwined. I've mentioned elsewhere that it was Mummy, at Papa's request who initiated my gurubhai, Swami Premananda into diksha mantra at the start of his spiritual journey.

You’ll see an echo of this experience a few pages ahead, during a blessed discussion between Papa and me at the uMngeni temple.

First uMngeni Road Temple Bhagavad Gita Class

Papa conducted classes on the Srimad Bhagavad Gita [a prominent Hindu scripture which Papa referred to as the 'milk [essence] of the Upanishads' [Hindu Vedantic scriptures]. They took place in the uMngeni Road Temple Hall – adjacent to the main Temple itself. You can see the hall on the far right in this picture, taken in January 2022 by Brother Raneel Singh.



In the late 1950s and early sixties, the uMngeni road temple complex was considerably smaller. Swami Nischalananda had lived in a little kutir on the extreme right-hand side of the complex on his return from India in 1953. The rooms there had been purpose built to accommodate visiting holy people from around the world. Today they seem to be storerooms. He made the temple kutir his base until he was able to ready adequate accommodation in the building at number 8 Montreal Road, Avoca, ashram, which became the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa headquarters.

The uMngeni Road temple holds very special memories for so many sadhakas [spiritual aspirants] from the early days. Our routine started with us going into the little Indian-owned fruiterer on the corner near the temple. There we would carefully pick out the best single piece of fruit of whatever

kind we felt we wanted to offer to Papa, pay for it and take it into the temple hall.

Papa had lovingly drilled into us that one should not arrive at a holy place or greet a holy person without some small offering. Lord Krishna himself says in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 9 and verse 26: 'If one offers to Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or even water, I delightfully partake of that item offered with love by My devotee in pure consciousness.'

We would arrive at the temple at about 6pm on Tuesdays. The Sri Vishnu Hall would be open and a few of us boys would set about unrolling the carpets. They were very long, stretching the entire length of the hall and when rolled up, were large and dusty – a bit like hay bales in fields at harvest time. If you positioned a roll correctly you could give it a jolly good shove and it would unroll parallel to the hall wall. If you messed it up, you wouldn't get three neat strips of carpet. The ladies were seated on the right and the men on the left. The same protocol was upheld in the ashram shrine.

Papa would arrive in due course, and we all rose as he entered. We did the same thing at the ashram shrine or when Papa entered a room. I see that today people seem to remain seated when a monk walks into a room or shrine. I find this disrespectful. Is it my age showing, I wonder?

The Gita classes were always interesting. The battle of Kurukshetra is a great metaphor for the battle in our minds between the forces of good and bad. And having to fight our very own selves at times, if not all the time.

At the end of the Gita classes, we would all go and prostrate to Papa and offer our carefully selected item of fruit. Then we'd roll up the carpets again and get ready to leave. On Tuesday nights after the class, we'd typically leave the temple and go to the home of some or other devotee who had been given the privilege of preparing food for Papa and a small group.

Mango Moksha

One year, my birthday, the 19th of December 1947, fell on a Tuesday. That day I carefully selected a magnificent, large, and delicious-looking sabre (fibreless) mango to offer Papa at the end of the Gita class.

Came the end of the class, Papa knew it was my birthday, even though I hadn't said anything to anyone. I prostrated and offered the mango with both hands. Papa put his hands on top of my hands on either side of the mango and said, 'What a gift, on what a day! Today I am giving this to you. Do you understand what I'm saying?' Papa always added that rider if he wanted me to take special note of something.

I immediately recalled Papa telling us that a mango, 'aam' or 'amrit' [nectar] was a symbol for moksha [liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth]. And here was this deeply holy sadhu saying, 'Today, I am giving this to you.' I can still feel the wave of love emanating from Papa on that significant Tuesday.



Preserving Holy Mother Sarada Devi

On another Tuesday, someone gave Papa a beautifully realistic, hollow papier mâché murthi of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Whoever had made it had done so with great dedication. It was exquisitely detailed and painted. But clearly fragile and vulnerable to damage.

Papa made a comment about the fragility and that Mother might easily get scuffed or discoloured by handling. Having some display art training in my background, I offered to take Mother

home and spray her with successive layers of what was known as artists' fixative. It's a transparent lacquer in a spray can. It doesn't change the colour of whatever you spray it on. But it's an excellent medium for protecting pastels and other works which are at risk of smudging or fingerprint damage. Successive layers, allowed to dry in between, will also give added rigidity and strength to the piece concerned.

Came the next Tuesday and my offering to Papa was the newly protected murthi of Holy Mother Sarada. Papa took Mother from me and rotated her in his hands in evident delight. He looked at me, and in a very emotional voice said, 'You have no idea how much you will one day come to love her…' His voice trailed off and he said softly, 'But let me leave it at that.'

I'd lived in Durban for several years in the 1970s and then come back to Johannesburg. I was back in Durban for a weekend. During that visit, in a high spiritual state, Papa said, 'Always think ashram first.' A day later, I mentioned what Papa had said and asked him if I should think of moving back to Durban. He did what he often did when on the normal plane and was asked about something he'd said in an elevated state. He became indrawn and silent for a few moments. He then said, 'Mother will bring you back to Durban when the time is right.' And the Mother did. From 2013-2015 during which time, I had the privilege of assisting in the care of ashram Mummy before she left the body.

The Involuntary Tilak [Dot on forehead]
It was at the same uMngeni Road temple, during the Tuesday evening Bhagavad Gita class run by Papa, that an interesting incident took place. We were all seated on the unrolled carpets in the Sri Vishnu temple hall, listening attentively to Papa's discourse.

A heavily intoxicated caretaker for the complex arrived and stood, legs apart with hands on hips at the entrance to the hall. He cut right into Papa's sentence and said in a loud, aggressive voice, 'You have to finish now, I'm locking up to go home.' We were stunned at his rudeness. Papa said very sweetly, 'We'll be finished at the usual time, maharaj. There's not long to go.' The man persisted and got even louder and even more aggressive. Papa

said to him, ‘Come here man, and prostrate.’ The man refused and stomped away muttering.

At the end of the Gita class, Papa sought out the drunk man, and lovingly told him that Brother Shyam [Whitfield] and I would drive him home so he wouldn’t even have to take his usual public transport. He crawled into the back seat of Shyam’s little Anglia car and gave us slurred directions to his home.

When we got there, he didn’t thank Shyam for the ride, but struggled in his tipsy state, to get out of the two-door car, tripping as he climbed out. He fell forward with an almighty thud. When he got back on his feet, he had a big red, slightly bloodied tilak where his head had hit the gravel. He was perfectly fine except for a bruised ego and sense of indignity. As we drove away, I thought, ‘Well, you wouldn’t prostrate in the temple, so you did it here, instead.’





Religions Are Like Rivers

In my time at the ashram, Papa was the creative force behind an annual mini ‘Parliament of Religions’, called Quest. The Centre would invite a speaker from each of the major religions to share their perspectives on a specific set of social or spiritual issues. Those events for instance, included a Franciscan monk, Father Bonaventure Hinwood [pictured, who was chairperson of one

function] a Sufi Imam, a Rabbi, a Zoroastrian, and a Hindu Pandit among others. What was illuminating, was the glorious commonality, rather than differences between those religions, on so many issues.

The Student Atheist

Papa regularly asked young people who arrived at the ashram, what religion they espoused. Particularly with university students who were quite frequent visitors. He'd say, 'What religion do you follow?' If they said Christian, he'd reply, 'Good, then I want you to become an even better Christian.' If the student or young person answered that they were Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu etc. Papa would say the same thing, inserting their religion.

Word got around at the University of Durban Westville as it was then known, and some students decided to try and flummox Papa. They arrived at the ashram and waited until Papa asked one of their peers which religious path he followed. The young man replied, 'I'm an atheist, Swamiji.' To which, without missing a beat, Papa said, 'Good, then I want you to become an even better human being.' The students shared glances among themselves. They'd been lovingly checkmated at their own game.

From Atheism to Satanism

The son of a long-time devotee at the ashram had become a particularly rebellious teenager. His mother brought him to the ashram in a state of considerable distress one day, so that Papa could have a chat with him and hopefully dissuade him from his new fad. He'd been to the ashram many times before, with his parents. Now, for sheer shock value if nothing else, he'd become a Satanist.

Over cups of chai, Papa asked him how he was getting along and how his sadhana was going. This was a question Papa frequently posed to devotees, 'How's sadhana?' In our sloth we often dreaded being around when that question was asked.

Papa said to S, How's sadhana going, son?' To which the young man, obviously hoping for a shocked reaction, said smugly, 'I'm a Satanist now,

Swamiji.' To which Papa said immediately and enthusiastically, 'Oh, wonderful! That's just the opposite side of the same coin.' Deflated, the young man remained silent and his dalliance with controversy came to an end shortly after that.

Papa The Comforter

A woman brought her African domestic worker to the old ashram. When I joined the small group of people in the sitting room of the ashram, I realised that the middle-aged black woman had recently been diagnosed with a terminal illness and she was understandably upset and fearful. Papa looked at her very intently and with both hands indicating his body, he said, 'Ma, when you become afraid, I want you to think of this.' I knew what an amazing benediction that would be.

In another incident, I arrived at the ashram and Papa said to me, 'How's mummy – in this case referring to my biological mother, who'd had the blessing of meeting Papa. I phoned my folks, who lived in the Western Cape every few days, so answered, 'Fine, as far as I know Papa.' Papa then said, 'I dreamt of mummy last night and she said to me, 'Swamiji, have you forgotten us?'

I got back home to my little flat near the Greyville racecourse in Durban at the time and phoned my mother. Before I could say anything on the topic, she said that she'd been having a tough time with my alcoholic dad and that she'd prayed to Papa and said, 'Have you forgotten us Swamiji?' I told her Papa had heard those words and she was deeply touched.

On the topic of my biological parents, my father suffered from what we today would understand as post-traumatic stress disorder. He'd gone 'up north' (in Africa) as they used to say, at the age of 17, in the second world war, to serve in a military vehicle servicing and maintenance role. As anyone who has gone through any form of warfare would know, incidents, casualties and the constant hypervigilance take their toll. He returned to South Africa from Egypt, an alcoholic. It was clearly his way of coping with things.

My mom had a very hard time with him frequenting the Regents Park pub in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg, every night before coming home very drunk or 'sozzled', as we used to say. Fridays were wages payment day, and they were always the worst. He was physically, emotionally and psychologically abusive. I hated him for the pain he inflicted on my mom and us and used to pray to God that he would die. Well, he didn't.

Instead, when I was in my twenties, he and my mom got to meet Papa. Papa treated them like royalty and took them to the beautiful Japanese gardens in Durban as an outing, for a few hours. During that time, Papa held on to my dad's hand throughout the walk.

Papa said of me to my mother on that day, 'In this birth, he will have one foot in the ocean, and the other on land.'

[This is the actual picture taken on that day]. They made an odd couple. The Indian monk with long hair and beard, dressed in gerua and walking around holding the hand of this elderly white man. A year later, to the day, my father stopped drinking and never touched it again. He used to get up at four in the morning to read his bible and pray. And after his passing, his Cape Town neighbours at his memorial service, told me that they'd been so uplifted by his cheerfulness and chats as he walked past their homes during his morning exercise routine. One woman, who suffered from chronic depression, said



that he was like an angel sent to soothe her with a few encouraging words every morning.



Many years later, Peggy Verbaan [pictured] who was deeply devoted to Papa, told me that as I was giving a talk somewhere, Papa said, 'I'm so proud of him. He overcame a very difficult childhood to be where he is today.' Yet I had never discussed any facet of my childhood with Papa. As the idiom goes, 'God moves in mysterious ways, his many wonders to perform.'

In case you were disturbed by my childhood hatred for my father, we reconciled in later life.
I understood alcoholism to be the disease it is, and accepted that it was a wartime injury, as it were.

Meg And Papa

Many years before, my dearest platonic friend, Margaret, whom I called Meg, got to meet Papa. I was so pleased because finally, when I spoke of Papa, she'd know exactly who I was referring to. I was somewhat taken aback as we drove away from the ashram to hear that she wasn't particularly taken with Papa. I chose to remain silent – a rare thing for me to do – rather than set out to challenge or change her perception.

A few months on, Meg had a malignant melanoma removed from just inside the hairline above her forehead. In those days, oncology follow-ups and tumour marker tests were not at the level they are now. In the space of just weeks, her overall health deteriorated, she was chronically exhausted – even a few steps left her winded – and the prognosis was that the cancer had spread to her liver, her lungs and chemotherapy was unlikely to help much. But they did it anyhow.

I was the manager of a new branch for the then top-tier John Orrs retail department store group and under enormous pressure on all fronts. I spoke to Papa about her condition. I recalled Papa once saying that if you get cancer, there's little anyone can do. He said that if you can do really intense sadhana, it can be overcome. But being as worn down and out as people are after chemo treatments, it's not likely that they'd be able to do the spiritual practise required to achieve that.

In the hospital, a Christian pastor came into the oncology ward and was clearly intent on harvesting Meg as a freshly saved soul which he could notch onto his belt. Utterly lacking in emotional intelligence, he said to her, 'So you'll be seeing our Lord before I do.' I recall thinking at the time, 'What an idiot. You could walk out of here and within the hour, get hit by a bus.'

Meg looked calmly at him to forestall his conversion pitch, and quietly said, 'I have my own spiritual anchor, and I feel safe and calm.' She told me later that she was referring to Papa. After just one meeting years before.

The night she passed on; Meg was in significant physical pain. The doctor came to her sister's house to give her an analgesic injection. I was so exhausted I wanted to crawl into a corner and go to sleep for days. She said softly, 'Please hold my hand.' I did. As I held her hand, I imagined in my mind, that Papa was holding my other hand. In that exact instant she said, 'It feels just like Swamiji is holding my hand.' She passed away a few hours later.

The day after her funeral I flew from Johannesburg to Durban and drove to the ashram. As I got out of the hire car, I saw Papa sitting on a garden chair under a tree, with a few people around him. As I walked towards him to prostrate, he said very loudly, 'Oh, my friend has died!' Somehow that broke into my emotional state and immediately removed my sense of sadness. As I prostrated to Papa, he said to me, 'She had a beautiful death.' Can you imagine? He'd been there with her. She felt him and depended on him. And he was there as she left the body. This was just one of umpteen instances in which I saw the unstinting motherlove that Papa poured into people.

These real-life experiences remind me of Holy Mother Sarada Devi's promise that 'Whoever has taken refuge at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna, will have his vision even if at the very moment of their departure from this plane of existence.' That is profoundly comforting and appears repeatedly in the writings about Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, as recorded by numerous direct disciples.

A life Lived For Others

Part 2

Dear reader, we'd hoped that we would have many people willing to share their memories of Papa and ashram life – particularly following publishing of the first edition of this tribute. Which would easily have produced several volumes. However, it's turned out that for the moment, it will remain just this single, expanded volume. There has been 'political' interference in the project and for reasons known only to themselves, many people have said that their reminiscences and experiences with Papa are 'personal', and they've chosen not to share them. A great pity, because a treasure trove of information is sitting in minds, recordings and photographs that must exist in abundance. And will die with them. So it's a lost opportunity to glorify their guru and Sri Ramakrishna. But those are their choices. As the French say, *c'est la vie* – that's life.

Disclaimer: Much of this second half comprises my personal experiences with Papa. That's not by choice, but because I want to share the *insights and learnings* which each of those encounters delivered and entrenched. They're relevant to any sadhaka or traveller on the spiritual path.

We've now standardised reference throughout the memoir to the original ashram location, as 'Avoca'. That area was known as Avoca (it even had its own railway station) and only later when a suburb for white people was developed in land across from the Old North Coast Road, did the whole area become referred to as 'Avoca'. Even today the old Corobrick site is designated as being in Avoca.



A joyful-looking Papa on the bonnet of someone's car. The CE numberplate registration in South Africa back in the day, used to be East London. So clearly one of the trips to East London. In the background, Mother Bhabhi Singh.

'Imagination is the greatest gift. Note that. The greatest. What starts out as imagination becomes reality on the spiritual path.'
Papa – Swami Shivapadananda

Papa: *"Gurudev gave Vishnupriya and me our garb at the same time. He told us, 'When I am no more, you must wear this garb. Offer it to the Master and then wear it. Know that with this garb I am giving you, you are a renunciate.' He chanted the appropriate mantras and then gave the garb to us."*

"After Gurudev's passing away, I told Vishnupriya, 'Now you have to put on the garb because that's what Gurudev wanted.' But Vishnupriya disagreed and said, 'We must work first, save money, then we can renounce. Otherwise, we will have to depend on people.' I thought: 'But what kind of renunciation is it, if my strength is in the bank?'

As it turned out, he saved some money; went to India and returned very unwell (with stomach cancer). It was a great pity that he passed away soon thereafter."

'I knew my mantra when I was born.' - Papa

Asherville Ashram – later named the Sri Sarada Devi Ashram



Papa had a vision for another ashram in the suburb of Asherville in Durban. After several years of dedicated fund raising by Papa and senior ashram members, plus Swami Premananda's numerous satsang tours around South Africa, and much planning, the concept reached viability stage.

The first design concept was by internationally celebrated architect, Michael Sutton (pictured). Michael was an occasional visitor to the Avoca ashram and had almost 100% hearing loss. As did his elder sister Anne (herself a globally renowned landscape architect) pictured here with him. However, he demonstrated to Papa and us how if he did a hatha yoga 'mini headstand', he could hear whilst upside down. Audiology was not where it is today, and I suspect that today, a Cochlear implant would be a routine procedure to solve that problem. Loss of hearing was, however, no impediment to Michael's creative and design genius.

The Asherville ashram site is on an extreme slope downwards from Abelia Road. Any design therefore needed to take this topographical feature into account. Michael presented a concept, the thatched roof of which was intended to be reminiscent of the droopy roof over Master's Kamarpukur birthplace, the living area of which is shown here.

I'm not sure what the technical reasons may have been for not going with the design, but thinking about it, a huge, thatched roof at street level in South Africa, would not, I suspect, have been approved by fire or municipal authorities. Just one carelessly discarded cigarette butt and catastrophe could have been the result.

As we've all learnt later in life, thatch requires regular maintenance and refurbishing. It's a luxury rather than a practical roofing material.



The subsequent decision was to have a street-level flat concrete slab roof over the entire shrine area, for parking purposes, because on-street parking was functionally non-existent. The area immediately above the altar portion of the shrine had a Shivalingam-style domed turret on it, (rear left in picture) so that nobody would be setting foot, albeit several metres above, where the sanctum sanctorum or altar is positioned.



The ashram was officially opened in 1984. In its early years, a massive, plexiglass, internally lighted, 3D AUM sign was fitted to the centre on the roof of the domed turret. Powered by a little electric motor, the sign rotated very slowly. It was an eye-catching feature. But Durban having such a humid and salty coastal environment, the sign eventually succumbed to the elements, was removed, and not replaced.

Access to the ashram building and shrine was either down some steep steps close to the right-hand side street entrance, or via a long, gently sloping pedestrian and wheelchair friendly ramp from the far side of the on-roof parking area. Papa regularly visited the construction site to inspire and motivate the builders.

Inscribing the yantra

One day, close to installation date of the murti of Sri Ramakrishna in the Sri Sarada Devi Ashram, Papa and Swami Nishreyasananda were seated in the area adjacent to the very neatly kept bookshop. They were discussing preparations for installing the beautifully sculpted marble murti of Sri Ramakrishna. Papa motioned me to come to him. He handed me a small – about 25mm x 25mm) square of copper sheeting. On a piece of paper, he drew the Sanskrit 'eim' (pronounced eye-m) – ऐं – the bija mantra symbol for Sri Ramakrishna. He handed it to me and said, 'Son, draw this on the copper. But work only from left to right, not the other way around.' I took the items and went into the bookshop to do the inscribing.



With Master's grace, many years previously, one of my hobbies was crafting embossed panels with copper sheeting. I took a ballpoint pen which was on the table and set to work. I spent time getting the yantra pressed deeply into the copper without breaking through on the other side. I heard Swami Nishreyasananda asking, 'Why is he taking so long?' And Papa replying with, 'It's OK, just leave him.' Papa knew of my perfectionism affliction and that I wanted to do the best job possible. I came out of the bookshop and handed the newly embossed copper square to Papa. That was subsequently positioned in the centre on the base of the altar of the shrine. Master's murti was installed immediately on top of it.

Swami Nishreyasananda (then Head of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Zimbabwe), Swami Balaramananda (then President of the Ramakrishna Mission, Mauritius) and Papa, together conducted the formal installation ceremony and Praan Pratishtha (infusing with life) of the life-sized and 3D marble image of Sri Ramakrishna.



The sanctum sanctorum in the Sri Sarada Devi ashram – with Master's murti, positioned directly below the Shivalingam-shaped dome on the roof.

'Concentration is the goal for God-realisation. Everything else is just psychology.'
Papa to me, when discussing Advaita Vedanta.

When at the Avoca ashram, I usually had the privilege of sleeping in the little room next to Swami Premananda's room and got to share his bathroom. When the Avoca ashram was pressed for accommodation at function times, Papa would send me to sleep over in the Sri Sarada Devi ashram, in his own downstairs room, with its ensuite bathroom. I was in that room, just after 3am on the 1st of October 1994, when Pravrajika Ishtaprana let me know that Papa had entered mahasamadhi.



The view from inside of the very spacious Asherville shrine. Picture taken by Br Shikhar Singh.



View of the street frontage to the Sri Sarada Devi ashram as it is today.

The brotherly bond

One day, Premanandaji Maharaj and I were seated on either side of Papa in the sitting room of the Avoca ashram. Papa stretched his arms out and placing a hand simultaneously on each of our heads, said, 'I want the two of you to be very close.' And we were.



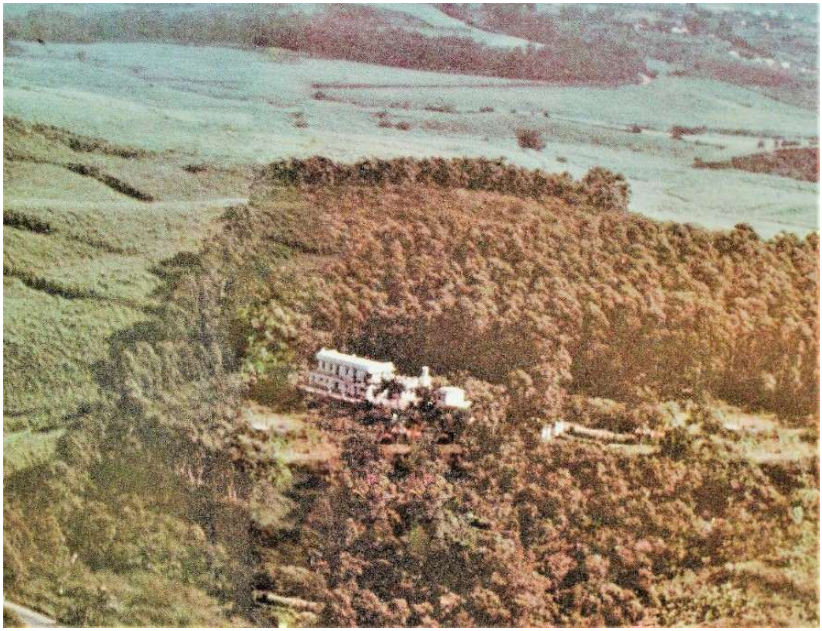
Premanandaji Maharaj outside the Sri Ramakrishna Dham in Lenasia, Johannesburg.

Papa, Mummy and I were driving north of Durban on the freeway. As we neared La Mercy, Papa pointed to the hillside on our left and said, 'Francis and Premananda will one day be old greybeards up there.'

Looking for new ashram property

The Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa Avoca ashram is located in what has over many years, developed into a light industrial area. And in 2024, regretfully an increasingly unsafe one, due to the encroachment of informal housing settlements and a significant spike in violent crime.

It was originally a huge sprawling property, including a significant sized forest as you can see in the very old picture.



The original Chateau de Montreal, which became the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa headquarters. In those days, located in a beautifully forested area covering many hectares.

The property shrunk in size when the provincial authorities planned a massive highway almost through the centre of it, to serve the north coast of KwaZulu Natal as it became. Although the property was now significantly smaller, the usable area still proved suitable for the ultimate expansion of the ashram.

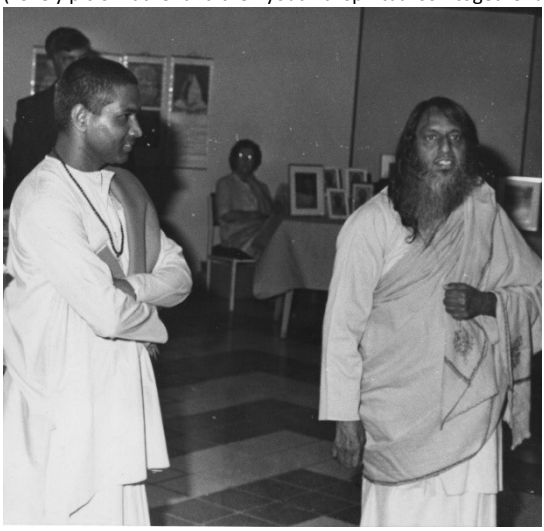
The freeway was constructed and carried much heavy speeding traffic. Despite this, the old ashram building didn't experience a surge in traffic-related or other noise. Possibly because it's located significantly lower down than the freeway and partially protected by a bank of eucalyptus trees.

Makhathini

Known simply as Makhathini, he was a wiry, incredibly hard-working amaZulu man, who was a jack of all trades and kept parts of the ashram complex tidy. He was permanently intoxicated. Either with alcohol or marijuana, or both. He visited friends on the forest side of the property, and once the freeway was constructed, he unfortunately had to cross about eight lanes of speeding traffic to do so.

One night, Papa and Swami Premananda (pictured here with Papa) heard a loud bang – even at that distance – and Papa said softly, 'That's Makathini.' The dear old man had been hit by a vehicle whilst making his no doubt unsteady way back to the ashram.

(Lovely pic of Father and then youthful spiritual son together at a function.)



Shortly after losing Makathini to that accident, other vehicles began having crashes at the exact same spot. For no evident reason because it was a straight piece of road. Swami Premananda told me that when this had happened a few times, Papa called him, and they took a coconut and other prayer items and conducted a 'cleansing ceremony' at the spot. It remained accident free after that.

Looking for a new home

A few years before the actual site-work and development of the new Avoca ashram complex began, Papa loaded us all up and said, 'We're going to look for a site for the new ashram build.' I don't know what had triggered this, but perhaps some members thought that due to the progressive light industrialisation surrounding the existing ashram, that it

was time to relocate? Papa being Papa, he was always open to considering suggestions and ideas, even if he knew that ultimately, they would not come to fruition. And inclusion and inclusivity were very much part of the multi-faceted holy being that was Papa.

Long story short, we trekked across several areas surrounding Durban and visited various sites that were up for sale, mainly in less industrialised areas. None of them, and by consensus, seemed to fit the bill. Perhaps mercifully so, because the existing ashram complex, although in need of significant upgrading and refurbishing, was after all, the Gurustan. The place in which our Gurudev, Swami Nischalananda, had planted the flag of the Ramakrishna movement in South Africa. So it was decided to stay put and develop the existing site. But the desire by some devotees to at least consider alternatives, had been satisfied.

This is what they call progress

I recall Mother Radha and a few of us being upstairs in Papa's room as he gazed out of the window when trees were being felled and earthworks machinery was demolishing old structures and levelling the site. Papa was in an indrawn mood and said softly, 'This is what they call progress.'

Strangely enough, a few weeks before all of this began, the ashram peacocks, of which there were about seven, began mysteriously dying off. Almost as if they knew that their habitat of many years was about to disappear.

It was at that point that Papa asked me to take the two remaining ashram dogs to live with me in Johannesburg.

Cracking the neck

One day I arrived back from being out on some ashram tasks, to find Papa sitting in his upstairs room in a deeply contemplative state. As I entered, he said, 'Do you know I've been sitting here waiting for you to crack my neck?' Doing a chiropractic manipulation of the cervical spine was something that happened every now and again at the ashram and whoever was in the room at the time would typically be treated to it by Papa. He'd loop a towel around the neck of the person concerned, to support the neck, and

then holding the towel ends with one hand, he'd use the other to give the head a deft push. Typically, we'd be treated to a satisfying series of cracking sounds and a sense of muscle tension relief. Papa said many years later that there was a spiritual reason for doing that. I didn't ask why.

But back to Papa wanting me to crack his neck. I'd become quite good at cracking necks, using Papa's technique but without a towel. I gently took Papa's head in my hands and attempted the crack the neck in both directions. But neither manipulation got the desired result.

Think of this

In my early days at the ashram a white woman came to visit along with her black domestic helper. They were both seated in the little lounge at Avoca. A few of us were sitting on the floor. It tuned out that the middle-aged African woman had incurable cancer. Although she looked externally calm, she might understandable have felt afraid. A few minutes before they were due to leave, Papa look at the woman and said, 'Ma, you see this?' – indicating his own body. She nodded in response. Papa said, 'If you become anxious or fearful, just think of this.' What a wonderful blessing and benediction. I knew from previous instances that when people had met Papa, their passing was made so much more peaceful, knowing that they had an anchor.

The doctors

There was a group of medical doctors who were very close to Papa. Two of whom played the role of personal physicians to Papa's almost chronically unwell body. They frequently came to the ashram and spent time with Papa either before or after their respective hospital rounds or consulting practices. There were always at least one or two of them recording what Papa had to say. I live in hope that the contents of the (in those days cassette tapes) will be shared with the Ramakrishna Centre before the doctor devotees pass on and those pearls of wisdom are lost forever.



Papa with Mummy (centre) and Bhabhi Ma Singh – dining al fresco at the side of the road on one of their fund-raising trips. From Papa's closed eyes it looks as though Papa was about to recite the prayer for blessing the food:
'AUM Brahmārpañam Brahma Havir BrahmāgnauBrahmañāhutaṃ, Brahmaiva Tena Gantavyam BrahmakarmāSamādhinah.'
Meaning: The whole creation being the gross projection of Brahman, the Cosmic Consciousness itself; the food too is Brahman, the process of offering it is Brahman; it is being offered in the fire of Brahman.

'Ramakrishna Blessings' farm

Dr Naren Rana had set his eye on a piece of farmland in the Richmond, KZN Midlands area, with a view to it becoming a retreat for Papa. It played a special role in the Centre's history, because Papa did indeed use it as a retreat for several years, whilst allowing the monastic disciples to find their feet and develop their ashram administration and other skills at Avoca, Asherville, Chatsworth and Pietermaritzburg respectively.

Those were the bad old days of Apartheid in South Africa, and Indian people were not allowed to own property in certain areas. Papa asked me to become the legally registered owner of the Ramakrishna Blessings farm for purposes of holding the title deed and all the other bureaucratic requirements.

There was an extremely racist old white farmer who owned the adjacent farm. To get to Ramakrishna Blessings one had to drive across a portion of his farm on a servitude road, which in law, is a public roadway to allow one to reach other land-locked properties. This fact notwithstanding, the bad-tempered old man caused havoc from time-to-time by trying to stop people visiting Papa. One day he became so enraged that he climbed onto the bonnet (hood) of a car belonging to one of the doctors to stop him driving past to see Papa.

Snakes and flames

A worker on the Ramakrishna Blessings farm one day saw a snake go down a hole. Bearing in mind that this was truly rural land, it must have been home to many snakes and other creatures. But the worker, without telling anyone, decided to pour petrol down the hole and set it alight. There was quite a stiff breeze blowing and as you can imagine, in a short space of time much of the dry grass was on fire. The wind blew it toward the old racist's farm.

As is the norm in those farming communities, whenever there's a fire on someone's land, all the surrounding farmers and their workers down tools and rush to help extinguish the blaze. The fire was eventually contained and although he never produced evidence, the awful old neighbour claimed that several bales of his horse feed has been burnt in the process. To keep the peace, I simply paid his demanded compensation.



The homestead on the Ramakrishna Blessings farm was built by internationally renowned Potter and ceramic artist, Andrew Walford (pictured), and his team, along with able assistance from John Tunmer from the Avoca ashram. Andrew bought a charming vintage house in the actual town of Richmond to use as his base while building the dwelling on the farm.

The house on the Ramakrishna Blessings property was located at the bottom end of steeply sloping land, right alongside the Upper Lovu river, which meandered in a curve around part of the property. Papa said in later years that if given another chance, he'd never have a dwelling so close to a river. In winter, it was very chilly.

The period that Papa was resident on the farm was at the height of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) political riots and unrest in that part of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa. People were being murdered in droves. There was much clan-on-clan political and ethnic-based violence. Later, in information emerging from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by the late Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it emerged that in some instances, Apartheid special forces and government agents were using black greasepaint on their faces and limbs and wearing balaclavas to pass themselves off as black insurgents, to stoke the conflict between the rival political factions.

Even in the early days at the ashram, security police would come visiting to check on whether the ashram was being used as a base for political activists, or indeed, engaging in inflammatory rhetoric of any sort. Papa, with his delicious sense of humour would make a point of introducing us to the security police, who must have been puzzled by the significant number of young white people sitting on the floor at Papa's feet. But Papa's love and all-embracing hospitality won them over and several became regular visitors and admirers of Papa and the work being done by the Centre.



It was on the Ramakrishna Blessings farm - that Rosemary Oosthuizen, who became Brahmacharini Sri, was initiated into sannyasa and was given the name, Pravrajika Atmaprana. All the other monastic disciples were present for that ceremony. At that time, I was living and working in New York City but briefly flew back to South Africa to be here for her initiation as a Hindu nun in December 1982.

I recall Papa telling me that when Sri went alone to the river to immerse herself, as is the tradition as part of the Viraja homa [final vows ceremony],

she was gone so long that Papa began to worry that something untoward might have happened to her. But she was clearly very much caught up in the sanctity and bliss of the initiation and the moment. She proved to be a wonderful, hard-working asset to the Centre and the Sri Sarada Devi ashram in Asherville, which she headed.



Papa with (from left Brahmachari Maharaj, Brahmacharini Sri (in her pre-monastic days) and Mr S H Singh.

Predictive books and horoscopes

Hindu astrology differs significantly from western astrology. And for millennia, pandits and priests have crafted detailed forecasts for individuals based on the precise minute and location of their birth. Including for Sri Ramakrishna.

Downstairs in the Avoca ashram, opposite the then Jyoti bookshop, was Papa's original office and personal library for use by the swamis. I recall Papa telling us that there were books in there which could so accurately plot a horoscope for individuals based on their precise time of birth, that they would state where moles would be found on the person's body. There were many other books on Vedanta, philosophy, and Hinduism. Brother

Gyanadayal told me that when Swami Premananda came back from his studies in India in 1977, he brought with him a massive Tantric encyclopaedia. Brother Ted as we then called him, said it was physically the biggest book he'd ever seen. Papa opened it, flipped through a few pages and then instructed the boys to remove a rear panel on his personal upstairs desk, place the book in there and then replace the panel. Such was the danger of that book falling into the wrong hands.

Ideas for new ashram

Papa asked me to gather ideas from the ashramites and devotees, without any restrictions, on what facilities they would like to see in a new ashram complex. One night I sat with my then personal digital assistant (PDA) in hand – there weren't any mobile phones just then, and invited the adults and children present to share their 'wish list'. I took the approach that I had been taught for creative brainstorming. Where there's only one rule, which is, you may not negate or criticise anyone's idea, however little you thought of it. If you couldn't improve on the idea or add value in some way, you had to remain silent. I knew that it was important to draw out ideas from even the most introverted or shy people. And the ideas flowed, from swimming pool to tennis and squash courts, a gym and the widest array of ideas for making the proposed ashram a real community centre.

As I'd been taught to do, I gave verbal encouragement and approval after every idea and contribution. The ideas were flowing thick and fast and although I wasn't consciously aware of myself doing it, Papa suddenly said, 'You sound just like a schoolteacher!' It momentarily threw me but with His grace I just carried on, because I didn't know how else to keep encouraging the sharing of those ideas. Perhaps there was ego involved? And this was Papa smacking the cobra smartly on the head?

The result was however, a happy one, with masses of ideas to share with the architects. Obviously, many of them would not and did not see the light of day for logistical, space or cost reasons, but a broad cross-section of the devotees felt that they'd had a share in the conceptualisation of the new ashram – which is what Papa wanted.

Stauch Vorster Architects and the 3D temple model

I think I wrote somewhere earlier about trying to source that physical model or even the new ashram complex plans from the architects, but despite me contacting them several times, neither was found. Here's an aerial view of the current complex. A similar shot including the Swami Nischalananda hall, appears later.



Mummy and music

Mummy was a gifted musician – having been trained in the classical Carnatic style. She would sit at the front of the Avoca shrine and when Papa nominated some random person to sing, Mummy would know by their very first, sometimes out of tune and froggy note, exactly what key and pitch would best suit them. She was the most sensitive accompanist I've ever watched in action. Added to that, she had a beautiful singing voice, and it was a rare satsang in which Papa didn't ask Mummy to sing. She also routinely led all the invocation prayers at the start of the satsang.

Papa at one point decided to learn to play the harmonium. I recall Mummy sticking the music notes on each key, so Papa would be able to find his way around the keyboard. It never quite took off. Papa would quite often sing in his unique and slightly off-key way, with his very powerful voice. He particularly loved singing the Paramahamsa Yogananda songs such as, 'O God beautiful' and 'Sitting on the asana of meditation', and the like. I think

that was to give the western devotees a chance to sing along and understand what they were singing.

The Catalyst



My ashram brother Atmaprakash and I were discussing one day what an amazing blessing the book, 'Autobiography of a Yogi' by Paramahamsa Yogananda has been. The divine used it to stir a need or awakening in many young Caucasian devotees, who then sought more understanding and came to the Ramakrishna Centre. Earlier in this tribute you'll have been reminded that it was Mahendranath Gupta or 'M' – Master Mahashay, who recorded the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, who gave Yoganandaji his first experience of samadhi by touching him on the chest. So there's a very close 'family' connection.

Love or fear?

Along with poverty, chastity, obedience and other vows, the monk or nun undertakes never to cause of fear in another sentient being. Papa was one day talking to us about respect, tradition, and various other topics so we would learn to conduct ourselves with the correct decorum in the presence of all.

Papa expanded on the term 'reverence' and devotees were responding with their ideas on what it encompassed. Some suggested it was fear-based. But after much discussion Papa stressed to us that it's a combination of love and awe. Not fear. And in many cases superstition is the trigger for fear. No genuinely holy person is going to harm anyone or anything. If they rule by fear, they are not holy. As the Lord Jesus Christ said, 'By their fruits, you shall know them.'

Pope Francis has spent much time warning priests, bishops and cardinals in the Catholic Church against being control freaks, ruling by fear, having

sharp elbows (pushing others aside) and being cold-hearted 'careerists.' Such people are regretfully found in all religions. They're politicians.

Ashes in the library

I recall only once feeling apprehension when with Papa. He was seated in the library at the Avoca ashram. Mummy and I were in the room. Papa had asked me to press his feet, which, seated on the floor, I was doing. Papa was talking about some problem or other caused by the lawyers who were part of the Centre's executive committee. He seemed to be angry. But as Master said, the 'anger' of a holy man is like seeing a stick floating in the water. It appears to divide, but in fact, doesn't. Be that as it may, as the discussion progressed, Papa said in a very firm tone, 'Don't these people know that I can burn this body to ashes, sitting here?'

I know this might sound funny in retrospect, but I had a real 'Good grief, and here I am holding Papa's feet' moment. Fleetingly wondering what would happen to me if Papa's body began burning. Mercifully, nothing of the kind happened. But very significantly, after that, Papa said, 'Son, I think we must make it a rule that lawyers may no longer sit on the (ashram) board (of governors). Their minds are too calculating.'

One of those lawyers sat in a Board of governor's meeting and when someone pushed back on a statement he'd made, he said, in front of Papa and the other sannyasis, 'How do you know that Master is speaking through my mouth.' I was gobsmacked.

At that time, tensions caused by some of the legal minds were so bad that when alone, I asked Papa if I could arrange to meet with them privately and see if we could reduce the level of conflict. Papa as always shielded us from ugly things that might be happening, so I never knew the full extent of what was causing the trouble. But I got a sobering sense of the magnitude when in response to me saying, 'May I set up a time and meet with them?', Papa's answer, with deep concern in his voice was, 'Son, these people are ruthless. They'll kill you.'

It might sound fanciful, but at one time, I refused to play ball with one of the people at the ashram regarding the sale of a property. He'd made a

commitment to the centre that on Papa's passing, a certain portion of a property would be signed over to the centre. He now wanted to go ahead and sell, but without keeping to his commitment. I refused to sign any documents until there was a written undertaking honouring his original commitment. As things escalated, he had the audacity to send a message via his attorney to the effect that, 'Tell him I'll kill him.' As you'll have gathered, that didn't happen, but it showed the extent to which some people with glowing faces, sitting at Papa's feet, were often not quite what we saw on the outside.

Weighing the arm

Staying with the library, Papa was sitting there one day shortly before I was to leave Durban to relocate to Johannesburg for career reasons. As I was sitting on the floor next to Papa's chair, he took my right hand and carefully studied the palm. Then he took my arm by the elbow and gently bounced it up and down – weighing it. Papa then said softly, 'You will have everything.'

Val Whitfield told me later that when they were discussing my departure to Johannesburg, Papa had said, 'He will bud, and flower, and fruit.' I'm sharing these things to show the parallels in the methods and behaviour of the great ones in keeping an eye on their disciples. If it seems like ego in play, let me assure you, looking the Guru in the eye, that I've always thought of myself as a Papa's 'pecked mango'. Unsuitable for being offered to the gods but accepted only through his grace.

Gender And Children

I was with Papa several times when people with only daughters or only sons would ask Papa why they couldn't have a child of the opposite gender. Papa would give them confidential advice which always led to the next child being the gender they sought after. Such a blessing.

Sister Jerry, the feisty and energetic look-alike daughter of Mother Radha, was talking about her Italian born son with us. Papa said to her, 'You weren't supposed to have children in this birth, you know? It's only by His (meaning Sri Ramakrishna) grace that you have.

Reflux

In the closing years of Papa's physical journey, he had developed a significant narrowing of the oesophagus, making it difficult to swallow certain foods. I was present (at Papa's insistence) in the operating room when a gastroenterologist performed a gastroscopy on Papa to see what might be causing it. It turned out to be congested blood vessels towards the base of the oesophagus, which, with the instruments introduced through the gastroscope, the doctor injected to sclerose (congeal) the swollen blood vessels so they would shrink and normalise. The procedure did help.

Several years later I had a similar oesophageal problem and when I was with Papa and he heard of it he said with a twinkle in the eye, 'Well, the apple can't fall too far from the tree.'

The healing thumb

While living in Durban, I need to have four impacted wisdom teeth removed. I underwent surgery at a day clinic and following the surgery, had a massively swollen face. I tried tough it out alone at my flat in Durban, but Shirley Whitfield kindly invited me to recover at their home in Glenashley. The surgery had left my teeth so sensitive I couldn't touch them with metal implements and even had to use a plastic spoon to eat. The worst part of the surgery was that the wisdom teeth nerves were damaged during the process. I would only discover a few months later, (the surgeon said it was just nerve bruising that would rectify) that all sensation to the lower right-hand quarter of my face had not returned. When I shaved, I would feel the razor glide on one part of my face and then not even know it was on the now numb part of the jaw. The surgeon finally said that there was nothing to be done about it.

Months later, I was sitting with Papa and several other people and somehow the conversation turned to dental surgery, and I told papa about the facial numbness. I was sitting on the floor at Papa's feet. Very unobtrusively, Papa reached out his arm and with thumb and forefinger began to gently stroke my chin on the numb side of my face. In his

wonderful way, he asked, 'I'm not rough handling you, am I?' No Papa, I answered, thinking nothing of the touch.

About a week later, I felt a sharp pricking pain in the numb area of my face. How odd, I thought, giving no further attention to it. But during the course of the next week, tingling, little shocks and signs of electrical activity in the numb area could not be ignored. It was waking up again! Within the space of about a month, full sensation had returned to that part of my face with my beloved Guru's grace. That was so typical of Papa. If he made healing or other spiritual interventions, they were, whenever possible, so subtly done that anyone other than the recipient of the grace would not be aware that anything had taken place.

It reminds me of an incident with Swami Venkatesananda of the Divine Life Society in Mauritius. A man had been diagnosed with a heart complaint and was scheduled, after some more tests, to have surgery to correct a malfunctioning valve. At the end of a visit, as the man was leaving, the Swami unwrapped a sweet, popped it into the man's mouth and said, 'There, that may fix your heart problem.' Everyone, including the man with the sweet tucked in his cheek, chuckled merrily at what they thought was a little joke.

A few weeks later, when the man had tests likely to highlight the need for surgery, his cardiologist was puzzled to find that the valve seemed to be functioning normally, after all.

The speech-making yantra

When the delightful Swami Venkatesananda left his body, Papa asked me to go to the Westcliff, Johannesburg premises of the Divine Life Society (DLS) to send his love and convey condolences to the devotees on the loss of the physical presence of their guru.

I entered the room set aside for the swami and prostrated to his cast-off body, which held fond memories for me as no doubt for so many others.

Papa was instrumental in the final rights for Venkatesanandaji at the cremation service. One of the sannyasi disciples approached Papa with a tiny square of gold which they'd found among Swami Venkatesananda's effects as they were tidying up his room. Papa said, 'That's a yantra with great power for speaking purposes. Take great care of it.'

In a later discussion I asked Papa if a yantra like that would work if used by anyone or only the person to whom it was given. Papa's answer was, 'It would work for anyone, but they'd have no idea afterwards, of what they'd said. Like a drunk man.

Papa's humility

Whenever visiting sadhus came to the ashram, Papa would prostate to them. There was an interesting development in which one of the young sannyasins at the ashram indicated, for some unknown reason, that he would not prostrate to a particular visiting sadhu when the monk arrived at the Avoca ashram. Papa didn't say anything, but when the monk arrived, both he and Papa spontaneously did a full ashtanga prostration to each other. Flat on the floor with arms outstretched to each other. The young monk had no option but to prostrate to the visiting monk.

The Catholic Priest Blessing

Francis Grant was a Catholic priest in formation (on his way to taking final vows) and was a regular visitor to the ashram. We'd been invited to his ordination at the Mariannhill monastery, and we tagged along, with Papa leading our little delegation. A special moment in the consecration of a Catholic priest is the moment when his hands are anointed with holy oil. Symbolising those hands then being able to confer blessings.

When we met with now Father Francis Grant following his ordination ceremony Papa did something truly beautiful. He knelt before Father Francis and asked for his blessing. Father Francis placed hi hands on Papa's head and gave the ritual Catholic blessing. As Papa rose to his feet, Father Francis knelt and asked Papa for his blessing. There came the beautiful moment. Papa didn't put his hands on Father Francis' head, but rather on his shoulders, and prayed a blessing upon him.

It was an interesting lesson for those who were tuned into the nuance of the gesture. Very few people were asked to or allowed to touch Papa's head. Many close ones got to press the holy feet or hands, but the head was a no-go zone in the main. Sometimes when Papa had a dreadful headache, he'd ask one of us to press the head. Or even, no headache present, just to press the head. But that privilege seemed to be reserved for very few.

Mutilating music

Although a lover of classical western music and much eastern music, I was not a natural musician. I got a prize in my final year of primary school for scratching out the school anthem on a violin. Our German music teacher, dear old Frau Cordes, thought we were sight-reading the music, but in fact we played by ear and just memorised when to turn the page of the music sheet. At the ashram, I muddled along with a harmonium and at one point could play the Hanuman Chalisa and some songs with reasonable confidence.

But one night at Satsang, Papa said, 'Francis, play the drum.' My heart sank. The resident male ashramites were all good at playing dhol and tabla and I'd watched them many times as they tuned the drums. I lifted one of the large dhol and to my horror found that the hide was slack and there was no way it was going to produce a decent sound. But I didn't dare start trying to tune it, even had I been able to. The harmonium was already playing and all I could do was on the beat, produce an embarrassing kind of dull 'thumping' sound. I felt like a total idiot. But these were all wonderful little ego-bashing episodes at the hands of our ever-loving Papa.

I'm a perfectionist (a fear of failure, based on a fear of ridicule and rejection) and have been all my life. I know it may come out of early-life dysfunction, but I've learnt to deal with it. While talking about Papa's ego-bashing, this springs to mind.

The Centre regularly produced cassette tapes (this was way before DVDs and internet streaming) featuring bhajans and kirtans. There was a whole series. Papa one day decided that we needed a cassette of (wait for this)

the songs by Swami Vivekananda as recorded in Master's gospel, to be produced on tape. Brahmachari Maharaj, pictured, had a beautiful voice, played multiple instruments and would have been the perfect person for such a project. But guess who got chosen to do it? Yours truly, able to hold a tune as well as an intoxicated frog. It was a particularly terrifying thought because Swami Vivekananda was renowned for his beautiful singing voice and his musical virtuosity. It was decided that the songs would be chanted instead. I want to die when I think that I tried chanting one of the songs from the gospel to the tune of the Christmas carol, 'Silent Night'. May the gods forgive me.



Came one Saturday satsang and Papa called me up to give the entire shrine congregation, a feel of what was to come. I still feel sorry for them. There had been no arrangement with our beloved Mummy to accompany me on the harmonium. There I sat with Master's gospel open on my lap, mutilating the beautiful words which Swami Nikhilananda had painstakingly transcribed from Bengali into English. It must have sounded awful. I got to the end of the song and there was a long silence, after which Papa said, 'That will be our next Ramakrishna Centre recording.' I wished that the earth opened and swallowed me up. Papa waited until I had resumed my seat among the other satsangis and then said, 'That's what happens when people try to do things too perfectly.' Did it cure the perfectionism. No? But was it another instalment of ego crushing? Undoubtedly.

Asherville Castor Oil Cleanup

Before the Asherville ashram became an exclusive 'Mother House', the Brahmacharis from the Centre used to play a role in the pujas an managing the shrine. The marble murthi of Master was the centrepiece of the sanctum sanctorum. Castor oil w as used for the lamp pr lamps in front of Master. Over time, with a spilled drip here and there, the steps of the

plinth on which the murthi rested and the immediate surrounds had become sticky. Papa asked if I would clean them up.

I hopped into my Volkswagen Beetle and drove to a nearby supermarket to buy several bottles of Handy Andy cleaning agent, some cloths, a scrubbing brush and the like. Castor oil is a resistant substance when stuck on a surface, so I spent hours on the task, making sure that every nook and cranny was cleaned, rinsed and restored.

By the end of the exercise, I was physically exhausted. Trekking buckets of hot water into the shrine, the bending, scrubbing etc. took its toll. Not meant as a complaint, but it was physically very demanding even on my then young body.

I'd completed the task when I noticed Papa checking the steps and the surrounds. I then saw Papa go around the back of Master's murthi to see if that part too, has been taken care of.

It reminded me of a cleaning exercise on the then interior fountain outside the library at Asherville. I was similarly exhausted, having spent several hours draining, scrubbing and refilling the fountain which Brahmachari Maharaj and I had had built many years previously. Papa was seated in the vicinity and seeing me standing in the cold water in the fountain doing the scrubbing off algae, Papa said, 'That's going to give you painful legs.' To which I responded, 'I'm sure I'll be fine, Papa.' Well, that night, my legs were in such spasm from standing in that cold water that I barely managed a wink of sleep.

As I'd completed the work on the fountain and was literally tottering by Papa with the final bucket of water, Papa said softly, 'We mustn't try to do things too perfectly.' This is exactly what went through my mind seeing Papa check on operation castor oil in the Asherville shrine. If it wasn't done perfectly, Papa would have gently made that fact known. It's a feature of the discipline of most if not all monks of the Ramakrishna lineage that their training is very focused on doing things perfectly and setting extremely high standards, which they exemplify, for others to follow.

The Flute Flop

Someone one day handed Papa a bamboo recorder/flute. Papa passed it to me and said, 'Play!' Even at school I'd been unable to produce any listenable sound from one of these. Somehow my fingers never quite covered the holes, and I produced a series of shrieks and whistles from it that would have been worthy of a cat in distress. I did the same here. Papa again said, 'play' – cue more shrieks. This happened about three time after which Papa patiently took the flute back and nothing more was said.

It takes my mind back to our beloved Swami Premananda. When he first went to the ashram at Gurudev's invitation, he was drawn to and fascinated by the harmonium. Gurudev popped his head into the shrine one day to find the then Angat picking out notes on the shrine harmonium. 'Oh, you want to learn to play it do you?' asked Gurudev. 'Yes Swamiji', the little boy replied. 'Take it home with you this weekend then,' said Gurudev.

Angat did that – and with Gurudev's grace – Premanandaji told me many years later, in his own words, 'By the end of that weekend I knew every note on that keyboard. He was a gifted musician who sang and played exquisitely.

He loved music so, that when Papa sent him to India to study at Kailas ashram, his acharya guru (Sanskrit and scripture teacher) took away his harmonium until he'd mastered, as he very ably did, his Sanskrit, Upanishads and other learnings.

Daily life advice

Papa gave us so much down to earth, sensible advice for daily functioning. Most of the older South African freeways were three lanes in width. One day as I was navigating some heavy traffic, Papa said, 'Keep to the right to pass, the middle to travel and the left lane ahead of needing to take an offramp.' It sounded like an odd piece of learner-driver advice in the middle of nowhere. But today, as an old man, when I'm navigating hectic Johannesburg freeway traffic, I choose the middle lane of the sometimes five lanes of traffic on the newer roads. The right-hand lane is usually

dominated by very large vehicles breaking the speed limit and the vigilance required to get out of the way and back into that lane at the proper speed limit again is ridiculous. Papa's middle lane, even if not travelling at the speed limit, is inevitably the calmer place to be. It's a great metaphor for life, too. Very much the Buddhist 'middle way'.

Some of Papa's home recommendations
When having a bucket bath or shower, repeat the Gayatri mantra as the water runs over you. Papa said, 'Watch the improvement in your skin' when you do that.

At the ashram dining table one way, someone passed me a salad bowl with cucumber in it. Before I could take some of it, Papa said to me, 'that one is your enemy.' Only then did I register that each time I ate cucumber I would end up with dreadful sinus. In culinary terms, it's one of the 'deadly nightshade' vegetables. And clearly not for me.

Chatting about food one day, someone asked Papa about various vegetables. When it came to onions, Papa said, 'Eat a lot of onions for a few days and see what happens to your memory.'

In our early ashram days, Papa encouraged us to soak raw channa (chick[peas) and eat them as an energising snack.

Electronic Angst
Papa would quite often spontaneously say, 'Get out the video player and let's watch a film.' A frantic rush around to get everything connected followed. I might have been given the instruction but suddenly it was a group effort with everyone giving input, pushing switches, plugging in cords and the like. I used to get quite irritated by the chaos. One day, after everything was set up, we'd watched the movie and things had been packed away again, Papa said softly, 'If others are trying to assist, let them do what they want. If they don't get it connected and running, then you step in.' A great lesson in not always being the first one to step up to the plate.

Silence And Decorum

I was with Papa and Radha in Papa's upstairs room one day. He gave Radha an instruction of some sort and she'd just left the room and closed the door behind her, when Papa indicated he had something else to say to her. Without thinking, I moved towards the door, raised my voice, and called her name in the hope that she hadn't yet started down the stairs. Papa didn't say anything but visibly flinched at my loud voice. I quickly opened the door and went down the stairs to fetch Radha again. No word from Papa about the raised voice, but I never did it again. That's how Papa tweaked a thousand and one things in our behaviour. He was and still is, our ever-vigilant guide and mentor.

'Jealousy is the bane of our national character, natural to slaves. Even the Lord with all his power could do nothing on account of this jealousy.'
Swami Vivekananda, page 259 Volume IV Complete works, Mayavati Memorial edition.

The serpent of spiritual jealousy

Val Whitfield (mentioned in the earlier part of this book) always used to say that there is nothing worse than spiritual jealousy. This manifested as people comparing their (self-perceived) closeness to the swami or guru compared with that of other people. I'd never considered the nature of my relationship with Papa against any measure. It just was. And I guess if asked to define it, I would have said, 'Like everyone else's.' Because in my head, each relationship with Papa was unique but neither superior or inferior to any other.

The topic of jealousy surfaced in a small group discussion with Papa one day and someone suggested that all of us suffered from it. With a smile, Papa said, 'You don't know my Francis.' Only then did it dawn on me that with his grace, I truly hadn't ever felt any competitiveness with my fellow-seekers, in my relationship with Papa.

My heart is coming



Brother Vasan Govender (pictured) and I were recently reminiscing about how Papa used to stoke the flames of sadhaka jealousy when it was known that I was coming down to Durban. Papa would regularly say things like, 'Make sure my feet are in good condition (soft, without any callouses). My heart is coming.' Or 'The heart is pumping because my Francis is on his way.' Papa referred to me as 'My darling heart.' I only came to hear of these provocations later, but it must have really annoyed some people. I heard one of them say in an irritated manner one day, 'Oh, it's all Francis this, and Francis that.'

Bursting the boil

Papa once said to us, if there's a boil (pus-filled festering sore), you need to rub it and irritate it until it bursts. I guess that's what was happening on the jealousy front. I was never aware of it though and Papa shielded me from any of it, until the evening of the day he left the body. And then the full might of the antagonism towards me, surfaced. It was an interesting and valuable personal development learning. Papa had taught us that if people are directing unpleasantness or evil our way, every time they surface in our minds, pray for them, and ask Master to bless them. This way, they don't get to live, rent-free in our heads. And we don't carry any bitterness. It exemplifies that wise saying, 'Bearing resentment is like you drinking a glass of poison and then waiting for the other person to die.'

The bitter pill

A brother devotee at the ashram had become a bit of kingpin. He was knowledgeable and well respected. Unknown to me, he'd somehow

started to see me as ‘competition’. For what I’ll truly never know. And I fortunately had no idea that he felt this way.

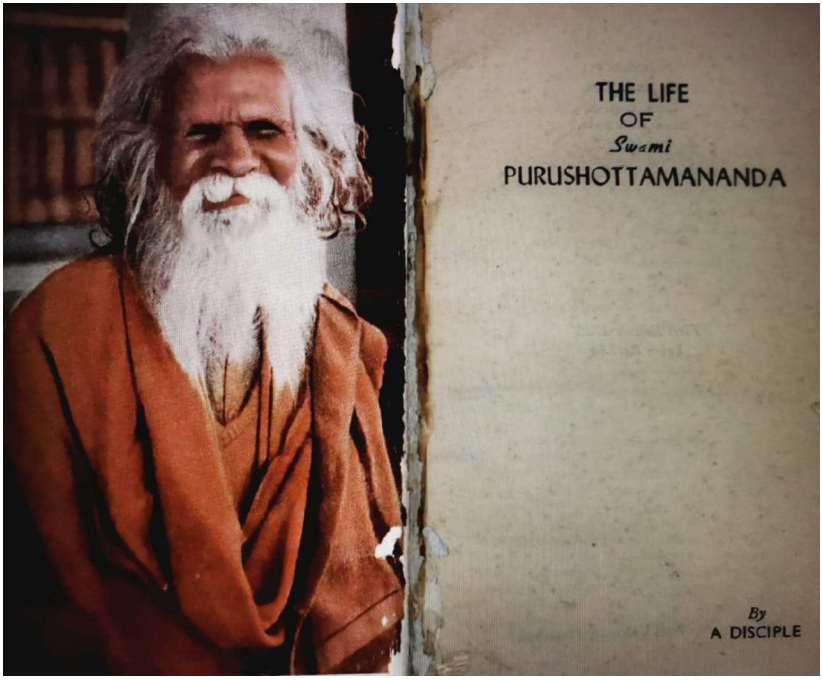
That very weekend at Satsang, a real lila played out. The brother devotee hadn’t been coming to the ashram regularly, but on this Saturday afternoon, there he was, seated among the men about two rows from the front. I hadn’t seen him come in. I was seated in the front row with the ashram brahmacharis, only because we’d all got into the shrine early.

All went well as usual with the Satsang. After the aarthi, all remained standing, and Papa would typically make his way out the shrine first. Papa stood up, walked straight up to me, put his arm around my shoulders and walked me out of the shrine with him. Only then did I see my brother devotee and realised with a stab in the heart how it must have pained him to see me being given what looked like favoured treatment. Only the divine will understand the how and why of it.

We didn’t see the brother devotee at the ashram again and a few months later we were told he’d passed away in a car crash. Papa said softly to me when we were alone, ‘That man died from hatred.’ May our Ishta Devatas help keep all of us away from assuming that some are loved more by the Guru, than others. As Papa said so many times, there’s no jealousy like spiritual jealousy. Each person has a unique relationship with the Guru. As Papa once said to me, ‘The gardener treats every flower-plant in the garden according to its needs.’ May we be protected from feeling we should be treated the same way as someone else.

‘Jealousy? There is always jealousy which leads to a state of slavery. We must avoid it. Avoid jealousy. Avoid jealousy. Avoid jealousy.’ - Papa

Papa on suffering as tapasya



Papa's body, like the body of our Guruji – Swami Purushottamananda – was almost never without suffering of some sort. The adage of the Guru taking karma from the disciples to help them more easily climb the mountain, was always in evidence.

Papa told us not to share complaints about our physical or other unwellness with people. His words were, 'Then it's no longer tapasya (austerity). In Papa's inimitable way in which he bent English to suit the purpose, whenever he chose, he said, 'You must become complainless.'



In the earlier part of the book, I mentioned Siphe Buthelezi (pictured), who the Divine Mother placed in my lap when he was a baby and who I was privileged to raise to manhood. At time of writing, he's 22 years old and an aspiring digital music composer and producer.

He had never met Papa, having been born eleven years after Papa left the body. When he was about four years old, he said to me as he woke up one morning, 'Last night I saw Swamiji, and he was wearing a pink towel.' In my home at the time, I had only large black and white pictures of Papa. Siphe didn't know Papa had worn the softest almost salmon pink khurta and dhoti. And he described the pink 'towel' as having been draped across Papa's body, so he must indeed have been blessed by a visit from Papa.

Papa told us that when we 'dream' of a holy person, we're not just dreaming. It is they who are visiting us in the subtle body. I get so thrilled when I speak with devotees who have dreams of Papa or Mummy. I never do, but I promise I'm not jealous.

I once commented to Mummy on the oddity of single me landing up as caregiver to a child. I was telling Mummy how when he was very young, Siphe could easily manage a spoon or fork or eat with his hands, but he would say, 'Feed me, Khulu.' *uMkhulu* being the isiZulu word for grandfather. That's the term he and his biological family have always used for me.

Mummy was silent for a moment and then said, 'I think that in a previous birth, you had to watch him starve, and there was nothing you could do about it.' When Mummy said, 'I think', it was her self-effacing way of telling a fact. Even when it came to cooking. If I asked for advice of some

sort, Mummy would never directly give it. But would preface it by saying something like, ‘They say….’ and then share the tip or suggestion.

Also, when he was very young, Siphe and I were one day talking about the one universal consciousness manifesting in many ways for the benefit of humankind. When the discussion ended and he’d left the room, Mummy said, ‘I feel that he understands.’

On another occasion, referring to Siphe, Mummy said to me, ‘He was very privileged to be born into that circle.’ Meaning the circle of those of us under Papa’s holy care.



The divine switchboard operator

When I first came back from working in the USA in 1983, I encountered a host of difficulties. The former chairperson of an organisation I'd worked for had borrowed money from me, in US Dollars, which he failed to pay back. My mom's breast cancer had re-surfaced and metastasised. I'd bought a piece of land in the countryside on which to build a house and only once the sale had gone through, did I discover that the legal subdivision of the land had not taken place. That took many months to sort out. My parents were moving up from Somerset West in the Cape to live with me and the construction project was months behind. Two builders went bankrupt, and the architect proved to be an unreliable and incompetent alcoholic. So it was the perfect storm and stress, too much on my plate at once and issues over which I had no control.

I had or was very close to having, a full-on nervous breakdown. The physical symptoms of anxiety made it all but impossible to prospect for new business or even manage the consulting I was doing at the time. I couldn't sleep properly, the anti-depressant medication I was taking didn't help and my world was rapidly falling apart. When I was at my office and things got totally beyond my ability to manage, I would phone the ashram to speak to Papa.

In those days there weren't any mobile phones and there was only a single landline into the ashram. And only one phone – on a little table in the ashram kitchen dining room. Yet each time I phoned in a state of great anxiety, Papa himself answered that phone. Hearing Papa's voice saying, 'Om Namo Narayana, Ramakrishna Centre', was like a healing balm.

It would not have been what I call a 'Ramakrishna lila' though, without adding this: each time, Papa would say to me, 'Do bhastrika.' Which is very rapid in and out pranayama breathing through the nose. As a chronic sinus sufferer from the Johannesburg dry air and dust, my nostrils couldn't handle easy breathing, let alone bhastrika.

What I learned through that totally awful period is that whatever you're going through, you must go through it. It's prarabhda karma, or necessary for our development. Although you're tottering under the weight of it and

not sure you'll even be able to keep going, the Guru is there and gently, albeit invisibly sometimes, supporting you through it.



It reminds me of a story in which a long-suffering devotee meets the Lord Jesus and says to him, 'You promised to always walk with me across the sands of time. But when I look back on the worst of those times, I see only one set of footprints. And the Lord said, 'My child, during those worst times, I was carrying you in my arms. That's why you see only one set of footprints.'

Born with a caul

Papa and I were chatting about human birth one day and I spontaneously said, 'My mother said I was born with a caul.' (When the baby arrives with a membrane covering the head or the entire body.) Papa said, 'I know.' I then asked Papa if there was any significance to being born '*en caul*' as it's called. Papa's answer was, 'It means you're born with special privilege.'

One day when talking with D P Soni, a former chairperson of the Centre about me, Papa said, 'I ordered him when I was born.' In another discussion when Brother D P as we referred to him, commented on something I'd written, Papa said, 'He has much writing to do.'



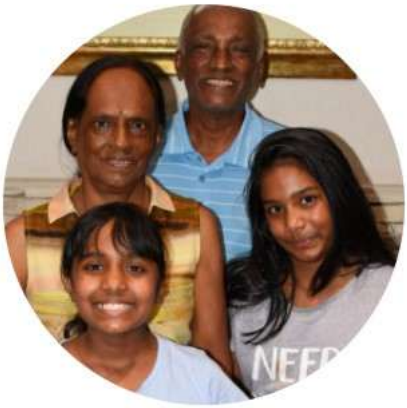
Papa with arm around D P Soni, Mummy to the right, Brother Ramsunder Shah on the left of picture.

The Indian mind

At least once a week in discussion with me, on some or other topic Papa would say, 'My son, so long as you live, you will never understand the Indian mind.' I never responded to this because I couldn't see the relevance of it. It even annoyed me because Papa said it so frequently. But eventually I came to understand what Papa meant and simply accepted it. It wasn't meant in a derogatory way, but as a cautionary note.

Disciple And Devotee Reminiscences

From Brother Devan Reddy



I've jotted down some of my fond memories with our most beloved Gurudev or Big Swamiji [A term widely used to differentiate between Papa and his monastic disciples].

On many occasions my earthly mother came to meet Swamiji at the Ashram. On one such occasion when tea was served to my mother, she asked me to have the tea as she was feeling a little bilious and did want to have the tea. I told her that I'd rather not have the tea as it was sugarless as I used to have 2 to 3 teaspoons of sugar in my tea. Swamiji heard this and reprimanded me saying what is more important, the love for your mother or the taste of sugar in the tea? Needless to say, I had the tea and gradually reduced the amount of sugar in my tea and now have sugarless tea.

Yuvaraj [Brother Devan's young son, now Swami Viprananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna order], used to sit close to Swamiji while other children of his age group were playing outside.
I recall one conversation that they had:
Swamiji— who is greater, Guru or God?
Yuvaraj— God is greater.

Swamiji— Guru is greater.
Yuvaraj – God is greater.
Swamiji – Guru will guide you to God, and it is his grace that will take you to God.
After a short while Swamiji continued:
'Just say you want to go to Cape Town, and you haven't been there previously, what do you do? You buy a map (before the days of Google and the internet) and use it to guide you to Cape Town. When you know the route to Cape Town you do not need the map anymore. Your goal is to get to Cape Town and without the map you cannot get there. Cape Town is the goal. The map is your guide, without the guide you cannot reach your goal. In the same manner you need a guru to guide you to God.'



Talking of Cape Town, Papa, Ramsundar Shah and Mummy, on Table Mountain in the early 1970s.

Swamiji had a unique way of analysing and teaching. Many times, we did not even know what was going on. In this way we felt very

relaxed, and our inner nature came to the front. One of his special ways of lifting our spirits, was playing scrabble with his devotees. Little did we know what was happening. There were some intellectuals with us, and they used to come up with some fancy words and because of that I used to avoid playing in their group.

On many occasions there were two or more groups playing at the same time, but I enjoyed being in close proximity of Swamiji. On one occasion I did not want to play with the 'big boys' and told Swamiji that I'd prefer not to play and enjoyed watching. Swamiji told me to play a second time. How could I say no? Needless to say, I played and won the game. Then I understood that in reality it was Swamiji himself that was actually 'playing', analysing and guiding all of us, without us actually knowing what was happening.

The late Alan Jibodh once told me, that Swamiji questioned him about his constant golf playing and went with him to the golf course. Alan had to explain to Swamiji about the game and offered to let Swamiji hit the golf ball. Alan could not believe that Swamiji hit a golf ball for the very first time, as it went as straight as a rocket. Swamiji explained that all it needed was concentration, just like when Arjuna was asked to shoot the wooden bird. All he could see and concentrate on was the eye of the wooden bird and nothing else.

My aunt [Sister Molly Mathias' sister] lived a few doors away from the ashram [at number 2 Montreal Road – the Ashram being number 8] and we visited them from time to time, and on special occasions we stayed over. One of my elder sisters, on staying over, visited the ashram with our aunt and other members of the family.

When my sister returned home her words to me were, 'Devan, you should go to the ashram, you would like it.' Why only me and not

any other sibling, I really and truly don't know? Although many of us used to frequent a local temple with my mother. It brings tears to my eyes when I think of that occasion and will forever be indebted to her. She passed away a few years ago. May Master, Mother and Swami Vivekananda bless her soul wherever she may be. 🙏🙏

My first visit took place a short while later, I think in 1970/71. What I remember was that Big Swamiji was in India at that time and Mr S P Singh was the chairman [of the Ramakrishna Centre]. He read out a letter from Swamiji encouraging us to continue with our spiritual practice and stating that administration matters were to be taken care of by the officials and for spiritual matters, Brahmachari Sevak was to take charge. That did it for me, I was caught, hook, line, and sinker. [He remains a devotee until this day.]
Ends.

Professor Pankaj Joshi



Brief Note on Swamiji: The beginning of my journey with Sri Swami Shivapadanandaji Maharaj.

My humble journey with Swamiji commenced around 1988 when I first met him through my dear friend Prof Vinod Jogessar. I was invited by Vinod to meet and have lunch with an interesting man who was the Head of the Ramakrishna Centre of SA.
I distinctly remember that Vinod and I preceded this encounter,
by visiting a mutual friend, Dr Sundri Chetty, who was physically compromised by cervical neck problems. The meeting went on for much longer than anticipated and we finally arrived at the Avoca Ashram to meet with the Swami some 90 minutes later than anticipated.

I presumed that he would have had his lunch by then. I profusely apologised for our delay and learnt further that he was waiting for us to have lunch together; and he was cordial, loving and kind in his demeanour. He totally downplayed our delayed arrival since he had noticed our own discomfort in this regard. He was more than a man – he was a superman! He insisted on us partaking of more food, emphasising that it was the Lord's Prasad.

Lunch was leisurely and undisturbed for the three of us in the then empty dining hall. His questions related more to getting to know me better; he had known Vinod for much longer. Swamiji's thoughts were sublime and full of compassion and what stood out for me

were his depth in character and his strong and unwavering faith in the Master, Sri Ramakrishna. His devotion was contagious and made his own sincerity undeniably palpable. The subsequent three hours passed imperceptibly until he invited us to the shrine to pay our respects.

He taught that every home should have a shrine with its size being dependent on the space in the house. He said that Master's children should always take their visitors to the shrine. He then graciously invited us to stay for supper, but we had eaten much too much to stay over for supper. He said to me, 'Son, this just is the first of our meetings and this relationship will last forever!' Now I knew that he was not a superman but a GOD-MAN! True to his word, I was with him during the last days of his earthly journey, and the relationship has now become Eternal. What a blessed day it was.
Jai Sri Swami Shivapadanandaji Maharaj!
Hari Aum Tat Sat.
Pankaj Joshi
Ends.

Sister Molly Mathias



I thought I will let you know what Papa has taught us as young adults. I think these three lessons are interesting to be added.
He would say to us. 1. 'Your body is your temple. Take good care of it because no one else will do that for you,' and the second one was, 'Do not eat to please your tongue, eat to satisfy your tummy'. (Meaning do not over-indulge in eating anything). The third was, 'Do not attend satsang or prayers without having a meal and then sit at these functions with the thought of when will the prayer or satsang come to an end, so that I can have something to eat?'

Papa was not one to ask devotees to keep fast (abstain from eating meals for the day). He reminded us that when attending these holy functions, we must concentrate on our chosen ideals or better still, be in the moment of the prayer or satsang. He expected us to be very disciplined as devotees. Loving Papa always regarded his teaching to be of great spiritual benefit to his devotees. He gave so much love.
Ends.

Sister Mary Jibodh [from transcribed, live, video recordings of Sister Mary.



Mary and Alan Jibodh, pictured, both initiated by Papa on Krishna Janmashtami in 1978, were the first devotees at the Ramakrishna Centre to take me under their wing.

They showed great kindness and made me feel very welcome. Alan is with the angels, but Mary and I are of a similar age and are, for the moment, still here. At one of Mary's first meetings with Papa, he asked Mummy to dress Mary (who was wearing Punjabis), in a sari. Mummy took Mary to the little bathroom adjacent to the Avoca shrine and dressed her in a sari. Teaching her at the same time, how to wear it for the future.

[Swami Swatmaramananda, the President of the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, suggested that I interview Mary on video. Not just because she doesn't use a laptop, but because the footage might be of use in future Ramakrishna Centre archives. Here's the transcription from the recording made at her lovely little Johannesburg home.]

Mary: The first time I came to the ashram I was expecting Shaan. Annie was seven years of age and Jayshree was five. We got to see Swamiji

downstairs. Throughout the whole day, I was teaching my children because they didn't know anything Indian. They didn't know about 'AUM' and 'Namaste' [as a greeting]. The whole day I'm teaching them, as they're running around, 'Say Namaste, say Namaste, say Namaste.' So they learnt it, right until we came there. As soon as we got to Swamiji, Annie prostrates and says, 'Namaste Swamiji'. Jayshree says, 'Oh my, and how are you today?' I wanted to kill her [Mary chuckles]. Anyway, when I left there, Swamiji said to me, 'My girl, you'd better see that you come back again'. I said, 'OK Swamiji', and then I left. [Question to Mary] What was Papa's reaction to Jayshree saying, 'Oh, my and how are you today?' Mary [with much amusement]: 'He laughed. Oh, yes and when she was going, 'Ta ta, I'll see you again!'

But anyway, I did go back because Shaan [Mary's son] was born, and after 41 days…you know in the Hindu custom you can't go to any religious place immediately after giving birth. You've got to wait forty-one days, until the mother is so-called 'clean'. So I waited for forty-one days and the forty first day I came to the ashram, likely in October of 1971. And then we never stopped going to ashram after that.

Mr S. P Singh introduced Alan [Mary's late husband] to Swamiji. Alan met Swamiji before I did. That's the day that S P Singh invited Alan to go to the ashram with him. S P [as we referred to him] told Alan to first go into the shrine, and there he saw Papa doing a headstand against the wall. He was doing yoga exercises. Alan met Swamiji and then came back home. And then he told me that Swamiji wanted to meet me. So that's when I went. Just before Shaan was born. Shaan was born in 1971, on the 14th of October.

I found everything there. Everything I wanted [spiritually].

You know, what I want to say with Papa, I say Papa, or can I say Big Swamiji? [We used them interchangeably throughout Mary's reminiscences] I'm used to that. You know that Swamiji named our Durban house 'Thirathbhavan' – place of pilgrimage – because you had to climb up thirty-six steps to get to the top, and to my shrine. But let me tell you what I feel. I feel that Swamiji was, is, and always will be with us. [Mary hunts for

glasses to read her notes] Swamiji was always there for all of us. And I can remember that the cultural festivals were all held at the ashram in those days, at the bottom [end of the property]. They used to put up a tent in the amphitheatre [a large open space below the ashram building]. And Swamiji would be sitting with all of us at the back of the kitchen, peeling potatoes, onions, and tomatoes, with us, until one or two o'clock in the morning. That's why I say he was always with us. He never, ever left us.

Now, I need to tell you one incident. This made me realise that Swamiji cared for everyone, even the animals. We had a dog, it was a Doberman, a beautiful black dog. Her name was Rani. She also used to stay at the ashram and Swamiji loved her. Swamiji got used to her, but she was our dog and when she came home, we used to look after her.

But at that stage, in our area, the Corobrick [brick factory] workers were creating havoc [striking] in the area and being violent and breaking things and all that. And this is what Big Swamiji used to do. He used to tell it to us the next morning. He would come to our house at about one or two o'clock in the morning, come up the stairs, Rani would be outside and wondering, 'Who's coming up the stairs?' and Rani would bark. Papa would get hold of Rani, give her a loving slap, and say, 'This is my house.' And then Swamiji would go sit on the wall until the morning to watch over us and the next day he would tell us, I promise you, he'd tell us the next day, 'I sat there looking after you all in the night while you slept.'

The next time Swamiji came again, Rani was watching all over. Swamiji's coming up the stairs with his black coat and a black hat. Rani is sitting there. This time she doesn't bark. Papa goes up to her and gives her another slap. He says, 'Don't you know that when you hear footsteps you must bark? [Mary and interviewer laugh]. It was not a win-win situation for Rani, but Swamiji loved Rani.

Rani got bitten by a snake outside our house and she passed on. She was taken to the vet and sitting on the vet's examination table, it was so sad, Shaan [Mary's eldest son] was crying. As the vet was about to inject her to

euthanase her, she jumped off the table and onto Shaan's lap. Shaan was crying and she too, was crying. It was so sad. She was a beautiful dog.

Now also, you know, Swamiji never just sat around and let people do things. He had a blue [ashram-owned] Volkswagen Kombi and he also used to go on donation drives with us. He would come and park the Kombi and pick us up, and even Mrs Govender, the old lady [from Tongaat] she would sit there and sell calendars, we'd sell books, Swamiji would also go with us. Big Swamiji did all that with us. He never just sat still and kept quiet.

There's a very important thing that I need to say. A very big lesson that I've learnt from Swamiji. In the beginning I was what you might say, naïve. When Swamiji used to say something, it didn't matter to me. I didn't take it seriously. We were very blessed because he used to come to our house often. He was nearby. So one day he rings to my house in Warwick avenue [Durban] and he says, 'Mary-girl, I want you to cook me some gram [chickpea] dhal, I'm coming for supper. Besides other things, he wants gram. It's now 6pm. All the shops are closed. I run to my mother-in-law downstairs, and she hasn't got gram. I sent Candy [a son in law] or someone else to go check at another shop, but we can't get gram anywhere. I thought to myself, 'Ah, fussy. Doesn't really matter, let me just cook what I've got. I cooked pea dhal. I made the pea dhal, Swamiji came home, had the pea dhal and whatever else I'd cooked for him and didn't say a word. He went away happily.

Three years later we are in India [in 1974] sitting in Dhirubhai's house, and Swamiji's relating to all of us, how when Gurudev [Swami Nischalananda – Papa's guru] came to his mother's [Kossilla Ma's] house, his mother cooked some dhal and Gurudev wanted some more of it, and they'd run out of it, they didn't know what to do, Swamiji [then the pre-monastic Inder] scaled three neighbouring fences to borrow dhal to satisfy the Guru. [Mary covers her mouth with horror as she recalls this].

I said, 'Oh my God, Swamiji, what did you think about me, then?' To which Swamiji said, 'I thought that you were not fit to be a disciple.' He did initiate me eventually, after seven years, on Sri Krishna Janmashtami. But I

think I had to wait for seven years because there was lots of nonsense I was doing in between.

Again, Swamiji came to test me. I know this was a test. After the Tuesday [Bhagavad Gita class at the uMngeni Road Temple] Swamiji used to bring some of the devotees home, and they would have a meal. Anyway, I cooked the food, I went to the temple, I came back afterwards. It's late now. About eight o'clock in the night. Swamiji said, 'Mary-girl, I want halwa' [a Turkish dessert]. I thought, 'Ooh God, what must I do? Where am I going to get halwa at this hour of the night? [Interviewer: 'And that takes time to make.'] Mary continues: Listen, I made it by hook or by crook. I said to Romila [Dr Anoop Seebaran's late wife], 'What am I going to do?' We took the Indian Delights [a world-renowned cookbook]. We're trying. We're trying and mixing, and it gets to nine o'clock. Then we hear Papa saying, 'Mary-girl, where's the halwa?' 'Coming, Swamiji.' We mix and mix and anyway, we managed to give Swamiji the halwa in a bowl with a teaspoon. He had to eat it like ice cream because it didn't set. You need to set it in the fridge. But at least I learnt a little lesson. It doesn't matter, if it's halwa Swamiji wants, it's halwa you give to Swamiji.

I was at the ashram one day and I was watching the brahmacharis and Swami Chandikananda, going up to Papa's room to serve him, and I used to stand downstairs near the kitchen window and think, 'Ooh, how nice, God, if only I can go and serve the Guru like that.'

As fate would have it, Swamiji's body got quite ill and Swamiji was taken into hospital for a while. When Swamiji was discharged he came straight to Thirathbhavan [Mary's home] and he allowed me to serve him for seven days. He used to sleep up in his room [in Mary's home]. In the morning, I used to cook Swamiji's food – I used to go to the garden – Swamiji asked me not to pluck flowers with milk [sap] in them, I'd pluck flowers for Swamiji's puja and leave it in his room, and make his lunch, make his supper, just serve him. I served him for those seven days. Whilst Swamiji was there, Thirathbhavan was open for everybody – everybody – loads and loads of people would come and sit around Swamiji and just be with him. I

felt so blessed that I was able to serve Swamiji continuously for those seven days. I was happy about that.

One day at the ashram, when there were not so many other people to help me, I was very tired. I don't know what I did but I was very tired. Swamiji called me up to his quarters. He said, 'Mary-girl, how are you?' I said, 'Swamiji, I'm sooo tired.' He said, 'What?! – don't ever let me hear you say you're tired when you're doing Master's work!' It's a lesson for all of us. [interviewer heartily agrees]. Swamiji said, 'Just for saying that, every time you say you are tired (this was a long time ago), you've got to pay two Rand [the ZAR currency] to the ashram.'

But if you want to know how many times I said at the ashram, 'I'm tired', I'd be owing the ashram thousands. [interviewer and Mary laugh]. But you know what I did? I told this to all our members, the older members – that was truly a lesson for everybody. If you go and ask Devan [Brother Devan Reddy – a close devotee of Papa's], 'Devan, how are you feeling today?' He'll say, 'Oh, Mary, the bones are paining.' He'll never say the word 'tired' [both chuckling]. We never mentioned the tired word again. Isn't that a wonderful lesson for us? [interviewer agrees]. And for the younger people to know? If you're serving Master, just feel blessed that you're serving Master.'

Here's another important lesson – also in Thirathbhavan – you know, Swamiji did tell us once that in the evening, after 6 or 7 o'clock you cannot go and disturb the flowers and pluck them in the night-time. They're asleep. Let them sleep. Swamiji rings me at nine o'clock in the night. He's been there during the daytime. 'Mary-girl, I want a betel roll.' Oh, my God, what am I going to do? [interviewer chuckling] I have heaps of betel leaves. Plenty big leaves. What must I do? What am I going to do? Anyway, I went to the betel leaf tree, and I clapped [Mary demonstrates by clapping her hands together] – I woke the Betel leaf tree up. I said to it, 'My Guru wants to eat the Betel leaf. I forgot to give it to him in the daytime. Could I please pluck some leaves?' I plucked, I made the betel roll, and we took it there, at about nine or ten in the night. Swamiji was satisfied. He was very happy that I brought the Betel roll. But the lesson that he told me there, when I said, 'Swamiji I hope you're not angry? [that I plucked the betel leaf at

night]' He said, 'No, when a Guru gives you instructions, you must listen and pay attention to the last instruction that he gives you.' (Although he said some months ago, 'You should not pluck at night.') 'But this is the last instruction I gave you, that I want betel roll, so that's the lesson to learn. The last instruction that the guru gives you.' I learnt my lesson there. I then used to cut the betel leaves and have them ready, so I didn't have to clap all the time and wake them up. [both chuckling].

You know, also once we were sitting up in Swamiji's room. Swamiji's body was very, very ill. I was there also, all the devotees are there, and I was feeling so sad. I had a pen and a sheet of paper, and I wrote there, 'Swamiji, how can I help heal the pain?' I passed it to Swamiji – he read it and put it down and he said, 'You will not be able to help heal the pain, but you will be able to help, if you just be good and do good.' I feel like crying when I tell that. [interviewer is affected as well – Mary pauses, says 'Oh, God' and quietly composes herself].

Another time too, I used to cook food for Swamiji on a Friday. I used to cook the food at home, and we'd take it to the ashram and serve Swamiji. This was every Friday. I took Swamiji's food up, I still remember, I'd made Swamiji some Paneer curry. I fed Swamiji and then I came back down to the kitchen. And then Swamiji sent for me. I must come to the room. He was



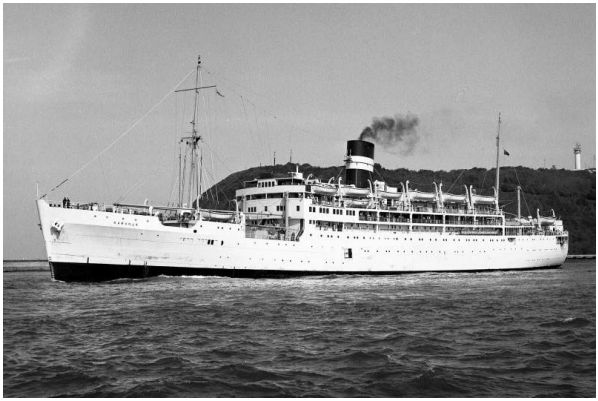
sitting by the window on the blue couch. He said I must sit and press his feet. In the room was only Swami Saradaprabhananda [pictured on left with Swami Gautamananda, current President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission] and me. Nobody else.

Swamiji's eyes were closed and I'm pressing and out of the blue he said eleven words, 'If only people will do their mantra, there'll be no problem.' He said those eleven words and [he appeared] to go back to sleep. Swami Saradaprabhananda was looking around to see who Swamiji's talking to and I'm also looking around to see who Swamiji's talking to. It was not for Swami Saradaprabhananda, it was for me! Swamiji's eyes were closed and after fifteen minutes again, 'If only people will do their mantra, there'll be no

problem.' Eleven words again, and then Swamiji [appeared to] go back to sleep. [Mary becomes emotional, her voice cracking] That was a message for me Brother Francis, and I didn't take heed of it. I was still all over here and there. Mary continues: If you do your mantra, you've got no problem. Isn't that a nice message for everybody to know? No matter what happens, if you do your mantra, there's no problem, but as I'm saying it, I'm still talking about problems, this one and that one, that you said I must forget about. [Interviewer had reminded Mary of Mother Sarada Devi's saying that 'these things are like water flowing under a bridge.' Rumination, regret, and recrimination are unhelpful.]

Interviewer: I'm reminded of Papa saying about Mother Henny Schimmel one day, 'All her life she's been wishing to live a spiritual life. And she doesn't realise that she's been doing just that, all this time. She will have Master's vision before she leaves the body.' Ashram Mummy – a saint who Papa had given permission to initiate sadhakas, said that Henny had reached paramahamsa state, before passing on. Mummy had also initiated Swami Premananda, Papa's first monastic disciple, into Diksha mantra.

Mary continues: The first trip to India in 1974 was on the SS Karanja [a freighter with several guest cabins]. We were blessed. There were 13 of us.



Swami Thribhuvan [then Thiba Nursee], Vanitha Soni, who later took the vows of a Hindu nun and was named Pravrajika Ishtaprana, and her mother (Mrs Soni), Sister Henny Schimmel, Mrs Govender and her daughter. Rosemary Oosthuizen, who became



brahmacharini Sri, was also on that first trip to India. [She later became Pravrajika Atmaprana, pictured.] She was the first woman from the Ramakrishna Centre in Durban to be initiated into sannyasa by Papa and Swami Nishreyasananda of the Ramakrishna Mission, Harare.

Mary: I was lucky. I went with Swamiji the first time in 1974 and then again in 1993 - nineteen years later. I'll tell you a few reasons why I had to go back. I spent a total of eight months on the first trip and three months on the second trip. We left in February and came back in October [first trip]. In India, we travelled in our own railway coach. Mary reaches to show a picture of the train passenger coach (bogey as it was called in India). What we did was, we hired a whole coach (there were thirteen of us) and we had a room [compartment] for Swamiji, a room for the ladies and one for the boys and we had a kitchen. We had a cook who used to cook for us most of the time, and we had a dining room. This was a big thing (Mary stretches out her arms to indicate).



I used to sleep in the one compartment – on the top bunk was [Sister Henny [Schimmel] – the bottom bunk was Ma Govender, and I used to sleep on a mattress on the floor. Henny used to buy Ganges water, it's in the bag up top and dripping on my head. We bought our own things. We also used to take turns to cook. It was lovely. And how we used to travel, let's say you want to go to Mysore, we get to Mysore, the train would stop, they'd unhitch the carriage and park us [in a siding]. So we'd go and do whatever we wanted to do. Come back in the evening, have a bath, have our food, have our satsang.

When we wanted to go to the next town, they'd connect us to the next train and off we'd go. [Francis asks how secure the unattended carriage was during the day.] Mary: It was kept locked and the cook, Babu, was there. When we used to stop at a station, you'd find many people trying to see into the carriage. We had beautiful dining room also; we used to have satsangs there as well. That's how we travelled in India. We travelled for eight months like that. Mary continues: Ooh, I've got a lot to tell you. [Reaches for her pile of notes.] We went to the north and the south. The ashramas we went to, we were very blessed.

[Francis asks: What were your first impressions of India?] Mary: I found it confusing. I couldn't understand it. The first time we came to a rural area, you see poor people, you see a little baby sleeping. She has no clothes and

she's sleeping on the floor, and she has a big brick as a pillow. It was sad. But the beautiful part, was also very beautiful.

Because we were with Swamiji we were very privileged to visit so many places. By Guru's grace we visited the Kashipur garden house [from where Sri Ramakrishna gave up the body].



Kamarpukur [the birthplace of Sri Ramakrishna, Jayrambati [the birthplace of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi], Mathura, Brindavan and Ayodhya, [all closely associated with the life of Lord Krishna], Kanyakumari and Vivekananda Rock (on the coast at the southern-most tip of India), Trivandrum and Thirupatti. We also went to Shabri [The Shabri Ashram is a place of pilgrimage mentioned in the Hindu epic Ramayana. It is said to be in the Dandakaranya forest, where the sage Matanga lived with his disciples, including the character Shabri, who was a devotee of Lord Rama. She used to taste the food before offering it to the Lord], Bodhgaya, Mysore, Bangalore. We went to the Udbodhan house [where Holy Mother lived in Kolkota, then spelt as Calcutta).

We went into the Dandaka Forest. We went to the Godavari Mountain. We also had the blessing of visiting Balaram Bose's house, Girish Chandra Gosh's house [a devotee whose home Sri Ramakrishna visited frequently. Girish was the famous Bengali playwright and poet who drank heavily and features prominently in the writings about Sri Ramakrishna. He gave up trying to reform himself when Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Give me your power of attorney'. He did, and ended his life as a saint], and Mahendranath Gupta's ['M' or Master Mahashay – who was the recorder of 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'] house. As well as Swami Abhedananda's ashram [a direct

disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, known as Kali in his premonastic days], to name a few places.

Swamiji said to us, 'A lot of people went to India. A lot of people will go to India. A lot of people will never go to India. I will bring India to them.' So, he went throughout the length and breadth of India picking up sticks and stones and soil and you name it. And all that was brought back to South Africa. It filled a very big Checkers (supermarket) plastic bag packet. That was all put into the foundations and all over the site of the new temple at the Avoca ashram. So when the children were crying, Swamiji would say, It's OK to take them outside. All over is blessed. So that's why it's nice to go around [circumambulate] the temple.

Very specific things Swamiji brought. You know, even at the Vivekananda Rock, we took a tiny piece of rock, also from the Govardhan hill, which Sri Krishna held up with his little finger, to protect the people.

Simhavahini Temple

We went to the Simhavahini Durga temple near Jayrambati. [The Goddess Simhavahini is represented in the form of a metallic pitcher. The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi said that once while she was lying before the temple, having taken a vow of fasting to get the goddess' blessings for the cure of an acute disease from which she had been suffering for a long time, the Goddess Simhavahini appeared before her and her mother Shyamasundari, in the guise of a blacksmith girl of about eleven or twelve years of age.

She suggested specific medicines to them, which cured Mother's body completely. The Holy Mother after her recovery preserved a quantity of earth from this sacred place in a small casket. She took a pinch of it every day, and gave it to Radhu (Radharani), one of her mentally deranged nieces. After the discovery of the curative power of this earth, people from distant places began to swarm to the temple, to collect the holy earth.]






[The old temple having been damaged beyond repair with the passage of time, the Goddess has of late been reinstalled in the newly built permanent temple where she is now worshipped daily. The front portion is covered with an open-sided roof for the devotees. The Goddess Simhavahini and her two companions Sri Chandi and Mahamaya, represented in metallic pitchers, have been installed on a raised platform and the Goddess Manasa has also been placed on a separate pedestal.]

Papa took a handful of Simhavahini temple sand – it's white in colour – and brought it back to Holy Mother's home village of Jayrambati. Swamiji said, Mary-girl, I want you to take a packet and wherever we go, you must stand there so I can put the sand [or other objects – leaves, small stones, twigs etc.] in the packet when I give it to you. I said right Swamiji, I'll do that Swamiji.

But on a particular day, Romila and I had gone shopping to find glass bangles. Swamiji took the sand, turned, and said, 'Mary-girl', but I wasn't there. Mummy took the sand instead. Papa was so angry with me for not being there. He didn't want to talk to me.

Swamiji brought soil, rocks, leaves, from holy, holy places. Everything is there (under the Avoca temple in Durban). [Francis: No problem with customs when you brought it back?] Mary: No, Master brought it through. It was for Master's shrine; it wasn't for me. The first trip we came back by ship. But the second trip we came back by plane.

Another important thing. When we went to Mathura, the dungeon is still there where Kamsa (the evil king) imprisoned his sister Devaki and her husband, Vasudeva, because Kamsa had heard that Sri Krishna was going to be born. It was Krishna Ashtami night. It was packed with people. People all circumambulating [moving in a clockwise direction] around the big temple. Some of them playing the harmonium, others dancing round and round.

Anyway, we go inside, it's all dark, black in colour. There's one step, the spot where Sri Krishna was born, and it was full of flowers. Now there were so many people there, you can't just go and take a flower from the spot where Sri Krishna was born. We came, we prostrated and then went outside again. And Swamiji said, Mary-girl, you have to go back again, don't you? And I said yes, Swamiji [both of us laughing]. So I go back inside. Nobody's there now. I go and take a handful of flowers from the spot where Sri Krishna was born. And as I turn, the pujari (temple priest) comes inside. He says in a south Indian dialect, 'Oh, ma, phul [flower], phul', and gives me another handful of flowers. I was already holding flowers in my hand, so he must have thought, who told you to take this? But he put the additional flowers into my hands, anyhow. So Swamiji has brought things from the most holy places. You will never go wrong if you go to headquarters [of the Centre], people will always be blessed.

[Mary tells a story as an aside]: There was a function in the [Swami Nischalananda] hall at the Avoca ashram, and our Phoenix branch mothers used to come. And this one lady came out limping. She said she was going to the toilet to get water. I felt so sorry for her. I asked if she was OK and she said, 'No, but I just need some water.' I took her to the kitchen and gave her some water. She said, you know what ma, I was supposed to go and have an operation, because I had gangrene in my leg. But since I'm

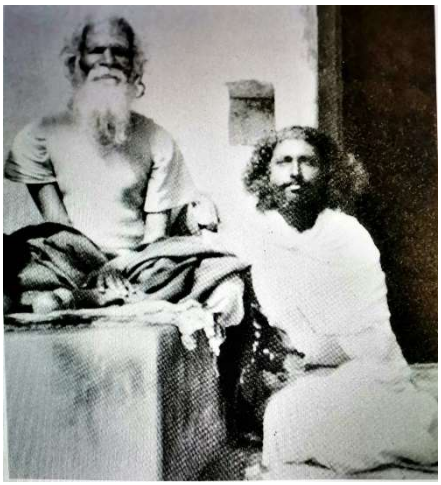
coming here and I'm walking around the temple, the leg is sore, but they didn't have to amputate the leg. When visitors come, they walk around [circumambulate] the temple, it shows the power of the place. As Master [Sri Ramakrishna] brought sand from Brindavan, so Swamiji did and said, I'll bring Brindavan to them [in Durban]. Isn't that beautiful?

Mary shows me a picture of Sri Ramakrishna's [fifth generation] nephew. Here it is. He's second from left, in profile, with the beard.



When we met him the first time in 1974, he was a little boy. Then when we went again in 1993, he's fully grown and looks like Master. On the extreme right of the picture is ashram Mummy, then Mary Jibodh and in gerua Pravrajika Atmaprana Didi, and in profile our beloved Papa.

[Francis asks Mary to talk about Guruji's cave, Vasishtha guha] When we went the first time, they didn't have pictures of Master, Holy Mother and Swami Vivekananda - they had Gurudev's [Swami Nischalananda's] picture in one corner. But they didn't have pictures of Master Mother and Swami Vivekananda. When we went in 1993, Swamiji (Papa) took pictures of Master, Mother and Swami Vivekananda and installed them himself.



Here's an incident that occurred – long before this second trip to India. I realise that although I went to India with Swamiji in 1974, I had to go back. There were some things that I did on the first trip that I needed to make right. Mary says, 'I believe I did a wrong thing; it's a sin that I [Mary looking very distressed] did. I didn't know what I was doing on the first trip in 1974. Swamiji wanted each of us to go into the cave itself and do our japa [repetition of the guru mantra]. We were to enjoy the meditation and try to do 100 thousand repetitions of our mantra. Everyone's taking their turns and going in. Ishtaprana went in before me, she came out and said she'd look after Shaan, and so I go inside. [Mary physically showing her restlessness in the cave] sighing, looking around, saying, 'Oh God… What must I do?' I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to get out from there. There was a stone asan [seat], nicely made up. I'm sitting on it, the Shivalingam was there. I was sitting, thinking 'when is it going to be time for me to come out?'

I did my prayer, came out, and carried on with whatever we had to do. But let me tell you, I know why I had to go back to India and the cave after nineteen years.

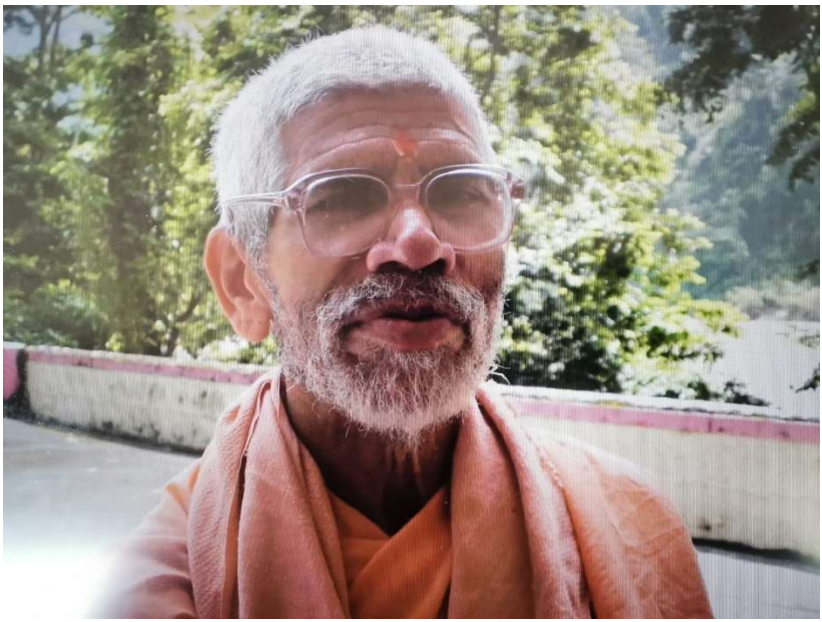
We're sitting outside the cave on our second trip in 1993. Mummy's there, Swamiji's there, I'm there. The others are in different places. And Swamiji was talking. And Swamiji said, 'You know, Mummy, that asan [seat] inside the cave, that's Gurudev's [Swami Nischalananda's] asan. Mary says in horror, I sat on it in 1974. You can't sit on the Guru's asan. That's why I had to go back, nineteen years later. I told them what I had done in 1974. I was so sad. I said, 'Oh my God, Swamiji, (Mummy was also there), this is what I did. Nineteen years ago'.

Swamiji said, ‘Don’t get worried. You go into the shrine, you get water from the Ganga, and you sprinkle it on the asan [in the Vasishtha guha cave]. I didn’t know at that time what I was doing. But now I’m realising, Oh God, what did I do? But that’s why I had to go back and sprinkle Ganges water there. Anyway, I sprinkled the water. [As discussed with Mary, these were all wonderful ‘teachable moments’ which all of us today can and do, benefit from hearing. Including you, dear reader.]



The Vasishtha guha ashram on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh.

Mary continues: We were very lucky because at the cave, they’ve got Swami Nischalananda’s picture there and a little shrine. I was blessed because I had to go get Ganges water and put flowers on the little shrine.



Romila (Dr Seebaran's wife) and I used to go wash the toilets; we used to do all of that. I'm talking about the second trip. And that second trip [Pravrajika] Atmaprana was with us. [Swami Chetanananda, Gurudev's Gurubhai, was the senior monk there for both of those trips.] Mary: He did remember us. He even asked about Shaan (Mary's son). We used to go to for aarthi and he used to be there. He was happy to host us. They gave us our own little rooms there, Swamiji had his room, and the ladies had their room and Yutesh [son of devotees Rubbie and Bheema from Pietermaritzburg] had his room. Lovely place, just by the Ganges.

When I went on the second trip in 1993 with Swamiji, Romila (Dr Seebaran's late wife) was there as well. We used to go and do hatha yoga early in the morning. Swamiji sent a message to us one night, 'Tell them they must not go and do any hatha yoga tomorrow morning before sunrise.' We never questioned the instruction. Alright, we didn't go. Later the next morning when we got there, the little boys who work there said, 'A hyena came and ate the dog in the morning before sunrise'. Swamiji had

warned us beforehand. [Francis: That's wonderful. Your guardian angel.] Mary, always, always.



[Flashback] The first trip [1974] we went to many places. We even went to the Vaishno Devi temple [pictured], high up in the mountains of Kashmir. That day, not everybody went. Because that day, only the people who managed to have a shower, went, because the water was cut off. I was lucky, I'd had my shower. Shaan was with me. Didi (Pravrajika Atmaprana) went as well.



It's seven hours walk to the top. Seven hours! Shaan is now four years old. He can't walk that distance. I'm carrying him on my back. Mr D P Soni (pictured here being garlanded by Papa on his birthday. Brother Mela Sookdew looking on) helped me with Shaan's napkin bag and water. As also Thiba (later Swami Thribhuvan). We carried on walking,

puffing, and panting. We come to another stage. Swamiji asks, How's everybody? We say fine Swamiji, Swamiji's walking. When it comes to another part, Swamiji says, Right, from now it's each man for himself.

Everybody's gone. Me and Thiba, we're battling. You must know, it's not like now, if you're go, where there's a road. Before you were climbing over rocks and what not. I'm climbing and climbing and thinking, oh my God, what am I going to do? And Swamiji's gone, everyone's gone. D P Soni and Thiba are helping me. I've got Shaan on my back. After a while I go around one corner, I see Thiba sitting huffing and puffing as I pass him. He then overtakes us, goes around the next corner, and later passes me again sitting huffing and puffing. Then I thought, 'I'm not going to go on. I'm just going to stay here. But thank God I didn't, because Swamiji and the others stayed at the top overnight. I would have been left alone on the mountain, halfway.

But let me tell you what I did. Hanumanji is Shaan's deity. I said to Sri Hanumanji, 'You know how you said, Jai Siya Ram' and flew? Please God, you must help me. And the next thing, I was able to walk and there was a lovely little girl dressed in a beautiful Punjabi – I think it was [the Divine] Mother – and she kept saying, 'Jay, mataji, prem se bolo', coaxing us, 'Come, jay mataji', prem se bolo, jay mataji.' And there we are, creeping along. And finally, we got to the top. It was late in the evening. We couldn't do anything. We couldn't shower, we couldn't bath, we just all slept in one big room in whatever corner or space we could find.

In the early morning, we had a bath in the Ganges, and we were then going to the temple. You must see pictures of the temple now. It's all done up. But in those days, you had to (Mary bends double at the waist) crawl in. If you're claustrophobic you're going to die. Everyone took turns to crawl through the entrance. I've got Shaan and he's crying and I'm bending down. You had to creep and crawl. Apparently the murthi manifested on its own. When we got inside, the pujari took the cloth garland off the murthi's neck and put it around Shaan's neck. I brought that garland back home with me.

We came down on horseback. Mummy was there, too. Everyone was on a horse. We couldn't walk down again. Seven hours of walking. We couldn't do it again. We'd die. We're on horseback and they're helping us, and as the horse is bumping, Shaan is sitting shouting, 'Hari bol, Hari bol, Hari bol!' It was a beautiful trip to remember. [Francis: Why could you not take the horses up, or is that not traditional?] Mary: That's not pilgrimage. Pilgrimage, you've got to struggle.

There was another temple. And Swamiji was always there to guide me, to help me. The Jagannath Puri temple had very particular pujaris. You can't go in, if you're wearing a dress. Thank God I had a sari on that day. I always carried a sari whenever I was going to be with Swamiji. There's lines and



lines of people. I got inside the temple, and we're all taking our trays to go and offer. Swamiji and Mummy are five people behind me. Swamiji can see I'm going to have a problem. I go there; I can see that the Panditji takes your tray to go and offer.

He's asking, 'Gotra? What's your gotra?' Gotra is your lineage, so I was about to say, 'Christian'. Had I said Christian, he would have thrown me out. But you know what Swamiji did? When the pandit asked my gotra, Swamiji shouted, 'Ramakrishna!' The pandit also asked 'Naam?' [name]. I would

have said, Mary. He would have thrown me out. Swamiji shouted, Marriamma! [Francis in paroxysms of laughter] Mummy said, but Swamiji you can't call her Mariamma, rather call her Mangala.

An unfortunate incident happened there, however. Sister Henny Schimmel was with us, and as always, she was wearing a very long white skirt – right down to covering her ankles. But because she wasn't wearing a sari or for some other reason, the pujari decided that Henny could not proceed with a tray and through him, offer it to the gods. [Context – in those days, admission of non-Hindus had long been a problem at this particular temple. In more recent times, then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was refused admission to the temple because she was married to a Parsee.]

Rather than have Henny left out and treated in this fashion, Papa's mood changed, and he said to us, 'Just prostrate and let's go from here, don't wait. Let's go. No prasad from here. Come on Henny, come everyone, let's go.' He was visibly upset with the pujaris. Anyway, we just prostrated. Now our hearts were sore because we didn't fulfil the rituals.

But what happened, many, many years later – in fact about three years ago [about 2020], somebody went to Jagannath Puri temple, and they brought prasad and they gave it to Swami Sumanasananda [then the Swami in charge of the Ramakrishna Centre Avoca] and he gave it to us in the kitchen at the ashram. So the prasad from the Jagannath Puri temple finally came to us, somehow or another.

We also went to Rameswaram. Badrinath I couldn't make it. Papa called me and said, 'Mary-girl, what's going to happen about Badrinath?' I said, 'Swamiji, I don't know what's going to happen, because we're leaving the next day by plane to go home. I said, Swamiji, I'll lay my head in your lap and that will be my Badrinath. So I didn't go to Badrinath.



Photograph of Badrinath temple, by Anubha Khare. Used based on https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=49685863

But Jayshree [Mary's daughter] went to Badrinath. It's not easy. It's way up in the mountains [more than 3000 metres above sea level]. When she went to Badrinath she brought back sugar candy, and so I had prasad from Badrinath even though I couldn't get there. So I had the prasad from the four temples. Apparently Holy Mother also went to the Jagannath Puri temple, and she carried Master's picture with her, saying, that if Master went there himself, he would probably go into samadhi and possibly not come back from that state. So instead, she took Master's photograph to visit there.

A very important temple also is the Rameswaram temple in the deep south of India. This is the temple where the Holy Mother visited with Golapma. Mother looked at the Shivalingam in the temple and said, 'Ah, it is just as I left it.' [Devotees will understand the huge significance of this statement].



The sanctum of this temple consists of two Lingams – one that was built with sand by Mother Sita, known as Ramalingam, and another that was brought from Kailash by Sri Hanuman, known as Vishwalingam.

Mary continues: Anyway, the first time the group went to Rameswaram temple [pictured], I woke up late and everyone had already gone off to the temple. It opens very early, half past four or five in the morning. Swamiji left me and Didi (later Pravrajika Ishtaprana). I said to Didi, we've missed going to the temple. Please let's go this afternoon. We took a tuk-tuk, but when we got there in the afternoon, the temple was closed from 2pm to 4pm. [The Deity is allowed to rest after the midday meal]. And we were leaving at 3pm. The railway coach was taking us. So it was a missed opportunity.

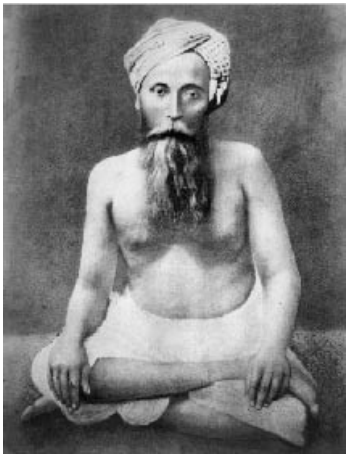
Back to 1993 – 19 years later, we were staying in a little house called Shantibhavan. We all stayed there. We shared rooms.

At the Rameswaram temple, the Shivalingam is washed with milk in the morning. [Abhishekam refers to the Hindu ritual of pouring water or other sacred substances on a statue or a deity while also chanting mantras.] It's a

very great blessing, so they say. So Swamiji comes and knocks at the door and says, ‘Come, come. Get up!’

I can’t be left behind this time. It’s a very great blessing to watch the washing of the Shivalingam with milk. When we got to the temple, there is a row cordoned off on one side and another row also cordoned off. And the Shivalingam is at the end. And the pujari started washing the lingam with water from a kamandalu [water pot] and milk. [This is the same lingam of which Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi said, ‘Ah, it is just as I left it!] The pujari saw Swamiji. He signalled Swamiji to come to the front. Swamiji took the kamandalu and Swamiji was offering water over the lingam.

Ashram Mummy was there. And Swamiji asked Mummy [who had a beautiful voice] to sing. The people were not allowed to go the lingam itself. They’re all outside the cordoned off area. We sang many bhajans, we took our prasad and we left there. What more could we ask for?



In Balaram Bose’s house in Calcutta [which was where the picture of Master standing and being supported in samadhi by his nephew Hriday was taken – picture below] we were allowed to sit in that very same room. [Balaram Bose, December 1842 – 13 April 1890 – pictured] was one of the prominent householder disciples of Sri Ramakrishna]. The harness that Sri Ramakrishna wore on his back to pull the ceremonial festival ‘car’ at Bose’s home, is also there. I went and touched it.

Mary continues: When I was forty-eight years old, I told our beloved Swamiji that when I turn fifty, I only want a hawan for my birthday. No party.



But when I turned forty-nine, it was already in the afternoon and Swamiji hadn't wished me yet. I called Papa and said, 'Swamiji, it's two o'clock in the afternoon and you haven't wished me yet.' Swamiji said, 'Not to worry.' Unknown to me he had planned a whole surprise in which there was a get-together of the ashram people. Mummy and Mala [Thejpal] would be there, and Swami Saradaprabhananda would perform a hawan. We had the hawan and then dinner afterwards. I realise now that the reason Swamiji arranged the hawan when I turned forty-nine and not fifty, is because Swamiji left the body before I turned fifty. So he organised my hawan a year early. My birthday was the 19th of October. [Papa left the body on the 1st of October the following year – 1994 – so would not have been able to fulfil his promise to Mary].

The future Swami Thribhuvan



Mary continues: About Swami Thribhuvan [pictured] being initiated into sannyasa on our second trip to India in 1993. It was in Haridwar, on the banks of the river Ganga [Ganges]. We were sitting there, offering our little lamps and he [the then Thiba], decided to have a dip in the Ganga.

He was wearing only a pair of shorts. Thank God that at that place, there was a long rope from one side of the Ganga to the other, to prevent mishaps or tragedies with bathers. The next thing, the current, which was very strong, swept Thiba away. We were all standing there horrified and unable to do anything. We were crying, 'Ma!, Ma!' [to the Divine Mother] praying for some sort of intervention. Brother Gyanadayal [Teddy at the time] was also there. Thank God, Thiba managed to grab hold of the rope. And when he managed to get out of the water, his shorts had been washed off by the current and he was naked and shivering. Someone on the riverbank took a towel and passed it to him. When he came back up to us, Swamiji said, 'You're not going to be wearing those clothes anymore. You're going to be wearing another colour. So sometime later, when we were back at the ashram in Durban, he was initiated into sannyasa and given the name of Swami Thribhuvananda Puri. [We all used to refer to him thereafter as Swami Thribhuvan.]

Swami Thribhuvan

[Francis adds: When I walked into the ashram and saw Thribhuvanji maharaj, dressed in gerua and sitting on the ashram lounge floor, with Papa in his usual chair, Papa smiled at me and said, 'Nobody put their money on this donkey.' Not meant rudely or unkindly. But Thiba was known for being chaotic and was always being scolded by Papa – so seeing him blessed as a sannyasi was an unexpected but joy-filled surprise. For those of us who knew him, spent time in his company and were with him when he finally left for Varanasi in 2019, to spend his last days at the Ramakrishna Home of Service, we understood that he was a deeply holy man. He accepted without a word of complaint, the awful treatment meted out to him by certain devotees at the Johannesburg Lenasia ashram, with calm and love and he would constantly say, 'It's my karma'. He literally, in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, blessed those who cursed him.]

Mahasamadhi In Benares

In Swami Thribhuvan's last years, his body was ravaged by Parkinson's disease, diabetes and other issues, which the usual medications couldn't control. Today, leading neurosurgeons do deep brain electrical implants, which dramatically reduce or stop the disruptive limb tremors completely. Swami Thribhuvan had long wanted to leave South Africa and end his days in Benares. Eventually, after enormous efforts on the part of Surend and Ramona Bharath, who were close devotees of his, plans were put in place. They made arrangements with Swami Ritananda of the Ramakrishna Home of Service in Benares, to have Swami Thribhuvan stay there. A farewell satsang was held at the Sri Ramakrishna Dham in Lenasia and Surend and Ramona then took Swamiji to their home in Cyrildene, Johannesburg for the last few days of his time in South Africa.

Whilst there, Swami Swatmaramananda, the current President of the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa at the Avoca ashram, came to visit. Maharaj had very thoughtfully brought a wheeled walker, which was a great improvement on the previous walker with rubber stoppers on the end, which required lifting and placing and then shuffling towards. Maharaj brought also various other items, very carefully selected, which he knew would be of use to Swami Thribhuvan. What was particularly beautiful to



hear, was this: Maharaj said to Swami T in front of us, 'Benares consists of three circles. There is the inner, the middle and the outer circle. Where you will be, at the Ramakrishna Home of Service, is at the heart of the inner circle.' You can see from this picture, how worn out and ravaged by the Parkinsons Swamiji's body already was.
A day or two later we were at OR Tambo international airport to see Swamiji off, in the care of Surend, Ramona and the wonderful Muslim oncology sister, Zarina. Whilst mentioning Zarina, Surend and Ramona knew that they would not be able to manage Swamiji on an aircraft, as he required a catheter and other attention. I drove Zarina out to meet Swamiji about a week before he was due to move to Surend and Ramona's home. Zarina was dressed in a full black abaya and burka – as an observant Muslim woman be. As we entered the ashram and I prostrated to Swamiji, so did Zarina. I was amazed. As Zarina rose to her feet, I was even more amazed to see Swamiji take her in his arms and give her a full embrace. He was the most orthodox of Swamis and would not touch a woman. My conclusion was that Zarina must have been very special for him to have done this. Zarina then sat at Swamiji's feet as she asked him a variety of questions so she could best prepare him for the trip to India.

It was a very emotional moment being at OR Tambo international airport departures with Swami T. There were about eight of us who'd managed to talk our way past the security people to be in the check-in area with Swamiji. We knew we would not likely see him in the body again. He was in a wheelchair and several of us were sitting on the floor around him whilst Surend finalised the check-in. Swamiji then began to pray aloud, mentioning the names of all Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciple. The moment of departure came, and we watched with great nostalgia as he was wheeled through check-in and disappeared towards passport control.



Zarina cared for Swamiji throughout the flight to, first, New Delhi where they switched planes and then flew on to Benares. Here's Swamiji, pictured on a pathway at the Ramakrishna Home of Service a month or two before leaving the body.

Swami Thribuvan was warmly welcomed by the monks at the Ramakrishna Home of Service, and settled into temporary accommodation there. After about a week, Surend, Ramona and Zarina left to return to South Africa. There is more to tell about Swamiji's stay in Benares before leaving the body there. Maybe we'll include it elsewhere in a subsequent update? But he turned out to be a great credit to our beloved Papa. A spiritual life lived very well. A true sadhu.

Back to Mary Jibodh, who continues: One day I was walking in the carpark at the ashram with Papa. He asked me to go back and get his patha [a length of gerua cloth for use to keep warm or cover the head]. I went and got it and as I was taking it back to Swamiji I didn't realise I had put it on my own shoulder. And Papa said, 'But Mary-girl, you know you had my

patha on your shoulder? I said, 'No, Swamiji.' He said, 'Yes, you had it on your shoulder, but it doesn't matter.' Mary interpreted this as a sin. [Francis explains it to her as yet another teachable moment which is now passed on to all of us.]

[On their first 1974 visit by Papa and his group to India, they had the great joy of being allowed right into Sri Ramakrishna's bedroom. The original, rough cement floor was still there and there weren't any barriers.]

Mary: In those days, Master's bedroom had not been cordoned off. So we were able to sit really close to his bed. It was a simple flat cot-like structure with wooden feet or blocks. Sprinkled around the feet was kumkum [vermilion powder or sindoor]. Shaan [Mary's young son] was just four years old. We were sitting there and Swamiji told us to meditate.



But here I'm sitting with my mind wandering and not knowing what to do. [Mary demonstrates her huffing, puffing distracted state]. Swamiji and Mummy and all of us are sitting close to the bed. Shaan was using his finger to play with the kumkum. He put a dot [tilak] on my forehead. He then went to Didi [Atmaprana] and put a dot on her forehead. He put his finger in the kumkum each time and went and put a dot on everyone's forehead. [Mary's not sure if Shaan put a dot on Papa's forehead, because she didn't want to look around when they were supposed to be meditating.] That's

how close to master's bed we were able to sit. But when we went again in 1993 it was cordoned off with a high rail as you can see in the picture. Now you must stand behind the barricade. [Francis asks about the original rough cement floor, when the room was in its original state. Mary confirms that in 1973 it was still the original rough cement. The floor now has large black and white tiles which tend to visually overpower the room.] Mary: The railing is elbow height. I can still remember we were standing there with our arms resting on it. The picture of Christ [which Sri Ramakrishna worshipped], is there. I remember the first time, Swamiji going right up to the picture. But the pujari said, 'No, no, please come this side [away from the picture]. He didn't know who Swamiji was.



Papa's Fractured Ankle

Mary is now talking about the Kali temple complex itself on the Dakshineswar site - pictured: We were walking around with Swamiji, visiting all the [smaller] temples. Inside the main Kali temple, there's a glass case with the original murthi of Lord Krishna. [That murthi's leg was broken when a temple priest inadvertently mishandled it. The temple authorities at the time were in a quandary about what to do. Sri Ramakrishna told them that if a human broke a leg, they'd ensure it was repaired and would not discard the individual. And that the murthi could still be worshipped once it was repaired. Master made the repair, perfectly, with his very own hands, so the problem was solved. But many years later the murthi was changed anyhow and the original repaired one was kept inside the Kali temple, but in a glass case.] Mary continues: There was a barricade in front of it. I went to put my prasad offering through the railing,

but the pujari pushed my hand back. Swamiji was standing in front of the repaired murthi of Sri Krishna. As he leaned forward to start prostrating, he seemed to lose balance and fell. I heard a loud cracking sound. Then quickly, Teddy [Brother Gyanadayal] and doctor Seebaran came and lifted Swamiji by supporting him under each upper arm. They gently got Papa down the steps from the temple. They put Papa in a taxi and took him to the Metropolitan hospital in Kolkota where it was discovered that Papa had a broken ankle. Mary adds: That was the beginning of Papa's physical health downward spiral.

The same day, after going all over. Swami Thribhuvan and I are [Mary gestures a dithering motion] jiggery [non-conformist] people. We weren't satisfied. We went to the Nahabat [music tower in the Dakshineswar Kali temple complex - pictured]. This is where the Holy Mother lived and from where she cooked food for Sri Ramakrishna, his disciples and visitors. We were able to prostrate. There was a rail, and the entrance way was cordoned off. Everyone prostrated and off they went to see the other temples, leaving us there. Swami Thribhuvan said, 'Come let's go [inside]'. Can you believe by the grace of God and my guru, the lock was open. Nobody is around. We opened the lock and went through the entrance.



Ooh! You will never believe how Mother survived in that small space of storeroom and bed – the place where she and sister Nivedita are photographed talking to each other.

It's a *very* small room with a little bowl suspended from the very low ceiling. I don't know how Mother survived with the cooking and sleeping and devotees. You'll never believe it unless you actually see it. We came outside again. We decided to go up

the stairs into the Nahabat itself. Mother used to cook under those stairs. There was a clay pot there and some cooking utensils.

I climbed the stairs, feeling my arthritis all the way and bumping my head on the very low ceiling several times. We entered the room which they were renovating, the room where Mother used to stand at the window for hours, watching and listening through the bamboo screen to Master singing with the devotees. I stood in that same spot, thinking of Mother with her arthritis. Chandramani Devi's room was above this. [Chandramani Devi was Sri Ramakrishna's mother. She spent her last twelve years at Dakshineswar and passed away on the Master's lunar birthday, 13th February 1877.] That's the room where Holy Mother used to nurse Chandramani Devi.

When we were coming out, we could see the pujari there. We had to duck, wondering what would happen if he saw us up there. We weren't supposed even to have gone into Holy Mother's room, let alone upstairs into the Nahabat itself. I said to Thiba, 'Let's go bang our heads there – where the Holy Mother banged hers on the low ceiling going up the steps. Mother banged it so hard it drew blood. The doorway is so low you must bend at the waist to get inside. We intentionally banged our heads in the same spot.

When we went to Jayrambati [Holy Mother's birthplace] everyone was walking around doing different things. Swamiji said to me, 'Mary-girl, come with me.' Papa walked a short distance to the banks of the Amodar river where mother used to bathe her younger brothers. It was summer, so there was no water in the river. Just the dry, sandy bed. Swamiji motioned me to go down into the riverbed with him. And there we stood, in the holy place of the Amodar riverbed, with my guru. What a blessing.

Kashipur Garden House

The (then referred to as 'Cossipore' the British corruption of the name) Kashipur garden House is still located in a suburb on the northern outskirts of Kolkata. It was the place where devotees housed Sri Ramakrishna once his throat cancer required regular medical attention.



For readers not familiar with the significance of this house, here's a brief [Edited] history of the house below – source: https://www.facebook.com/SriRamakrishnaMovement/photos/a.134386196699149/141730682631367/?type=3&locale=zh_CN

"Cossipore Garden House (Bengali 'Cossipore Baganbari'), Kolkata.
Sri Ramakrishna went into Mahasamadhi here on 16th August 1886.
He stayed in the round-shaped front room of the first floor, for about ten months, of his last days. His householder devotees brought their Master from Dakshineswar to here for better treatment. Swami Vivekananda and other young disciples stayed here day and night to serve their Master, Sri Ramakrishna. Once, Swami Vivekananda wrote '(Cossipore) is our first Math (Monastic Quarter).' (from a letter of Swamiji to Raja Maharaj, [Swami Brahmananda] dated 13.07.1897).
'It will be good if we can get the garden of Kristo Gopal (owner at that time) in Cossipore. (Where Shri Ramakrishna passed his last days.) What do you say? In future, great works will be accomplished. If you agree with me, don't let this matter out to anybody, either within the Math or outside, but quietly make inquiries. The work is spoiled if plans are not kept secret. If it

can be bought with fifteen or sixteen thousand, then buy at once — of course, only if you think it good. If something more is demanded, make some advance payment, and wait for those seven weeks. My view is that for the present it is better to buy it. Everything else will come by and by. All our associations centre around that garden. In reality that is our first Math.'" – excerpt ends.



Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi in advanced bodily age.

Mary continues: We went upstairs to the room in the Udbodhan House in Kolkota, where Holy Mother left her body on the first floor. She entered mahasamadhi at 1.30 am on Tuesday the 21st of July 1920.

In that room they have a little place where they have Mother's relics. The little stool that Master used for the Shodasi ceremony [in which Master worshipped Holy Mother, as Mother of the Universe] is there, protected in a glass case. Holy Mother's bangles are also there. I asked Swamiji if we could ask the attending Swami if we could take Mother's bangles to be kept in the museum at the Durban ashram. Papa answered with a long-drawn-

out n-e-v-e-r! Those bangles are now housed in Belur Math – the headquarters of the international Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Mary relates an incident in 1994 when Papa's body was very ill. She, her late husband Alan, and ashram Mummy were in Swamiji's room at about 2am. Papa's body was profoundly unwell. Mary asked Papa, 'Swamiji, your body is so ill, what is going to happen to us when you leave the body?' Papa replied, 'My girl, this body is very ill, and I can't do much with it. But when I'm out of the body I will be able to accomplish so much more.'



At Sri Ramakrishna's birthplace, Kamarpukur, Master had planted a mango tree [pictured]. It was still there in 1993 – it's a huge tree. It was a windy day. And the wind had shaken loose hundreds of mangoes, all over the ground. Romila and I picked up those mangoes. We took them with us when we travelled to the South of India to the Vivekananda Kendra at Kanya Kumari [southern-most tip of India] when we went there. Romila and I took turns at cooking in the Kendra. And we made mango pickle, and we were able to serve the guru mango pickle from Master's tree.

We went to the Dandaka forest [there seem to be several spellings of the name] near Ayodhya in 1993, which is famous for being the place where Ravana abducted Mother Sita and Sri Hanuman had to come and save her. Swamiji was lying under a tree with his head resting on a suitcase. The trees were laden with tamarind pods. We plucked some pods, so Papa ate tamarind from the Dandaka Forest and mangoes from Master's tree.

Mary On Papa's Mahasamadhi.
It was about two weeks before Swamiji passed on and we were up in Swamiji's room. Swami Chandikananda was there, Swami Premananda was

there. Swamiji said to me, 'Mary-girl, when I pass on, I want you to get a white flower and place it in the coffin, by my head.' I didn't know Swamiji was going to pass on in just two weeks.

On that fateful morning, we got a call from Swami Saradaprabhananda to say that Swamiji had left the body, and we could go up to the hospital. We went there. I was sitting outside; I was crying because we had promised Swamiji we would do something on the coming Wednesday. I don't remember what it was. But before that Wednesday could come, Swamiji had passed on. And I was crying. In my mind I'm saying sorry. A doctor came out and said we could go in, but were not to go near the bed where Papa's body lay, or to touch anything.

When we got into the hospital room, Swamiji's body was covered with a blanket. And the next thing, I believe it was Swamiji's grace, but doctor Jogessar who was there said, 'It's OK Mary, you can lift the blanket and touch Swamiji's feet.' I lifted the blanket and touched Swamiji's feet, and I felt so happy for the privilege. [Mary is very emotional in retelling this].

Paying respects

Mary continues: Later, when the funeral arrangements had been made, I thought, I have to do what Swamiji told me. And I can't go to the university of Durban Westville [where Papa's body was lying in state for devotees to come and pay their respects] and try picking a flower there, they won't allow me to. They had security at the gate, and they didn't want to let just anybody in. I got in and told Swami Premananda that Papa had said I must put a white flower in the coffin. Mummy and Shamolia were there, crying. Swamiji's body was in the coffin on a catafalque [stand]. I didn't have a white flower. And there were none in the gardens. The next thing Kido from Verulam [the ashram electrician and a devotee] – arrived. He was delivering flowers for the ashram. I said 'Oh, there's my white flower.' So I took a white flower, offered and placed it above Swamiji's head. Then I felt satisfied.

Papa's body at the Avoca shrine

Francis: Papa's body was brought to Avoca before being taken to the University of Durban Westville Hall for viewing by devotees and the public. As the hearse reversed in the driveway close to the Shiva fountain, several male devotees moved forward to take hold of the coffin handles and move Papa's body into the building. At that moment I realised I wouldn't be able to help carry because all the handles were already being held. I moved into the shrine instead and in a few moments the coffin arrived at the shrine door. The one half of the door was still bolted closed, so the bearers couldn't easily get the coffin through. Being inside the shrine, I placed my hands under the head of the coffin to guide it through the gap. The Guru had responded to my need to touch it.

The coffin was placed on a stand at the front of the shrine, close to where Papa's asan was. Why it wasn't put in the centre, right in front of the altar, I have never asked anyone. This was the body of a saint – not some ordinary person. Each of us moved forward to have a last look at Papa's body.

After Papa's body had left the ashram again, I climbed into my car and took a very long solo drive up the north coast from the ashram. I needed to clear my head, alone. Papa had often said to me that if one was distressed or needed to clear one's thinking, a long drive was often helpful. Now I experienced it firsthand.

When I returned, the monastic disciples were gathered in the kitchen-side dining room and asked me to write the obituary notice and some wording for the brochure on Papa's life, which we titled, 'Compassion in Action'.

Treating the holy person's body with respect

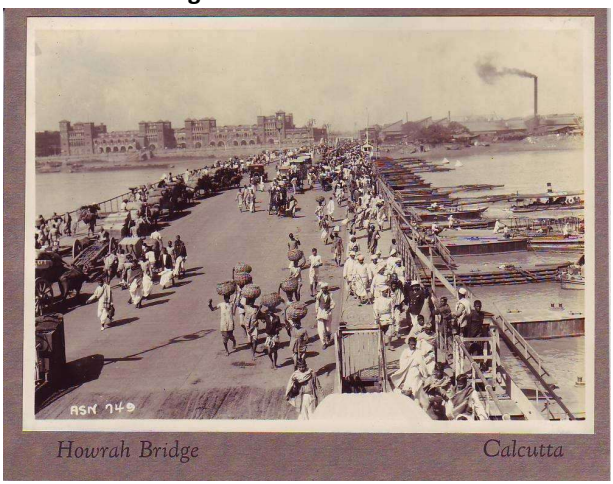
One day when Papa and I were talking about the various ways in which the bodies of holy people are treated after they entered mahasamadhi, Papa said, 'Those bodies must always be treated with respect, because God has consciously lived there.'

And when we were talking about the suffering through which the bodies of the holy ones routinely seemed to go, Papa said, 'If you but knew what they had to go through, to become a saint, you would cry and cry.'

Back to Mary Jibodh:

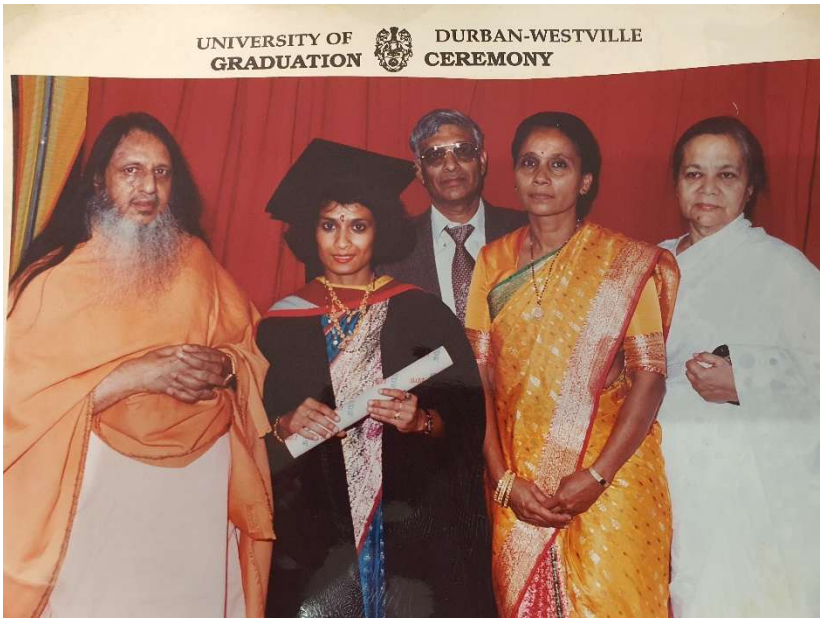
Another little thing. On my 48th birthday I was at the ashram and Papa told doctor Seebaran to go upstairs and bring a blanket off his bed. Doctor Seebaran came down and gave the blanket to Swamiji who then gave it to me as a birthday gift, 'Saying, 'There. Do your meditation on that.' When Swami Chandikananda came to our home to do puja, I used to place that blanket for him to sit on.

The Howrah bridge flower-seller



The first bridge connecting the city of Howrah and Calcutta, was a pontoon bridge that was built in 1874 following a contract signed with Sir Bradford Leslie. Parts of this bridge were built in England and then shipped to India to be assembled.

Annie – Mary's daughter – was very close to Papa. Papa said that in a previous birth, she was a little English girl with a basket of flowers, on the Howrah bridge. Annie is also a speech and hearing therapist. She was supposed to graduate in four years. But some university lecturers were victimising her and her courses went on for seven years instead. It went on until Swamiji said, 'Hey, what is happening?' Anand Singh [now professor] was then a lecturer at the university. Swamiji said they must get Anand to speak to some higher authority and tell them what's happening. Anand sorted out the political difficulties and Papa said to Annie, 'When you pass your exams, I'll come to your graduation.'



Annie's graduation day arrives and Swamiji is sitting in the audience. When they've capped you, all the gowned graduates go and sit on one side of the stage. As soon as Annie was capped, she ran off the stage and down towards Swamiji. Swamiji was sitting in the centre, and he stood up and began moving towards Annie. Annie ran to Swamiji and prostrated to him. All this madness in the hall, because Swamiji had promised her he'd be at the graduation. When we went outside, there were photographers all over. One of them took a beautiful picture of Swamiji with Annie. Mummy was there as well. We all posed for photographs. From there Swamiji asked Annie to go to the old ashram shrine. She took more photographs there.

[Mary got up and went to find the photograph.]





Papa – second from left with white beard – as Swami Vairagyananda is blessing devotees at Papa's request.

Mary shows a picture of Swami Vairagyananda (then aged 94) who was a disciple of, and personally served the Holy Mother Sarada Devi. Mary says: Imagine those hands, which massaged the feet of the Holy Mother when he was a boy of seven years of age, blessing us! Papa had asked him to bless all the people in the travelling party. Papa asked for Vairaigyananda Maharaj's walking stick as prasad, and the Swami gave it to him.



Yutesh – son of Rabbie and Bhimla of Pietermaritzburg – being blessed by Swami Vairagyananda. This young man was also blessed to be initiated by Papa inside the Vasishtha guha cave, in Rishikesh.

[In a similar vein, Swami Chetanananda, the senior monk at Vasishtha Guha, gave Swami Thribhuvan our Guruji's [Swami Purushottamananda's] walking stick as a memento when he returned to South Africa. That stick stayed with Swami Thribhuvan for years. When his Parkinson's disease had advanced significantly and he used the stick, an interfering devotee one day accused him of exaggerating his symptoms, told him that he didn't need a stick and confiscated it. Where it is now, remains a mystery. Swami Thribhuvan shortly after that, required a walker to get about. Even on medication, the body took major strain with the Parkinson's.]

This is where Holy Mother used to dry her hair, sitting on the steps of the Nahabat. Mother is pictured here with Sister Nivedita, the former Margaret Noble – a disciple of Swami Vivekananda.



Mary: When Swami finally got me to get up early and go to the Rameswaram temple, I did what I had to do there, and then came back, I can remember that Swamiji had a splitting headache. He said, 'Mary-girl, come and massage the head.' Mary was massaging Papa's temples.

And one very blessed thing, at Vasishtha guha, where we stayed, the day before we left, Swamiji called me and said, 'Mary-girl, we're leaving today – in the afternoon – go into the cave and bring some sand.' I got a knife and there I am scratching on the floor to loosen some sand. A Swami came in to check on the lamp, and I stopped scratching. He goes out again, I'm scratching. Until I had a handful of sand. So, sand from inside the Vasishtha guha [where the Shivalingam is] cave is under the shrine of the temple in Avoca.

Swamiji was very, very hot. Papa asked Mary to wet his blanket and bring it to him. Swamiji then asked Mary to massage his feet. Mary: Imagine, I got to massage my Guru's feet in Vasishtha guha.



Shamolia, pictured here with Papa. Papa had told us that he intentionally brought Shamolia here to create an attachment. Without which he would have had to leave the body. In Papa's own words: 'The yogis, to stay in the body, must have a thin thread of something to cling onto; something that they can later snap off. So rather choose a thread that you are used to.' 'My thread is Shamolia. I could have another thread - but that's the best thread I can get. Having to call the world my apparent home, I am doing good to it, at the same time.'

Sister Vigie Pillay



[Sister Vigie pictured here with Pravrajika Ishta Prana Mataji, at the 2025 Swami Nischalananda birth centenary celebrations in Durban.]

The 'Baton of Hope' of this, my life's journey, was firmly held by Swami Nischalananda ('Gurudev') from a very tender age. Unbeknown to me at the time, having dawned upon me only years later, this baton of hope was passed from Gurudev to Swami Shivapadananda ('Swamiji').

Early Years with Gurudev and in Memory of my Dear Mother.

My life at the Ashram was, so fortunately for me, kick-started by my parents, G.A. and Linganayagee Pillay, who were founder members of the Ramakrishna Centre in Avoca, Durban in the 1960s. We were truly blessed to be initiated by Gurudev.

I was very young, and I was so pleased that Gurudev included me in the initiation process and ceremony. Amazingly I clearly recall standing obediently in line with my parents and other members outside the residential quarters at the Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam, commonly known as the 'uMngeni Road Temple' situated in uMngeni Road, Morningside, Durban. I carried a small tray which my mum had lovingly prepared for me, with the traditional offerings.

I eagerly awaited my turn and tiptoed [up the steps – pictured] into the prayer room where Gurudev was seated in a meditative state in readiness to receive all members with love. The room was simply furnished, reflecting a spartan way of life – yet it was permeated with the power of Divinity, ready for the sacred ceremony to occur.



I politely greeted Gurudev, 'Namaste Swamiji' and handed my little tray to him with utmost love and respect. I prostrated at his feet and sat with my legs crossed before him. Almost instantaneously I was absorbed into the spiritual presence – it was beyond my control. Divinity just took over all by his will.

I was then initiated by our revered Gurudev. I was given a guru mantra which I continue to recite to this day. I was also given a japa mala which eventually snapped (through constant use) and which despite several failed attempts to re-thread is still in my possession and is very dear to me. After the initiation, I silently left the prayer room with love and gratitude.

At this juncture I may mention that all activities at the Ashram were conducted with dignity and humility, under strict discipline. Accordingly, it was easy for me as a tender young girl to accept and abide by the rules. We did not just visit the ashram and attend the satsangs, meetings, and participate in its various activities – we were resident at the ashram. My parents and I stayed with Gurudev at the ashram for a considerable period, yet on reflection we were not given any special treatment, as Gurudev treated all equally and fairly as children of God.

I now share a few special memories of Gurudev. Whilst staying at the ashram I spent a lot of quality time with Gurudev. We would follow a strict routine. My mother was one of the 'housemothers' and performed her duties diligently. Mum and the other women cooked meals and Gurudev would take over on certain days. I recall a very long dining table where Gurudev would sit at the head of the table towards the shrine. I used to sit next to him on his left and dad on the right of Gurudev. Mum used to sit to the left of me.

Gurudev usually started with the recitation of the food prayer. Like every child I used to play with my food and not eat. Gurudev would occasionally look in my direction and continue to partake in his meals. On noticing that my plate was untouched, Gurudev would exhibit a subtle demand for discipline. There was no idle chat. We sat in obedience. Gurudev without a word being uttered, would look at me, bringing down his nose his black framed glasses and stare intently at me with his bold brown eyes. Needless to say, I finished my meal in no time without looking back at Gurudev or my parents. My parents were tickled by this gesture, where Gurudev stepped in and shared the parental role with little effort.

Another incident was when I fell ill and did not go to school. The ashram had visiting members on a regular basis but during the week it was very quiet. Gurudev noticed that I was restless and bored, and he called out to me to join him to prepare lunch for the day. He carried me to the kitchen. Gurudev often cooked a variety of dhals combined in one pot. Mum did that over the years and I do this to this day.

On that day Gurudev gripped my hand gently and helped me to take a handful of dhals of different kinds to be cooked and then he added his contribution. Gurudev took me to the library to read a few books, took a

walk in the garden, sang his favourite bhajans and did a bit of yoga with me, by which time I felt better and happier. Today I give thanks for that opportunity to be in the presence of Gurudev.



My dear mum performed her duty as one of the ashram house Mothers while my dad went to work. She cooked, helped with the general upkeep of the ashram with the assistance of other members who visited from time to time. Here I should state that sister Henny Shimmel [pictured in skirt, walking on Tongaat beach with Papa and devotees in preparation for early morning yoga camp meditation] an ardent devotee of the Master, visited regularly. She often brought me a gift, which I treasured. Sister Henny and Aunt Ruth, an African woman, took turns to watch over me at the Yoga Camp in Tongaat, whilst my parents were in a meditative state. Also, a kind young lady, Yogi, from Johannesburg, would assist mum by taking care of me during the various camp activities.

Apart from attending the regular satsangs and discourses, we participated in many events, such as the Yoga Camp, rallies (attended by the different branches in Natal) and other functions. Gurudev would visit the cave (on the banks of the uMngeni river) in Newlands, as a retreat. We would visit him there on some occasions.

After a few years we relocated and left the Ashram. My parents remained devout devotees and continued their spiritual practises diligently. They were very deep in their faith in the Master Sri Ramakrishna and were spiritually intoxicated at most times.

With my experiences at the ashram and my parents' spiritual outlook, I in my little way played games differently. Children normally return from school and 'play school', take the role of the teacher and replay the events of a school day. I did that too, but to keep connected to the Ashram I would gather a few children in the neighbourhood and conduct a service

by singing bhajans and would talk about the Master as Gurudev would do. I would sit in front of the little group imitating Gurudev. The setting in our prayer room at home was like that of the shrine at the Ashram. Gurudev, when my parents related the story to him in one of the many telephone calls that they exchanged, was tickled by my game. Amazingly the children enjoyed it, even though they came from different backgrounds and belief systems.

My very last meeting with Gurudev was when I was returning from school one afternoon, while heading towards my dad's office in Goodhope Centre in Queen Street, Durban. I noticed a crowd of people walking towards the stationery shop at Goodhope Centre. My eyes caught a glimpse of revered Gurudev leading the crowd. Being tiny I feared I would be lost in the crowd, so I waited outside the shop and allowed the group to enter. I then peeped through the glass window at Gurudev whilst he was talking to the owner of the shop and responding to the attention of the others. He looked engrossed in his conversation, so I sat on my school bag and watched attentively. As the Lord would have it Gurudev spotted me out of the corner of his eye.

Gurudev lowered his glasses and looked at me. To my surprise he did not smile or wave. But suddenly he left the crowd, still with a stern expression, walked to me, picked me up and carried me into the shop and introduced me to the others with a sweet smile as his baby - baby of the Ashram, with me still holding onto my school bag.

Gurudev spoke to me and assured me that Paramahamsa Sri Ramakrishna would always take care of me. He then let go of me and bid me farewell with the usual namaste and went back to his purpose at the shop. I walked away ecstatic. Two weeks later my mum in a sad tone informed me that Gurudev had left his mortal body. I cried bitterly.

My Days with Swami Shivapadananda.
A few years later we returned to the Ashram, now under the leadership, care, and guidance of Swamiji. Mum resumed her duties as one of the house mothers, cooking meals and assisting with the general upkeep of the Ashram.

We attended satsangs and other events and mum supervised the girls at the Winter Yoga camp. Together with Sri Jayanti Devi (ashram 'Mummy') mum went out for sponsorships and was actively involved in fundraising, preparation of Diwali hampers and other ashram projects. My mum, Mummy and other female members were disciplined, hardworking, committed to the cause and enjoyed a group spiritual relationship. They supported each other, and worked in harmony. All of these were controlled and supervised by Swamiji.

Swamiji saw the need to instil good values and morals in the youth, and he would guide the members along the path of righteousness. He was more laid back than Gurudev and he was always jovial. He was approachable and focussed on counselling members who were in search of a spiritual identity. He adapted to the trends of the time and accommodated members where possible, yet maintained respect and discipline throughout. He imparted knowledge of the spirit to the senior members, bringing to their attention the essence of his purpose and highlighting the mission of Sri Ramakrishna.

The intensity of the drive to spread Sri Ramakrishna's message brought many new members and their children into the fold. We as dedicated members stood by and supported Swamiji during the tough times. Mum, together with Mummy, brahmacharis Angad (later Swami Premananda) Krish (later Swami Chandikananda), Vishnu Tribhuvan (later Swami Thribhuvan) and other dedicated members, kept the fires burning.

I spent a lot of time with Swamiji even though we did not then often stay at the ashram. We attended satsangs, had meals, helped in the kitchen and gathered around after supper in the lounge. These were relaxed get-togethers, and we would have an informal bhajan practice, a short discourse, share ideas and discuss plans for the coming weeks. Some members took the opportunity to discuss personal concerns. It was an enriching experience for me. Thereafter it was time to leave, and we would get into the Ashram's little green Volkswagen beetle and head home. The VW was driven mainly by Swamiji or by Swami Premananda.

On many occasions Swamiji would receive a telephone call from a member who was ill and required prayer or who was in grief arising from death of a family member. Swamiji without hesitation and regardless of the time, and

accompanied by other Ashram members, would leave to reach out to these families. Often Swamiji, Swami Premananda, Mummy, her daughter Kalai and son Lokesh, my mum and I would travel together. Mum and I spent a lot of time with Mummy's immediate family.

Mum and I would go on these trips to homes of members and conduct bhajans. Some other members joined us there. I now wonder in amazement how we fitted in that little car with the harmonium, tabla and up to seven people. Nevertheless, we were all joyous and sang bhajans all the way to our destination.

Swamiji was very devoted to the members. Some days during my visits to the Ashram he would offer spiritual advice and talk to me about the importance of trust in the Master (Sri Ramakrishna). He mentioned I would always be protected and supported. He instilled self-discipline and motivated me to be less fearful and more confident. I became an 'ashram girl' in many ways and was teased for it as I grew older. I participated in the Children's Rally, attended the Yoga Camp, and played a part in the play, 'The Ascetic' by Rabindranath Tagore, which events were organized by the Ashram. I was also in the youth brigade and trained by the late uncle Jackie Pillay, Mummy's husband. He was indeed a kind soul. My inspiration came from my life as an ashram girl.

The Yoga Camp was an exciting event for me and being an only child, I got to interact with other children. We were supervised by Swamiji and his team. The brahmacharis were actively involved in conducting the daily programs, which were well planned and designed to suit each child's needs. Kalai, Mummy's daughter and a dear friend Geetha Maharaj (who sadly passed at a young age) and a few others would show off our yoga skills particularly the head stand and sitting legs crossed in the half Lotus (Sukhasana) pose.

We would have an early start to the day. Start off with a bath, go to the shrine for service, have a simple breakfast, attend Yoga classes, help out in the garden, wash our own clothes (instilling a sense of responsibility) and later have a vegetarian lunch. Then we would meet under a tree for a children's discourse of storytelling, parables, singing and a fun exercise of bonding with children from other centres. My favourite story was about Shirdi Sai Baba strangely enough.

We then took a break for tea, which was served during a period of mouna (silence) on some days. The tea was sometimes intentionally served without sugar (to encourage management of the senses), but we had no way of complaining. It was an exciting experience for me. I am still in contact with Kalai, Molly, and a few others.

It was during one of the Yoga Camps when my dear mum was hospitalised and Swamiji did not want to disturb my Yoga Camp program. He kindly arranged with my mum for me to remain in the ashram to complete the program. But for Swamiji's intervention, I would have had to return to my family.

My guardian angel, Swamiji, arranged for sister Henny, Swami Premananda and Mummy to take me daily to the hospital to visit my mum during the hospital visiting hours. This occurred during the dark apartheid days, and we were faced with many restrictions. On the days that Swamiji had a very tight schedule he would send me to the hospital with sister Henny to visit, even during the non-visiting times. Sister Henny would hold my hand tightly and just walk past the guards and into the ward without any fuss or interference. We would take a meal and sit and whisper some prayers, and exchange heartening spiritual messages. She ensured I was well before conveying to mum Swamiji's encouraging message that all will be well. Arranging with sister Henny in defiance of the apartheid restrictions mirrored Swamiji's naughty, witty side. On the days Swami Premananda had the task to take me to the hospital, we would be dropped off and picked up later.

As we waited for the visiting hours, Swami Premananda would teach me a new bhajan and we used to sing with much enjoyment.

I was not alone and was always taken care of. (The fulfilment of Swamiji's prophecy to me mentioned earlier). I am taking advantage of this platform to give thanks to my beloved Swamiji for his love, guidance, and care.

Mum recovered but unfortunately had other health issues and had a struggle. The prevailing circumstances constrained us into leaving the Ashram and returning to family. But we kept close contact. Many members visited us at home often to maintain the contact with mum.

After mum's passing, I developed a strong affinity for and a close association with Swami Premananda, who counselled me and took care of my spiritual needs. In later years I visited him often, accompanied by my husband, when Premanandaji maharaj used to travel from Johannesburg to Durban to the residence of his pre-monastic sister Beena in Reservoir Hills, and the residence of Brother Raj and Sister Beema in Westville.

Swami Premananda used to inform me of his intended visits to Durban well in advance, and through the kindness of Brother Raj and Sister Beema, who received me with much love, I was able to spend quality time with Swamiji, who showered his blessings on me. Now on reflection, I realised that Swamiji (Papa) handed the 'Baton of Hope' to him. I give my heartfelt thanks to the higher power, knowing full well that His grace runs through all those who held the Baton of Hope.

The Baton of Hope has now reached the powerful and safe hands of Swami Chandikananda. Mum and I had a special association with Swami Chandikananda, who used to visit our humble home quite often in the early days and would engage in discussions with us, most times about the Master. Mum treated the Brahmacharis as her young sons, whom she cared for in the Ashram.

Impactful Life Incidents

When I met my husband to be, I was not sure whether I should take the step of marriage. I discussed the matter with Swami Premananda. He did not give me a definitive answer. I prayed to Gurudev for guidance and soon after he appeared in my dream stating that this is my life partner from my previous birth. I must go ahead for there are some life lessons to be learnt and for me to complete some unfinished karma, by having the experience of marriage. I related the contents of this dream to Swami Premananda, and he said 'Well Vigie, you got your answer.'

My mum was terminally ill. I was the only child, very protected and loved, but I led a sheltered life. Devastation is too mild a word to express my fear and pain of losing her. I was unmarried and nursed mum up until her passing. Two days before she passed, I became fearful and asked, 'Ma what do I do if you are no longer… who do I ask?' In a frail voice whilst also trying to complete her Japa she said 'No need to be afraid. I will watch over

you throughout. Leave all at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna. Ask the Master. No need to look for help or ask anyone. The Master will provide.' Looking back, I know these assurances were honoured.

I give thanks for my spiritual journey and the Master and God who planned my life with difficulties yet necessary challenges and blessed me with the fortitude to overcome them and reach the point where I am today.

I would like to conclude with an experience at Prashanthi Nilayam, the abode of Sathya Sai Baba. This was at the time when mum was very ill. I recall standing in a long queue for his darshan. There were huge crowds and mum struggled but continued reciting her guru mantra. A thought hit me that we were betraying Sri Ramakrishna by being there and I whispered this to mum. Mum with full belief, said that Sri Ramakrishna is here too, all is one. Just to confirm that, the next day, and every day until we left, the 'Thought of the Day' was posted on the notice board, from the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna or Swami Vivekananda - a further confirmation of the oneness of all life, and my dear mum's truly spiritual understanding of life.

After we returned from Prashanti Nilayam, a month before the passing of my mum, I received a message from Sathya Sai Baba through one the Sai Centre officials that I must break off all attachments and He will take care of me – a promise fulfilled through the workings of Providence over and over.

I decided to make this contribution in celebration of the life of Swamiji and that of my dear mum, flowing from her unwavering commitment to the cause of the Ramakrishna Centre from inception to her very end.
Much love and blessings, Vigie Pillay.

Ends.

Brother Francis

I was standing inside the old ashram building at the base of the staircase leading from upstairs. In his very distinctive way, with one sandal causing a slapping sound against the cement step, Papa made his way slowly down. As he got to the last step, he paused, looked at me and said, 'I have come down to play. And I have to play hard, or I have to go.' This may give some

context to Papa creating the intentional attachment to Shamolia [pictured with Papa with the old Avoca ashram building in the background].



Papa And the Poodle Pelvis



I was living with friends in Amanzimtoti in Durban. Their property was unfenced and my little grey Maltese poodle, Juanita, was still a puppy. While I was away for a day, she wandered onto the road and got hit by a car. I got a call to say she was at a local vet and in bad shape. They wanted to observe her overnight to

see if there was any chance of helping her. They'd done x-rays. Her pelvis had been shattered and her one back leg broken.

Papa saw my distressed state and asked what was wrong. I told him my tale of woe. He asked, 'What's your doggie's name?' I told him. He was silent, with closed eyes, for a few minutes.

Early the next morning I got a call from the vet who said, 'I have no idea what's happened here, but it seems like things aren't as bad as we first thought. It looks like she may be OK in time.'

I brought Juanita home after a few days again, and the only permanent reminder of the accident, was a slight, life-long limp in that one back leg.

Respecting animals

You will be familiar with the story in which Holy Mother saw a devotee stroking a cat with her foot. But when the foot touched the cat's head, Mother said, 'Don't ever put a foot on the animal's head. That's the seat of the deity.' In the same way Papa said to us, 'Don't step over an animal's body. Walk around it. Each time you step over it, you shorten its life.'

Animals And Intuition

Papa said that animals have a sixth sense. I saw this in action several times. The first was in my Randjesfontein home in Midrand. I was in the laundry area with Ladu, my beautiful Rottweiler standing on one side, and the kitchen door on the other. I was alone in the house. I heard Ladu giving the kind of soft 'wuff' (not a bark) that she gave when she came across something unusual or unfamiliar. I turned to her and noticed that she was looking through me to something on the kitchen side. There was nobody there. Her tail was wagging as if in recognition of something or someone.

When I was next down in Durban, I told Papa about the incident and asked if it might have been an ‘evil’ entity that Ladu was seeing. Papa asked, ‘Did you feel any fear?’ I said no. ‘Then, said Papa, it wasn’t anything evil.’

In that same house, I slept on a Japanese Futon – a thick padded cotton rectangle on a slatted wooden base, very close to the floor. Not once, but several times when I was still in or on the bed, I noticed Ladu standing at the foot of it, looking into the wall above my head and making the same ‘wuff’ sound, again with wagging tail.



Floppy, having a blissful moment with Papa. His brother pooch was, I think, named Brahmachari.

When Papa was one day leaving the Randjesfontein property where I lived, he said to me, ‘I’m leaving a presence behind here.’ I answered, ‘Yes, Papa.’ Papa paused, and then as he always did

when saying something of particular importance to me, ' Do you understand what I'm saying?' I again answered, 'Yes, Papa.' I understood it to be a protective power.

Many years later when Mummy and I were chatting about the moment, I light-heartedly said to Mummy, 'I wonder if the presence has followed me in all of my numerous home moves?' To which Mummy, in all seriousness said, 'Definitely.'

It makes me think of Papa watching with us, the movie, 'The Power of One'. Which features a little boy learning to box. As he got better and better and was winning more matches, his Sangoma (traditional healer) mentor invoked, through a ritual ceremony, an elephant as his powerful protecting spirit. As the elephant appeared behind the young man, Papa said very excitedly, 'Look at that. Look what he's just put there to protect the boy!'

Bruno the protector

Next door to Mummy's little house in Newlands West, a neighbour had a beautiful, long haired, bronze coloured Spaniel-mix dog. His name was Bruno. But Papa (because of his colour?) always referred to him as Bronzo. So Bronzo he became.

On my many trips down to Durban, as soon as I got to Mummy's house, Bronzo would push his way through the wire fencing surrounding his home, come hurtling into Mummy's living room and literally fling himself upside down into my lap, licking and wriggling as he got big cuddles in return. It was as if we'd known each other for a long time.

Once day, I got down to Durban to hear that Bronzo had tried squeezing through a different part of the fence to get to Mummy and his head had got stuck. He appeared to be strangling. Mummy

frantically phoned Papa at the ashram and Papa drove to Newlands West as soon as he could, intending to free Bronzo from the fence. But by the time Papa got there, Bronzo has passed away.

I was devastated at the news. Our Brother Vasan Govender had buried Bronzo in Mummy's front garden. The soil had subsided somewhat, so Brahmachari Maharaj and I were later filling it in, and raking the surface. I'd bought some rose bushes from the Jungle Garden nursery, and we planted them on top of the grave, where they flourished. During the raking and planting on that boiling hot and humid day, both of us were sweating profusely, and I wept copious tears at the loss of Bronzo, without it being noticed.

Several months later, when Mummy was talking about a security breach on her property being narrowly avoided, Papa said, 'Well, why do you think I put Bronzo here to protect you?' I found it deeply reassuring to know that the beautiful pooch was there in spirit form, still with us, and looking after Mummy's safety.

The Sadhu's Tranquillity

When Papa had people around him, I marvelled at how he would deal with a non-stop barrage of questions, requests for help, explanations on spiritual topics and so on. However exhausted or in pain the body might be, Papa would be patient, tranquil and loving throughout. It reminded me of Maharaj (Swami Brahmananda, Master Sri Ramakrishna's 'eternal companion'), when asked what a monk might have in his pockets. Radiating joy and amusement, he answered: 'Love. Only love. That's what a monk has in his pockets.'

Pain And Endurance

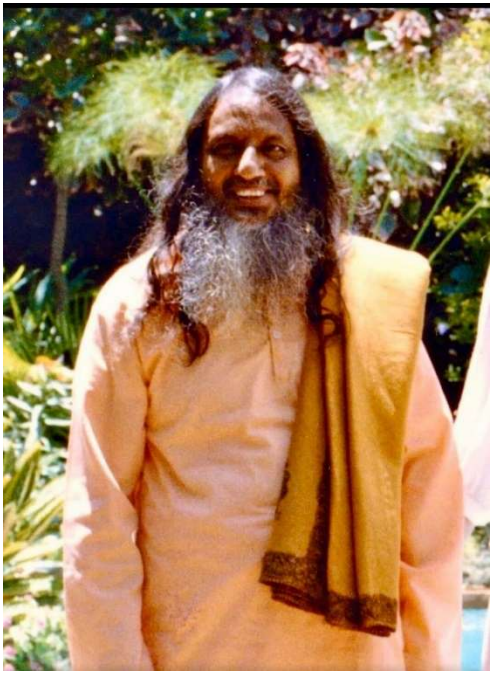
Speaking of bodily pain, Papa one day said to me, 'Bliss is when the pain is so bad, that it can't get any worse.'

I think of the time when Papa's body was close to its end. Papa had such awful gallbladder pain that he'd asked a sturdily built devotee to use his fingers and press as hard as he could, on Papa's right hand side in the vicinity of the gallbladder, to alleviate the pain.

The Rising Struggle

Swami Brahmananda, in speaking to some of the aspirant monks at the Ramakrishna Home of Service in Benares, said, 'Sleeping more than six hours a night is a disease.'

Papa used to say again and again to the aspirant monks, nuns and us sadhakas at the ashram, 'You should get up at four o'clock in the morning.' It's something I tried many times but found that I'd be like a zombie, drifting through the day, with a buzzing in my ears. However, the more obedient and dedicated sadhakas used to do so. I simply don't know how they managed it, because some of them would be serving Papa's body until late in the evening, if not throughout the night.



Call From The Fountain

My ashram brother Shyam Whitfield and I were sleeping in the little upstairs room above the original printing press at the ashram. At four o'clock one morning, we were both startled awake at the sound of Papa's voice. He was singing loudly, from next to the Shiva fountain. I recall the moment of thinking, how are we going to get to the downstairs bathroom, a separate building) and get dressed? We'd have to go past Papa to do so. Does one, unwashed, prostrate to the Guru first? So many thoughts and questions went through my mind. Without thinking, I said to Shyam, 'Do you think he's coming up?'

Many years later when I was recounting the story to Papa and mentioned my wondering, 'Is he coming up?' Papa said softly, 'That was rude.' As of course it was, albeit unintentional. Had I said to Shyam, do you think Papa's coming up? it would have been more polite. Papa never let a teachable moment go by. He would always lovingly correct us. The emphasis was always on respect, gentleness and love.

The Guru's lotus feet

A western married couple arrived at the ashram in the early 1970s. From discussion, the man was clearly one of the people Sri Ramakrishna referred to as digging here, there, and everywhere looking for water, but never digging deeply enough in one place, until they struck water. He'd tried practically every eastern flavoured fad available, and was now going to sample the ashram.

Mummy used to modify Papa's socks by stitching a little division between where the big toe would go and the rest of the toes would fit in, for easy wearing with sandals.

The man saw Papa wearing socks with his single-strap sandals, came up to me, pointed subtly to Papa's feet and in a conspiratorial and amazed whisper asked, in all seriousness, 'Is that what they mean by the Guru's lotus feet?' I worked hard at containing a guffaw of merriment.

Work and mantra

Papa and I were sitting together one day, and Mummy was at a distance, carefully crocheting something, which she did exquisitely well. Papa said, 'Mummy repeats her mantra with every stitch.' A beautiful thought for us and japa.

Are you happy?

Papa would consistently ask people around him, 'Are you happy, so and so?' The answer was always (in my hearing anyhow) 'Yes, Swamiji.' I often wondered if Papa was hoping for an answer along the lines of, 'No, Swamiji, because I'm not feeling closer to God each day.' But by the same token, Papa would so often say to us, when departing from the ashram, 'Be happy!'

Same experience, different interpretations

I was quite surprised one day to hear Papa say, 'Spiritual aspirants have the same experiences, they just interpret them differently.' But then, as so often happened, a validation followed in short order.

Val Whitfield and I were chatting on the phone one day. Her deity (on Papa's strict instruction) was the Lord Jesus. Somehow, we got to talking about dreams in general and I related to her how I'd had a dream (rare for me to remember) in which there was a luminous being standing to the top left of my bed, at the extremity of my peripheral vision. I couldn't see detail but was aware of the most incredible love radiating from the entity. At which Val exclaimed, 'I had exactly the same dream!'

Small vessels, much disruption

One of my ashram brothers, Atmaprakash, and I were recently talking about psychedelic experiences. We were both teenagers in the 1960s and were aware of (but didn't participate in) the use of LSD, magic mushrooms and other psycho-active substances that were prevalent as part of the hippie movement. We both somehow saved it for later life. Him by attending a shaman-guided retreat during which they were served cups of freshly brewed ayahuasca tea. He commented on the varying responses to the hallucinogenic beverage by saying, 'Some people had very intense experiences and were deeply emotionally and physically affected. Some crying out, some vomiting, some falling about the place. But my own experience was very muted.'

My response to him, remembering something Papa had told us and which was echoed in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, was that 'an elephant entering the Ganga causes hardly a ripple, but if it enters a mud hut, the roof and the walls will come crashing down.' The capacity of the 'spiritual vessel' was often evident when people

became overwhelmed at the least stimulus. Whereas others, with that same stimulus, remained calm and meditative. The smaller the vessel the more dramatic the reaction and fallout.

I had undergone Ketamine intravenous sessions in my seventies, for lifelong treatment resistant depression (TRD). Being a psychoactive substance, it was a delayed version of the hippie era psychedelic visual and auditory experiences for me. But it was a deeply spiritual and non-frightening experience. Although it didn't do much on the depression front, it unexpectedly stopped chronic tremors in my hands, giving me back my ability to once again write legibly. All the Guru's grace in different forms. For which I am profoundly grateful.

Papa told us very early on, that if people were not spiritually prepared and had a drug or other chemically assisted experience of some sort, it was possible to 'burn out' the subtle nerves (nadis) and then said Papa, 'Nobody can help you.' Which makes the modern-day obsession with so-called 'Kundalini Yoga' something to be considered with caution.

The in-touch and in-tune monk

If Papa was at the ashram at midday on any day and not in a meeting or counselling someone, he'd put on the TV in his room and watch the CNN global news update. In those days it wasn't the propaganda machine that most news networks have now become, through their ownership by the likes of Rupert Murdoch and others. Although I know some found this TV hour a bit odd, it kept Papa in touch with what was going on globally, in politics, religion, finance, medicine, biology and many other fields. A strong contingent of university students used to visit the ashram. And Papa was a completely relatable, informed source of discussion for them. Even though one or two of the ashramites felt that they were better equipped to handle that age group. Papa could and would, engage on any topic of

conversation, always steering it into an ethical, moral, humanitarian direction. So a spiritual component was incorporated into everything.

Return good for bad

The mothers and girls of the ashram had organised a jumble sale to raise funds for the new Avoca ashram project. We boys went along to help set up the trestle tables and do any heavy lifting that might be required. There was a very broad section of sidewalk in a shopping area of the Durban city fringe, that the mothers decided was a prime spot.

We set up the tables and the ladies folded and arranged the wide range of clothing to make it look as appealing as possible. Sales started and no sooner had they done so, than a woman arrived and complained quite vigorously that she had a shop close by, and we 'were stealing her trade'.

My immediate mental response was, 'What nonsense. We're on a public street and sidewalk. This is fair and legitimate trading competition.' But without any fuss, the mothers selected another spot some distance away and the tables, boxes and merchandises got packed up and moved across to it. Despite the initial hiccup, the mothers did well, and raised a good amount of money.

When we got back to the ashram, someone told Papa about our having to move to a new site. I commented, half-joking, 'I should have placed a saucer at her shop front door with a candle on it and told her it was a Tantric spell.' Papa turned to me and gently made a life-altering comment; 'How much nicer if you did that, but told her that her business would prosper.' That wonderful alternative was seared into my mind. To this day, the idea of returning only good and love for obstructionism or evil, wherever it may be or whomever it may come from, has remained with many of us.

Papa demonstrated to us that there's little more liberating than when your opposition or critics surface in your mind, that you ask your Deity to bless them with love, kindness, and truthfulness. It not only benefits them, but us as well. Because then these negative thoughts can't live rent-free, in our heads. Summing up very neatly, the adage of, 'Bearing resentment is like you drinking a cup of poison, and then waiting for the other person to die.'

Prayer benefits

Papa stressed to us repeatedly, that prayer has a positive impact on the subtle body of the person to whom it's directed. Whether they know or don't know that you're praying for them. At times, our prayer list had become so long that Val Whitfield and I used to joke that we felt like going to our home shrines and saying, 'Dear God, please see the attached list.'

Reading with feeling

Papa often got various individuals to read from a book that was seemingly randomly selected. But as so many devotees will attest, there was inevitably something of relevance in that reading, for several, at least, of the people present.

When I was there, I tended to become the default reader at Papa's request. Although I'd always been considered a good reader and had even recorded audio books, Papa lovingly took my reading to the next level. He one day said to me, 'Imagine that you're there, and read so that the meaning and the feeling is conveyed to the listener.'

I found that approach not only deepened one's concentration during the reading, but evoked emotions as one truly 'lived' the story. Sometimes bringing one to the point of almost weeping or wanting to just stop and think about some profound insight.

That guidance has stuck with me. I shared Papa's teaching by saying to Siphe Buthelezi, my young African ward, when having to do out-loud reading in class at school, 'Read it with expression!' In pure speech terms, it improves the modulation (peaks, valleys, light, shade, nuance, and energy) in the spoken speech, and makes it so much more interesting and alive for the listener.

Papa used every possible opportunity as a teachable moment to improve us, and what we did. Most of the time in a loving and very gentle way. But on occasions when our egos got out of control, Sri Hanumanji's gada [club] would, metaphorically, be used to deliver a thud on the ego's head.

Advance notice of arrival

Ashram Mummy was born in 1928, ten years ahead of Papa taking a body. Mummy told me that when she was a young girl, she was lying in bed and looked up to see a sadhu standing at her bedside. He wore a dhoti on his lower body, Rudraksha beads on both upper arms and his forehead and chest were smeared with ashes. He had long, matted hair. As he looked at her, tears rolled down his cheeks, and after a few moments he was gone.

Mummy said that many years later, when she was pressing Papa's feet, she looked at him intently and realised with a start, that this was the same sadhu who'd visited her as a young girl. As that realisation struck her, Papa said 'Yessir!' Which was something he often said at some significant moment, when a disciple had a fresh understanding. Papa told us that if we dream of a holy person, it isn't just a dream, but a visit from that holy person in the subtle body. Those who have had this experience will know that such a visit usually produces an 'afterglow' after waking up.

The sadhu's tears were not without reason. The politics that swept through the Centre after Gurudev's mahasamadhi, are common to many institutions. And when it's a religious institution, it's often even worse. People jostle for power, position and clique or cabal inclusion. And jealousy is a key driver. As Papa used to say, 'People bring their minds when they come here.' He also said to me, 'Only the Guru truly knows what's in the aspirant's heart.'

Work in other places

Sitting with Papa one day, something about Hawaii surfaced as a topic. Papa said softly, 'I have much work to do there.'

'This time, I have come for the householders.' - Papa

Master and monkeys

A beautiful, framed picture of Sri Ramakrishna used to be in Gurudev's room upstairs in the old Avoca ashram. Sister Henny Schimmel worshipped at it daily. Gurudev's room was kept locked and was much as he left it on his final use. I had the privilege of sleeping in it one night. It would have been unthinkable for me to lie on Gurudev's bed of course, so I snuggled up with some blankets and a pillow on the floor and slept soundly.

One day, Henny Ma whispered to me in horrified tones. Monkeys (who were in abundance at the ashram) had climbed through the inadvertently left open window into Gurudev's room. Somehow, they knocked the picture of Master over and castor oil from the diya [prayer lamp] ran over his face, soaking into the cardboard. Henny asked if there was anything we could do to rectify the damage.

Being in advertising at the time, I took the picture back to Johannesburg with me. We had a very idiosyncratic, gruff, physically huge, pipe-smoking, and brilliant air-brush artist at the agency. His name was Hennie. How's that for synchronicity?

I was a little apprehensive that he might react disrespectfully to the picture or spurn my request for help. With Master's grace, he enthusiastically embraced the challenge of restoring the picture, and at no charge.

About two weeks later he called me and told me the picture was ready. I headed off to his studio expecting some traces at least of the monkeys' anointing with castor oil. But there wasn't the slightest sign that the picture had ever been damaged. It was flawlessly restored. I was so thrilled and grateful. He was happy that I was happy.

He could not have known how privileged he was, that Master chose him as the instrument of restoration. But I believe that he will have earned appropriate merit for handling a holy icon so respectfully and restoring it to its former glory. That picture today hangs in the President's office at the Avoca ashram.

Papa told me several years before the castor oil episode, that at the time of the worst internal political upheaval at the Centre, he looked at that same picture one day, and there were tears coming out of Master's eyes.

The pathless path

Papa described the spiritual journey as 'a pathless path'. No signposts. To which He added, 'The highest good is to die, doing, for the Unknown.' The Bhagavad Gita teaching in one phrase.

On wandering off that path

You'll recall Papa saying that the ashram was not a retirement home for saints, but rather a hospital for sinners. To which he added, 'And when you're admitted here, you don't get released until you're cured.' Papa stressed that if we started to wander off the path or

move away from our spiritual course, that 'Mother Nature herself will force you back onto it.' That appears to be either through ill health, troubles, or lack of finances. Papa said that we think more about God when things are not going smoothly. I suspect we'd all agree.

On taking one's own life

At various stages of my life, because of genetic clinical depression (maternal grandmother and my own mother also struggled with it) I have contemplated suicide. Papa clearly knew that this would happen. Because on one occasion he said to me, 'Taking your own life is the *greatest* sin.' And years later he added, 'Committing suicide is a terrible thing. It takes a great saint to get you back from there.' Clearly meaning from a lower realm or Loka (level of consciousness). So even when things were at their worst, I'd already know that the outcome of taking one's own life was not going to lead to a better place.

Please make a note of this and tell people who might need it. Three people from the Sri Ramakrishna Dham in Lenasia took their own lives over the years, which was a tragic and possibly avoidable outcome. Professional help is available. Refer, and take it when necessary. Today, there's easily accessible assistance and support through the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG). They're accessible on all social media platforms as well. On their website, they give useful contact information. Please put the relevant number into your mobile phone. You might be God's instrument in saving a life:

SADAG Helplines in South Africa provide free telephonic counselling, information, referrals and resources 7 days a week, 24 hours a day – call 0800 21 22 23, 0800 70 80 90 or 0800 456 789 or the Suicide Helpline 0800 567 567. They're @theSADAG on twitter.

Wrapped up in the Guru

Early on in my days at the ashram, Papa said to me, 'When I am not with you physically, imagine that I am the air around you.' I thought about that for a moment and said, 'That might be a bit difficult.' Papa responded: 'It will be easier when I am no longer in the body.' And, with his grace, it is.

I also loved Papa's recommendation that we imagine ourselves as a pinpoint of light moving through the vast space of this world and all consciousness. Imagining that Sri Ramakrishna's love and grace is radiating outwards from us, touching everyone and everything in the vicinity.

Put the problem into Master's lap

Papa knew that I was very attached to the animals I was blessed to take care of. Some of them were what I called my 'Ashram refugees'. Four of the ashram dogs saw out the last years of their lives with me. Sometimes when I was down in Durban and one of the dogs back in Johannesburg was unwell, I would worry about them. Papa asked what was troubling me. When I told him of my worry about the dogs, he said, 'Whenever you go somewhere, mentally put them onto Master's lap, and know that He will look after them.' I have continued to do that not only with animals, but with many other things over the years.'



Chakra (pictured) was one of those ashram dogs. A gentle German Shepherd-Labrador cross. Towards the end of his life, he had a series of strokes. After the second one, his co-ordination was affected, so although still happy and getting around the one-hectare property I was living on at the time, if he barked, he fell over. A few months later, he had a third stroke, and this was followed by a rapid deterioration in his condition. I phoned and told Papa about the situation. In a choked voice, I asked, 'Oh Papa, please hold his paw.' Instantly Papa said, it is done.' A few weeks later, Chakra could no longer stand. I called to ask Papa if it was OK to get the vet to the house and let the old doggy leave his worn-out body. Papa's words to me were, 'My son, you do whatever you need to do.'

Papa knew that we had exhausted every possibility. In contrast, when Mother Radha (not meaning about herself) was one day talking generally to Papa about the euthanasing of animals, Papa's emphatic response to her was 'That's a dirty, filthy western habit.' As we've realised so many times, what is said to one devotee by the guru, does not necessarily apply to another. Some people (certainly not nature loving Mother Radha) would have animals put down on a whim. We need, with professional veterinary advice, to ensure that there's a careful balance between life, and quality of life, for the animal. When it becomes completely untenable for the beloved animal – time to let them go. As an aside, when it came to people,

Papa said it's essential to keep the body as long as possible – I guess to work out maximum present-birth karma.

On love and attachment

I was caught in a secular relationship at one point and Papa was trying to wean me away from it. It so happened that one evening at the time we watched the Franco Zefferelli-directed film on the life of St. Francis, entitled 'Brother Sun, Sister Moon.' At one point in the movie, the young Francis says, 'This love is a confused thing within me.' He pronounced as in the old English 'con-*fews*-ed.' Papa tapped me on the shoulder and said softly, 'Note that.'

Speaking of St. Francis, Papa said two things that have stuck in my mind. One was, 'St. Francis came to show the negative path (self-abnegation) to God realisation. The other comment, out of the blue to Shyam Whitfield and myself one day, was. 'Don't be surprised if you discover you were followers of St. Francis.'

Obeying the guru

Papa would occasionally share teachable moments that he had experienced with Gurudev. One day when stressing to us the need to obey the Guru's instructions, he shared a personal example. In Papa's pre-monastic days, Gurudev had said to the then Inder, 'You must learn to type.' Papa said somehow or other he never did get around to it. And Papa said with a mischievous glint in his eye, 'And look at my position today. I now have to get everyone else to type for me.' It was a valuable lesson for us. Mummy and Benny Maistry played the role of default typists.

Papa made sure we were all sufficiently tech-literate during his time in the body, to be electronically independent. Papa encouraged us to learn how to use computers very early in the days of DOS and the early word-processing era. He would ask us questions, and we'd have

to find out or learn something new to explain it. We all thought that Papa was doing it so he could learn the ins and outs. But in hindsight it was of course, so that we would become tech-literate. Just as Master used to get Swami Vivekananda to read certain things to the other disciples. But Master was wanting to instil that thing in the young Naren's mind.

In the same way, Papa would give specific people something to read for all of us, when the reason for the reading was clearly adding to that person's knowledge base. I used to get most of the reading instructions when I was at the ashram, so was clearly in need of more remedial therapy than many. 😉

My fellow sadhakas were very diplomatic. I only realised after a year or two of reading from 'Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master' that I had been pronouncing Master's boyhood name as 'Gadd (as in gadding about) a – daar.' An appalling anglicisation.

Waiting for the Rishi

A devoted couple used to visit the ashram along with their little daughter, who always protested at having to go to the Centre. This became a bit of a pattern and when the concerned parents told Papa about this, he said, 'Oh don't worry about that. She's waiting for an ancient Rishi.' And that Rishi turned out to be Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, leader of *The Art Of Living Foundation.* She is today a disciple of Maharaj and among the teachers he has authorised to spread his message. She and I had a good chuckle about Papa's prophecy being fulfilled.

Speaking of Gurus, when it was obvious that some people were following crooks and charlatans, Papa said, 'You get the Guru you deserve.'

Picture the Guru

One day my very dear spiritual sidekick, Mother Radha, was swanning about taking pictures of all and sundry. She took a picture of Papa, turned to me, and asked, 'Shall I take one for you, too?' Papa responded by saying, 'He doesn't need a picture. I'm already in his heart.' With his grace, that was and is true.

Papa often did and said things to discourage devotees from becoming attached to his body. He said many times, 'This body is a limitation. Out of it, I will be able to do so much more.'

Loving literature lesson

The first time I had the joy of sitting in the ashram Volkswagen Kombi with Papa, I had just bought the large version of Sri Ramakrishna's Gospel from the ashram bookshop. Which was very well managed by Sister Sri who became Pravrajika Atmaprana Mataji.

Papa began singing a bhajan and we the passengers all joined in. I had Master's gospel on my lap. I couldn't clap without it sliding off my lap. I moved my hands very slightly, thinking to put the book on the car floor (yes, I also cringe when I think of it now). Before I had even moved the book, Papa very gently took it and put it on the vehicle dashboard. The singing and clapping continued and a lifelong lesson had been lovingly given, learnt, and remembered.

Respecting all symbols

Papa made sure that we developed a respect and reverence for all sacred symbols. My brother Shyam Whitfield used to make fine hand-crafted leather sandals with just the little strap between the big and next toe. On one pair, he'd inscribed the symbol of the cross on each sandal. Somehow or other, Papa got to see them and very gently said, 'Don't put any holy symbol where it will be walked on or treated

disrespectfully my son.' We all learnt from and remembered the lesson.

Manipura chakra boundaries

Papa taught us to hold any object of religious significance no lower than waist-height (belly button or manipura chakra in the subtle body). This applied to our malas as well. And to offer things with the right hand, both hands, or have the left hand touching the elbow of the right arm, as we handed over something. This is a very strong and good indigenous African custom, too. Today, I automatically do this all the time without even thinking about it. I have noticed the odd quizzical look from fellow Caucasians when doing so.

The left-hand no-no

I recall an instance where devotees had been offering Bilva leaves on top of a beautiful Shivalingam. When my turn came, the pile of leaves was high and perilously balanced. I just knew that like a Jenga game, my leaf would likely be the last straw. I was faced with the terrible possibility of knowing that my left hand might need to fly to the rescue of the toppling pile, which would have been a big no-no, but mercifully, and with Papa looking on, the leaf stayed put, without causing an avalanche.

Sit! Stay!

Papa was once trying to get a lovely, smooth, natural stone to sit in place as a Shivalingam for worship purposes. Each time he placed it, it slipped to one or other side. After several attempts, Papa gave the stone a sharp slap and said, 'Now sit there!' And it did. I'm not quite sure what Lord Shiva's reaction was. 😂

Purity of heart

We were sitting in the dining room of the ashram one day, having lunch with Papa. An African man had come to visit and was sitting to

Papa's right-hand side eating his lunch. As Papa was eating, he entered into a deeply introspective state and started eating food off the man's plate. The man didn't react but must have realised that something special was taking place.

From time to time, Papa would take some food item from his own plate and pop it straight into our mouths. From childhood I'd never been able to eat anything if someone else, even my own mother, so much as touched my food. But from Papa it was as natural as breathing.

Papa said to me one day, 'Never, ever, eat or drink anything that someone else has already partaken of.' In the same way, Papa repeatedly told us sadhakas not to eat food served at funeral sraad (not 'faith') ceremonies, as it had the potential (as Master also said) to damage a sadhaka's spirituality.

A mahatma's (holy person's) body

We were talking about the different methods of disposal of a saint or holy person's body. Although 'just a body' as many might think of it, Papa stressed that it should be handled and treated with respect and reverence because 'God has consciously lived there.'

Offered flowers or ash from a hawan

Papa told us that any items from a worship, whether garlands, flowers, ash or anything else – should be disposed of in a respectful manner. Under a tree, or in a garden, but where people would not walk over those items, which are now prasad.

On becoming a saint

We were talking about the lives of holy ones and how their journeys seemed to consistently include great physical suffering. Papa said

softly, ‘If you knew what they had to go through to become saints, you would cry and cry and cry.’

Apart from the visible and recorded physical suffering experienced by the holy ones, I often wondered about the mental burden of listening almost non-stop, to the travails and problems of others.

As with the deity, so with the sadhaka

Papa said that if we worship and sincerely meditate on a particular deity, we will in time begin to display characteristics of that deity's nature, as we perceive it to be.

Sleep and merit

So many ashram activities or discussions involved being awake late into the night. This all finally made sense when Papa said one day, 'There is no merit without loss of sleep.' So that was our little bit of tapasya (austerity) to benefit from the teaching, discussion or activity.

The caretaker and the broom

Some sadhakas are at risk of feeling superior because they're involved with an ashram or blessed to have a spiritual preceptor. Papa put this into a simple context. 'Your role here is to be the caretaker (or janitor). It's your job to keep the place clean and ready for use by others. That's what we are. Brooms in God's service.'

Concentrated spiritual energy

Often when driving with Papa, we'd see him put his hands together in a namaskar (prayer) position and bow his head in a certain direction. Only a few seconds later would we see a mosque, church, temple or church come into view. Before my question of 'why?' was even fully formed in my mind, Papa said, 'It's everywhere, but it's denser in certain places.' In my mind, in reference to spiritual energy.

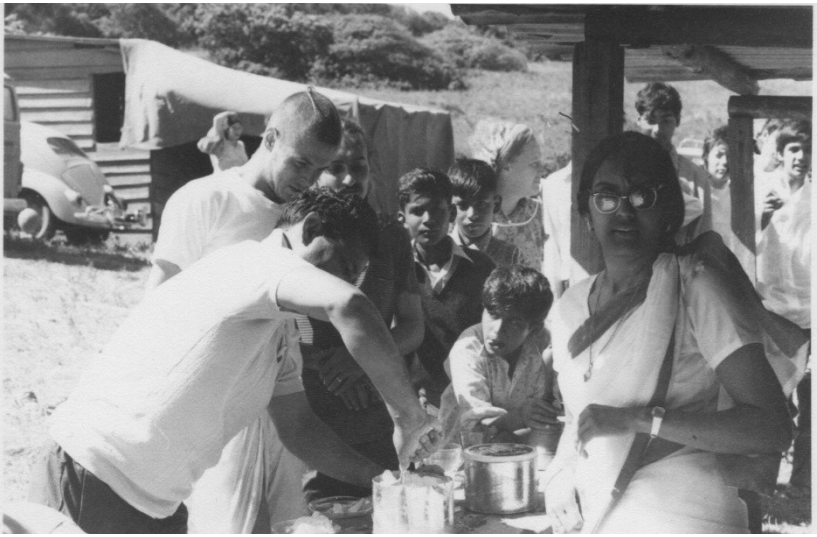
The godly kiss

One day as I'd prostrated to Papa I leaned forward and as part of our always tight embrace, I spontaneously kissed him fully on the lips. Immediately, I had a moment of horror thinking that I'd perhaps done something inappropriate. But before I could think further or say anything, Papa said, 'Come here,' gently pulled me towards him again

and kissed me back, firmly on the lips. What is spontaneous and driven by love, is pure.

Purity of mind when cooking

There were rare occasions at the ashram when Papa would send back the tray of food brought to him, saying, 'This is not good food.' Meals were often prepared by people at home and brought to the ashram to feed the devotees. Papa stressed again and again the need to have pure thoughts when cooking. And not to cook in anger, or with other inappropriate thoughts or emotions. Because the negative vibrations would be carried in the food.



At one of the Tongaat yoga camps. Brother S H Singh enthusiastically opening a can of some sort, Brahmachari Maharaj looking on, and wearing glasses, Vanitha, who became Gargi, who became a nun and is now Pravrajika Ishtaprana, and in charge of the Sri Sarada Devi ashram in Asherville in Durban.

At our annual yoga camps, Papa would sometimes do part of the cooking. I recall Papa, with a large stick, stirring with great difficulty, a huge pot of food over an open fire. Papa often reminded us that while Master was purifying devotees with his presence and words,

Holy Mother was doing so, through the food that she prepared for all of them.

Prostrating To The Holy

I recall one day asking Papa what to do, when for example, the earth was muddy and we were trying to greet a monk, but a physical prostration would have meant a full change of clothing being necessary afterwards. Papa said, 'You mentally prostrate instead. A truly holy person will know that you have done so.'

Food and memory

We were discussing sattwic, rajasic and tamasic foods. There were those in the ashram who went overboard avoiding chillies, garlic, onions, ginger and the like. Papa didn't approve of extremes in anything. But I was interested to hear Papa say, 'Eat a lot of onions for a few days, and see what happens to your memory.' That was sufficient caution for us to be more aware of what we were consuming.

Where to focus in meditation

I once asked Papa, 'Should I be meditating in a particular part of the body?' Papa said, 'For you, anywhere you like, so long as it's in the head.' Note Papa's words, 'For *you*.' He lovingly taught us that what was suggested for an individual was not intended to be applied to all.

Mindfulness and respect in all things

I'd bought several abrasive bath or shower mitts, thinking they'd be useful to Papa and the ashramites. They were great for exfoliating the skin. I wrapped them individually and when I got to the ashram there were several of the ashramites there. I handed them out and in an awful moment of thoughtlessness, handed one to Papa as well. 'Handed' and thoughtlessly were the operative words. Not offered. Papa just took the wrapped mitt and left in on his lap. But a few

minutes later when the others were not there, Papa picked it up and tossed it onto the table next to him. The message was clear, and a life-long learning.

The sandalwood saga

In a similar fashion Papa had asked for some sandalwood oil. I went to one of the shops in Durban that stocked essential oils and was amazed at the price of the sandalwood oil compared with many of the others. On my next visit to the ashram, I offered the little bottle to Papa who immediately opened it and dabbed some behind each ear. Without thinking, I said, 'It's so expensive.' Why? I have no idea. Papa didn't respond and carried on as if he hadn't heard the inappropriate comment. But I made a mental note not to fall into that lack of thoughtfulness again.

Dreams and remembering them

During a general conversation with Papa, he asked, 'Do you remember your dreams?' My answer was 'No, Papa' to which Papa said, 'Good.' Only rarely do I remember dreams and am always left in awe by fellow ashramites who tell me how regularly they dream of Papa or Mummy or some other holy person.

It was on a much earlier occasion when we were talking about dreams that I said to Papa, 'I have dreams in which I'm flying.' To which Papa said, 'I know. There's a certain kind of power there, and you're wasting it.' It was one of many occasions on which Papa said something, and I never thought to ask a question or explore the comment further - but didn't. I had this (strange?) idea that if an explanation was required, it would have been given.

Puranic stories and legends

I hope dear reader that you won't be offended, but my heart used to sink at a satsang when Papa or another speaker began to tell what for me always seemed like overly long stories with relentless detail from the Puranas. My mind was never and still isn't geared towards them.

But I learned a valuable lesson one day when we were talking about legends and 'mythology' from some of the Hindu holy books. Papa summed it up in one beautiful short sentence. 'What people call myths or legends *are not that*. They are traditional wisdom.' When we think about it, those (I still think they are, though) long and often convoluted stories, always had a moral or other learning encapsulated in them.

Don't trust too easily

One day, out of the blue, Papa turned to me and said, 'You know what your problem is?' My mind raced to scan where I might have recently displeased Papa, but almost without missing a beat, I answered, 'No, Papa.' Papa said, 'You're too trusting.'

It was a valuable wake-up call. Only when thinking about that cautionary advice, did I realise how often I'd been taken advantage of, by not approaching people and situations with sufficient care.

Malas on the beach

At one of our Tongaat beach yoga camps, we'd all marched down to the beach in the early morning for Surya puja and meditation. Afterwards, we sat facing Papa as he shared some wisdom with us. Papa then opened a little bag which he had with him and said, 'Who wants a mala?' Such was the ego, that I didn't put up my hand. But several people did, and they went forward to receive a mala from Papa. Old Ma Govender who had beavered away in the ashram



kitchen for many years, also put up her hand. Papa looked at her and lovingly and gently said, ‘Ma, you don’t need one.’ She was a karma yogin of the finest kind. She never stopped working, cooking and cleaning at the old ashram. Years later, Dr Anoop Seebaran found her sitting with head down on a bench outside the kitchen in the wee hours of the morning. She had silently left the body and gone to be with Master and Holy Mother.

On that morning at the beach, Papa beckoned Rosemary Oosthuizen, and gave her a mala, then took her hand and wrote some symbols on it. I heard Papa say, ‘This is for the Lord Jesus and that is for Mother Mary.’ A reminder that Rosemary was given the name Sri and then became a Hindu nun many years after, as Pravrajika Atmaprana. Looking at her one day, Papa said to me, ‘A pity she wasn’t born a man.’ But she outdid all of us when it came to digital printing processes and many other fields. She was a qualified radiographer, and had also satisfied a wish from Papa that she obtained a university degree.

Divine Calling

At one time when I was living in Johannesburg, I stayed in a tiny apartment in a building called Inglenook. The building was owned by the Christian denomination Salvation Army. Papa and some of the ashramites had come to visit. At one point, the harmonium and cymbals were going full tilt and voices were joyfully praising the gods. Only now, when I think back to that delightful satsang, do I wonder what the other, largely Christian people in the building thought. Perhaps that it was a Hindu religious conversion ceremony?

Suddenly there was a knock on my front door. I thought, 'Uh-oh, a complaining neighbour', even though this was a late afternoon. I opened the door to find a tiny, elderly lady there. Without greeting or introducing herself, she breathlessly said, 'The music, oh the music. I have to come in.' I ushered her in and the person sitting next to Papa on one of my small couches gave up their spot, and she was blessed to sit next to Papa.

Only later did I discover that she lived in one of the apartments below me. She was German. I marvelled yet again at how, if people were meant to have Papa's darshan in this birth, they would be blessed.

In the same way, when I was living in Durban, I heard crying in the passageway outside my flat. I opened the door to see a little boy – perhaps six or seven years of age – standing there, weeping. He said, 'I'm going to get into terrible trouble.' I asked why? He said, my mom went out and told me not to go outside the flat. I came into the passage and the door locked behind me and now I'm going to get a hiding. I said, 'No you're not. I'm expecting some people, so you'll stay here until your mum comes back, and everything will be OK.'

A few minutes later, I saw the ashram VW Kombi arriving. Taking the little lad by the hand, we went downstairs to greet Papa and the party. After I'd prostrated, I told Papa about the little boy being locked out. Papa looked at him and gently said, 'Ah. He just had to see me in this birth.' When the little man's mum came home, we explained what had happened, and she was just relieved that the boy was fine.

It was in that same sparsely furnished Durban apartment that the first time Papa, Mummy and the Brahmacharis came to visit, that Papa came in, and lay down on my bed. It was a bachelor pad, so no separate bedroom. Papa appeared to be giving the body a good rest. As tea was going to be served, Papa sat up and said, 'This is a sadhu's flat.' Today, at close to eighty years of age, I recall so many instances in which Papa would inspire us and gently push us to work at spiritual progress. He would never emphasise the negative, but always stress the positive alternative to something.

Embracing The Former Enemy

One of my early experiences at the ashram was the arrival of a husband-and-wife couple from Pietermaritzburg. Papa embraced them gave them a hearty welcome and treated them like loved ones he hadn't seen in ages. Only after they'd left, having spent blessed time with Papa, did I hear from someone else, about them. They'd evidently worked very hard against Papa and all that he was trying to accomplish for the Pietermaritzburg and Avoca ashrams. They'd literally ganged up with several other people to make things as difficult as possible to disrupt Papa's mission.

Yet it was these very same people who Papa received with love, which overwhelmed them and left them behaving very differently from then on. The saying 'Love conquers all' was in clear evidence.

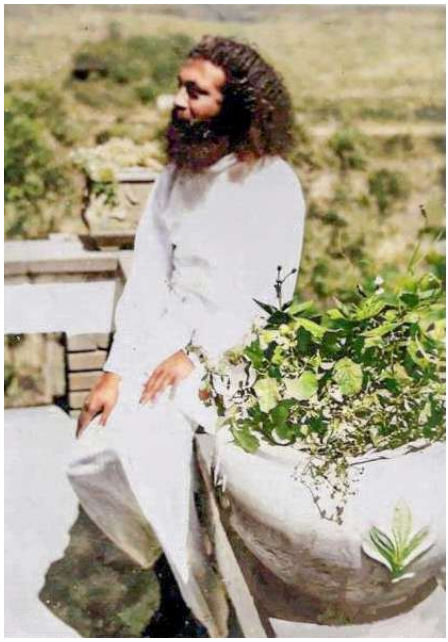
Anyone for a burger?

Papa had been giving some instruction to a group of young people. Probably pre-teens. At the end of the session, Papa said, 'Who would like a hamburger?' Some must have thought Papa was joking. Others were too afraid to admit to being meat-eaters. So just a few put up their hands. Papa got someone to go and get just those people the burgers.

More mala sagas

It was so odd how several of us were obsessed with the idea of having a mala. I'm not sure that it would have helped our pretty poor efforts at japa, but we wanted one anyhow. That and initiation were often topics of discussion among the sadhakas. One day as Shyam Whitfield, John Tunmer, and I were sitting at Papa's feet in the lounge near the fireplace in the old ashram, Papa said, 'What initiation can I give you? You are sparks of Sri Ramakrishna.'

On wastefulness



Our beloved param Guru, Swami Nischalananda, was a stickler for not wasting food, as was Papa. On his various pilgrimages around India, Gurudev had been so hungry that he was forced on occasion to eat discarded food. His comment to his chelas was, 'You haven't known real hunger until you've had to eat out of rubbish bins.'

Brother Basha told me of an incident from the 1960s, where a devotee, our dear late Brother Peter van den Berg, took some sliced cheese out of the fridge at the ashram, as they were preparing for breakfast. As he did so, one slice fell to the floor. He picked it up and tossed it into the kitchen dustbin.

A few moments later, Gurudev came through to eat breakfast with the boys. As he entered the kitchen, he walked straight to the dustbin, opened it, picked out the discarded piece of cheese and popped it into his mouth. Neither Gurudev nor the devotees present said a word. But the lesson was never forgotten.

Peter left the ashram following Papa's mahasamadhi. He became a helper at the Chinmaya Mission in Durban, until his final days in the body, which he left well into his eighties. He was a karma yogi of note. Brahmachari Maharaj told me that when he got up at 3:30am to start his ashram day, Brother Peter would already have a mug of tea

waiting for him. There was an interesting dynamic between Peter and Papa. Peter had been at the ashram with Papa in Papa's premonastic days. And when Papa became the head of the ashram, Peter never prostrated to Papa, but as he approached Papa, Papa would quickly put out his hand so that Peter could greet him in western style, with a handshake.

Mummy told me many years later that following Gurudev's passing, there was a degree of vying among certain people to be the next ashram head. But Gurudev had already given sannyas to only Papa and Bobby. It appears that Peter one day walked in the Avoca shrine at the start of a satsang, dressed in crimson, walked to the front of the shrine, turned to face the congregation, raised his arms to his sides and stood in a crucifixion posture. Quite what he was hoping would happen, one has no idea. But it was clear that he continued to believe that he should have been the next head.

Spirituality and yogic powers

Peter was a very interesting character who had acquired some siddhis (yogic powers) and spent some pre-ashram time as a magician. One of his tricks was to have people place his head on one chair, have his torso supported by a second one and his feet on a third, while he made his entire body rigid. Helpers would then remove the middle chair, leaving him, stiff as a board, with head on one chair and feet on the other. Then, to the horror of the audience, they'd place a block of concrete on his chest, swing a huge sledgehammer and smash the block. After which Peter would get up to thunderous applause – with not a scratch on him.

Not referring to Peter specifically, but Sri Ramakrishna warned his disciples and devotees that if they acquired even one yogic power, it was very unlikely that they'd achieve God-realisation in that birth. Because the mind and ego become trapped in the powers. An

example of that was two brothers who came to Sri Ramakrishna, who had developed the ability to shine lights out of their backs. Now of course, lights shining out of the front of your chest would be quite handy on a dark night, but this just shows the absurdity of misplaced powers. Sri Ramakrishna removed the power from both of them.

Papa used to warn us that if we had the most minor spiritual experience, we should not talk about it – not even to the Guru. Logically it would be by his grace anyhow. The risk is feeding our ego and also disappointing others who haven't had those experiences.

Potato perils

Thinking of the slice of cheese in garbage can anecdote earlier, I was blessed to have Papa, Mummy and a few devotees come and stay over at a property I lived on in Midrand in South Africa. Some weeks before Papa's visit I'd bought a pocket of potatoes. Following the instruction on the bag, I stored them in 'a cool, dark, dry place.' So effectively, that I completely forgot about them. When I went to use the potatoes, they looked fine but were soggy and mushy. I wasn't sure whether we could still use them. To be on the safe side, I took the pocket out to a deep compost pit we had dug on the land and tipped the pocket of potatoes into the pit.

A week later, as Papa was walking around the very large property, we came to the compost pit. Papa peered down into it and asked, 'What are all those beautiful potatoes doing down there?' I felt terrible. It would have felt so lame to explain that whilst they looked fine, they were all mushy. Rarely for me, I had no answer. But the lesson has stuck forever. If there's one form of waste I can't bear, it's food waste. Because with so many homeless and hungry people on our streets in South Africa, and the rest of the world, it's a real sin to do so.

Talking the digging of holes, Papa often reminded us about the dangers of setting up other people for failure. He said, 'Always remember, that when you dig a hole for someone else, you're the first one in it.'

Gandhi makes the point

Papa stressed and admired the frugality of Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi. Even during Gandhi's law practice days, it was noticed that if he received written correspondence, he'd read the letter and if it was to be filed, he'd remove the straight pin (no staples in those days) that held the pages together and keep it for future use. Repurposing and respecting the environment long before it became a mainstream movement.

As previously mentioned, Gurudev asked Papa (then Inder) why he came to the ashram. The answer was, 'Because I love you.' Gurudev's response was, 'No, you come here because I love you!' We enjoyed our several times a week visits to the ashram. At some point, I'm not sure what the reason was, but Shyam and I hadn't been there for a few days. When we did arrive, after greeting us, Papa said, 'Where have you been? Are you trying to kill me?' Such was his love for us. I now have the karmic gift of experiencing a pang of a similar order, when the African child I raised from 18 months of age, 22 at time of writing, doesn't make contact or respond with even a one-line WhatsApp message for a few days. It really hurts and causes worry. How much greater must have been the concern, driven by pure and unconditional love?

The Rishi's Meal

Brother Vasan Govender, who sponsored the first print run of Instalment 1 of Papa's biographical tribute, had this delightful anecdote to tell me:



One day, as he was taking Papa's food upstairs, he opened the door to Papa's room and entered, carrying the tray. As he went to put the tray down next to Papa, the full glass of water tipped over and sloshed over all the food in the plate. Poor Vasan was horrified. But in a flash, Papa said, 'Don't worry son, this is how the sadhus eat their food in India, so as not to satisfy the sense of taste. They mix it up with water.' And with that, Papa mushed the food together with the water and proceeded to enjoy his soupy meal. Such love. Teaching an inspiring lesson, but also assuaging the disciple's concern.

Accuracy of prayer request

Pietermaritzburg in then Natal province in South Africa was experiencing an extended drought, and residents were having to carefully ration water. Two close devotees asked Papa if he could come through to 'Maritzburg' as it was referred to, and perform a hawan (ritual fire sacrifice of samagri - fragrant woods, grains, and spices etc. with ghee – clarified butter- and camphor to help keep the fire burning) to ask the Divine to bless the area with some rain.

Papa did so and a few hours after the hawan, it began to rain cats and dogs. It poured down in a non-stop deluge in 'Maritzburg. After Papa had returned to Durban, the devotees phoned and said, 'Swamiji, it's still pouring with rain in Maritzburg, but there's no rain in the catchment area – so the dams are not being replenished.' Papa responded energetically but not unkindly, 'Well, when we were doing the hawan, you should have told them (the gods) where you wanted it to rain.'

Papa often stressed this need for focused and accurate prayer requests or desire. It takes my mind back to when I was a little boy. I fell totally in love with the S-type Jaguar car that my elder sister's boyfriend drove. Like many little boys, I could recognise any car model in a flash and always thought, 'One day, I'll own one of those.'

That did indeed come to pass many years later. I bought a second-hand S-type Jaguar. Those flowing smooth lines, the raw power of the V-8 engine and the superb comfort were all and more than I had dreamt of. But was that car troublesome! Every month there was some or other repair and because spare parts were priced in British Pound Sterling, services and repairs cost a fortune. I reached the point where I thought, 'Much as I love and enjoy this car, I simply can't keep up with the chronic maintenance demands. I traded it in on a very sensible little Fiat 500, which I've now had for twelve years, and thoroughly appreciate and enjoy. And because it's so tiny, there's always a parking space – even when there isn't.

Prayers for yourself

Papa stressed to us time and time again that it was not only good but of benefit to pray for others. But that we were not to pray for money or the health of our own bodies.

Giving the garb

Another example of accurate speech: As I was taking leave from Papa at Durban airport to fly back to Johannesburg one day, Papa took the patha (folded gerua cloth used by monks) off his shoulder, pressed it onto my shoulder and said, 'There, look after that for me.' The significant difference is this: if Papa had just given me that gerua cloth, it would have been the equivalent of giving me a sannyasi's garb. Because such a cloth given by a holy person would typically mean that. But I was told, 'Look after this for me.' I still have that

patha in a little wooden kist, on my shrine at home. See the meticulous accuracy of speech of a truly holy being?

At the old ashram, Papa had been given a length of gerua cloth by someone as dakshina (an offering of thanks or for some or other reason). Towards the end of the satsang, Papa said, 'Who is the next person to take sannyas in the Ramakrishna Centre?' Sri (who became the Hindu nun, Pravrajika Atmaprana) was seated near the front. Papa held out the cloth to her and she received it with a gentle smile and a prostration. That was the difference between giving of the garb, versus being asked to be caretaker of it. She was formally initiated into sannyasa several years later at the Ramakrishna Blessings farm in Richmond, KwaZulu Natal.

Final example of prayer accuracy: I was a kid from a financially poor family, and 'Lower Houghton' was one of the wealthiest and poshest suburbs in Johannesburg. As a little chap, I'd always thought, 'I'd love to live there.' Well, the gods answered my prayer six decades after I'd forgotten all about it. In my body's old age, I live in a tiny, rented cottage behind a commercial office building but guess where? In what was renamed from Lower Houghton to Houghton Estate. The childhood desire was satisfied. Just not in the way I might have expected it! But I'm deeply contented with Papa's grace.

Papa said, 'Be careful what you wish and pray for. You may just get it.' When people say things like, 'I'm praying for so and so's healing,' I always wonder, 'What do we mean by healing?' Because healing can mean a shift in someone's physical, mental, emotional, psychological, or spiritual state. The healing might mean them accepting a terminal illness situation, and peacefully passing away. Get the idea? Papa encouraged us to frame prayers carefully and without personal motive. Papa memorably said, 'Don't develop a shopkeeping relationship with God.'

Logic in speech

Papa once told us, 'A truly holy person will never speak illogically.' That's always been my yardstick when listening, sometimes even to some of those purporting to have travelled a great distance on the spiritual path, or sometimes even wearing monastic garb. When what they say is illogical or visibly isn't in congruence with their behaviour, with Papa's grace, a little red flag pops up in my mind.

Sri Ramakrishna said, 'The professional dancer never makes a misstep.' And I think of that in the context of the sometimes-absurd things I've heard important 'spiritual' people say.

Hidden agendas

Someone sitting with Papa and me one day, was talking in such a way that I was unable to hear every third or fourth word, due to his poor articulation and mumbling as he spoke. When he'd left, I asked Papa, 'Why is his speech so difficult to understand?' Papa's response was, 'How do I say this without getting myself into trouble? When people speak like that, it's because they have hidden agendas.' This has proved to be invaluable advice in my life and business consulting work over the years. Not as a conscious observation. But the moment someone speaks like that; the mind automatically remembers what Papa said.

Clarity clue

I was sitting reading something aloud at Papa's request in my early days at the ashram. In the middle of nowhere, Papa gave a delighted laugh. I paused and someone said to Papa, 'Why the laughter, Swamiji?' Papa responded, 'Listen to how clearly he speaks. It shows he's not too caught up in Maya.' My mind goes to Swami Swatmaramananda, the president of the Ramakrishna Centre in

Avoca. He has the clearest diction when speaking English (despite speaking several other languages) that I've heard in a long time.

On taking naps

Quite often when I got to the old ashram to visit Papa for a weekend or a few days, after being with Papa for about an hour, he'd say, 'Son, please go take a little rest.' And I would be sent off to rest in the room next to that of my dear Gurubhai, Swami Premananda.

When Swami Premananda came back from India in 1977, Papa and I were one day standing together and Papa looked at Premananda, who was standing just out of earshot and said, 'Those toes are most worthy of being worshipped.'

I'd often protest about being sent off to rest, but Papa would insist. I told Papa that if I napped during the day, I woke up feeling horrible. Heavy-headed and with low blood sugar. Papa gave me some wonderful advice. 'When you wake up, keep your eyes closed and stay like that for about five minutes. Then gently open your eyes and get up.' It works like a charm. Sister Henny Schimmel used to refer to these (today called 'power naps') as 'deep dives'. And that they are. They can be very restorative. Particularly if we lie down with a mantra or thought of the Ishta Devata (chosen Ideal or Deity) in mind.

Naps and samadhi



Papa in front of the hawan worship that was performed to 'open' Kanti Nivas – Mummy's new home in Newlands West, Durban.

Papa would occasionally go to Kanti Nivas, the little house where ashram Mummy lived. We would be thrilled to be spending time with Papa and Mummy together. Mummy cooked beautifully tasty food. While Mummy was preparing the food, Papa would lie down on his side on the day couch and after a time, appear to nod off. We devotees would be as quiet as possible, thinking that Papa was



asleep, and we shouldn't disturb him. After this had happened a few times over various visits, I noticed that Mummy would, after a time, get a little clean gerua towel and move to the chair adjacent to where Papa's head was. At the exact moment at which he woke up, Mummy would place the towel below Papa's mouth to catch saliva that might have accumulated during the 'sleep'.

It was only in later years that I came to understand that it wasn't sleep but in fact samadhi. And here's the kicker. Our darling Mummy, who journeyed so humbly and at times almost invisibly to others, knew exactly when Papa's mind was returning to a normal state of consciousness, and would be ready with the little towel. She had been the closest disciple to Gurudev and to Papa. Many at the Centre had no insight into her holiness or the role she played. Including close biological family members.

Having been privileged to spend two years as one of Mummy's caregivers in her last two years on earth, I was witness in so many ways to her holiness, her status as a yogini and finally, on 31st August 2015, I was in the room when Mummy voluntarily let go of her body. She, like Papa, never drew attention to herself. But always

turned everyone's gaze to Master or Holy Mother. In the more than a half century that I had the privilege of knowing Mummy, I never ever heard her utter anything negative about anyone or say anything unkind. She was one of my most deeply appreciated mentors. When I would occasionally become upset at the way certain people did things, she would gently say, 'Don't judge them by your own standards.'

One day, I was frying some or other food item for Mummy in the kitchen at Kanti Nivas. An oil splatter leapt out of the pan and landed on my index finger. It burnt very badly. I must have given a yelp of some sort, because Mummy called out, 'What happened?' I answered, 'Burnt by hot oil.' 'Please come here.' Said Mummy, which I did. She looked at the red patch on my finger and touched it gently, without saying anything. Only later that day did I realise that not only wasn't there a patch of red on the finger, but there was also no pain and no blister. That holy touch had done something.

Speaking of the construction and upkeep of Mummy's little Kanti Nivas home, Papa said 'Shafi (Mummy's son in law) is the cow and Francis is the milk.'



Papa and monastic issues

Papa would occasionally discuss with me some or other issue affecting the monks at the ashram and ask what I thought of a particular suggestion or situation. One day, as Papa was doing so, I thought, 'How odd that Papa's asking for my thoughts on this.' No sooner had the thought flashed through my mind than Papa said, 'I discuss these things with you because there's a certain purity there.' Papa had asked what I thought about then Balan Reddy, now Swami Saradaprabhananda, becoming a monk. My immediate response was, 'I think he'd make a wonderful Swami.'

No judgement

Once, when things were going very badly on the financial front for me, Mummy said to Mala Thejpal, a very close devotee to both Papa and Mummy, 'Please take Francis to the uMngeni Road Temple (pictured earlier in this book) and ask the priest to open a book for him.' I was appalled, and said to Mummy, 'Here I am, a child of Sri Ramakrishna and now I'm going to ask for advice from a householder temple priest.' Mummy looked at me with a gentle smile and said softly, 'Keep an open mind.'

The visit to Radhakrishnan the senior Sri Lankan pujari at the uMngeni road temple, was both interesting and depressing. He told us that my ruling planet being the sun, these troubles would continue for the next six years! But that to mitigate them I should feed the wild birds with black thill (sesame seeds) on Saturday mornings and do a little offering of water to Suryadev every morning.

As we were leaving, Mala asked him to brush me. I had no idea what that involved. But he swiftly picked up a tied bundle of peacock feathers and swatted me on my bald head. My brother Gyanadayal once told me that Papa warned people against brushing being done by the wrong people. I'm hoping Radhakrishnan was the right one.

Ego exorcisms

In the first instalment of this biographical tribute, you'll have noticed in the reminiscences of the contributors, the numerous ego-bashing but loving lessons imparted by Papa. There would have been numerous examples for each devote, but just as a single reminder in each instance: In the case of Brother Kissoon Behari, it was to get him over his fear of asking for money donations for the ashram. In Brother Gynadayal's case it was to eliminate the idea that only his Deity (Lord Shiva) counted. In Brother Benny Maistry's case, it was at the end of a very successful event (Matric vacation classes) organised by him. He expected an accolade from Papa but was told instead to go pick up papers lying around, ensure that the toilets were clean and then catch a bus home. I don't think there's anyone who came into close contact with Papa who would not have had some or many of these loving, ego-reducing, unforgettable lessons.

In the case of our brother Atmaprakash (who lovingly sponsored with Brother Surend Bharath, a second print run of the first instalment of this biographical tribute series), it was no different.

Atmaprakash

My ashram brother Atmaprakash Kramer is a tall, slim German. At the time of this writing, we are still blessed to have coffee and a vegetarian bagel in a plant nursery garden in the north of Johannesburg. It's a mini-satsang, with just the two of us. And we're often joined by brother Vasan Govender. It's always a blessing to reminisce and share anecdotes about Papa and the ashram.

In the early ashram days Atmaprakash had long blond hair. Wearing a dhoti and with bare feet, he'd be sent off to the fruit and vegetable market in central Durban. With one or two of the brahmacharis at the time, he'd have to beg for vegetable donations for the ashram. This

must have been a daunting task because he stuck out like a sore thumb. And although some people gently refused, others could and would shoo people away in a rude and nasty manner. Atmaprakash found these experiences very useful in developing a gentle acceptance of any embarrassment, rejection, or humiliation as Papa's continuing spiritual development of him.

He would likely not tell you this himself, so I shall. Atmaprakash also took it upon himself to regularly clean the public toilets at the ashram. No gloves, masks, protective gear, or hazmat suits in those days. And as we all know, public-use toilets can be gross places. But he chose to do this as his own personal way of reducing the ego. Knowing that it was serving Papa and the devotees, by ensuring that everyone had access to clean toilets.

Papa and medicines

In the early days of the Avoca ashram, we had Henny Schimmel, Narayani Harmon, Shirley Whitfield, Mother Radha and one or two other practitioners of homoeopathy. They were forever on the hunt for anyone with the least ailment so that the wonders of Samuel Hahnemann, the 'father' of homeopathy could be brought to bear. Each would have their copy of the Materia Medica (the 'bible' of ailments and remedial homoeopathic substances) close at hand.

In those early 1970s days, Papa's body was not as worn down as it was in the early 1990s. Papa would willingly take whatever concoction they hatched up, to keep them happy. Shirley Whitfield used to lift the foil caps on the delivered bottles of milk at her home in Glenashley, Durban, and put a dose of 'tissue salts' into them. So we'd all be getting optimum micro doses of goodness knows what. The fortunate thing with anything homeopathic is that the dilutions are so extreme that you'd be unlikely to do any harm with any of the treatments, anyhow.

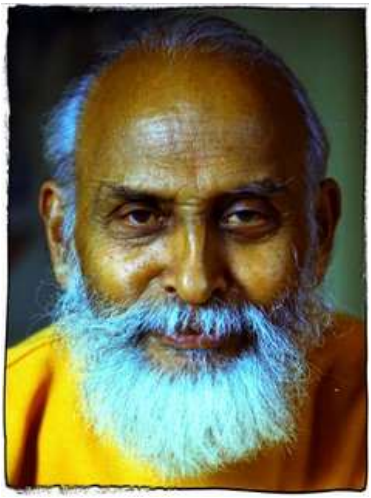
Papa said to a small group of us one day, 'Homoeopathy doesn't work in this day and age. In the old days, when people ate sattwic diets, drank pure water, breathed fresh air, and lived moderate lifestyles, the subtlety of homoeopathy would work. But with our highly processed, preservative filled foods, polluted air, water with added chemicals, etc. it's no longer of any use. Papa always stressed that it was important to get the appropriate treatment. He once said to someone, 'You don't go to a homoeopath for a broken leg. You go to an allopathic doctor.' Over the years I did hear Papa recommending specific Ayurvedic treatments for different conditions.

Swami Nishreyasananda, when visiting the ashram, was a great proponent of mudpacks for healing purposes. One of the ashram peacocks had a leg injury and Swami Nishreyasananda suggested we applied a mudpack. We never did of course, because the logistics of catching the peacock and somehow getting a mud pack to hold in place on its leg while it went about its daily business, was beyond us.

One or two of the more extreme ashram homeopaths also bought into 'water of life' as they called it, which was urine therapy. They were convinced that drinking specific quantities of their own urine would have a curative effect for various ailments. Once again, Papa debunked the notion by saying, 'In the old days the Rishis would prescribe such remedies, but they were always accompanied by a mantra. Today, you go and drink your own urine you might just become very ill.' Papa was always in favour of moderation in all things.

The grandfather swami

Swami Nishreyasananda was already in his late 80s when I first met him at the Avoca ashram. He was blind in one eye, having tried to watch a solar eclipse as a young man, without any eye protection.



He wore a kurta made of quite a heavy fabric. And he'd clearly dropped food or other items on it, because it had a variety of stains and marks on it.

Papa had organised a substitute outfit via Mummy, who typically sewed Papa's tops. One day, Papa asked Swami Nishreyasananda if they could remove the top and put on a fresh one while the other got laundered. He was asked so sweetly and respectfully by Papa, that there was no protest, and Papa himself took the top off the old monk and helped him into a new top, which he wore until Mummy had laundered the original, which he was happy to wear again.

I dreaded it when Papa told us that Swami Nishreyasananda would be talking in the shrine. He was a jnani of note and a repository of great learning and wisdom, but the satsang would then last three hours or so, which was way beyond the endurance level of my back when sitting on the floor.

Blessed be the sheep

Papa had been struggling with dry lips, and someone very kindly brought along a little tube of Lanolin-based cream to solve the problem. One night, as Papa was applying the cream to his lips, some self-righteous vegan devotee said in horror, 'Oh but Swamiji, the lanolin comes from a sheep's tail!' To the hilarity of us devotees, Papa promptly responded, 'I'm sure the sheep doesn't mind sharing a little with me.' Lanolin isn't from a sheep's tail of course. It's a waxy

substance, extracted from the sheep's wool, after shearing, so no sheep are harmed in the process.

Just be natural

It's almost a knee-jerk reaction that people first coming to an ashram or other religious institution will consciously modify their behaviour. When we were first at the ashram, it was 'the in thing' for some younger folk to swan around in thin Indian cotton embroidered kurtas, handmade sandals and wearing a shiny 'holy-looking' face. Papa always drew our attention to any contrived or artificial behaviour. His words, burnt into my memory, were, 'Just be natural.' Life-altering words, if we take them to heart.

Speaking to God

There's a story (paraphrased here) about a man who approached Swami Vivekananda and said, 'I repeat mantras all the time, but I don't feel any closer to God.' Swami Vivekananda asked, 'What language do you use?' The answer was, 'Sanskrit.' Swamiji asked, 'Do you understand what the mantras mean when you chant them in Sanskrit?' 'No', said the man. Swamiji answered, 'In future, pray and speak to God in your native tongue.' A little while later the man reported that he felt a distinct increase in his devotion, because of his new, simple, natural way of communicating with the divine. Remember what Papa told us again and again: 'Just be natural.'

Holy Mother and lunch

Holy Mother asked a young woman to serve Master's lunch in the shrine in the Udbodhan House in Kolkota. Immediately anxious, the young woman said, 'But Mother I don't know any of the prayers to chant.' Holy Mother said, 'No need to know those, just take the food through, offer it to Master and say, 'Please come and eat.' Once again, just being natural. Mother and Master made it so easy for us to engage with whatever our concept is, of the Divine.

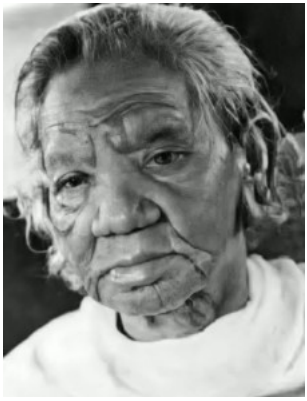
Papa's uniqueness

Mummy and I were one day talking about the great saints and Rishis. I said to Mummy, 'There can't be too many like Papa on earth at any given point.' Mummy nodded and said, 'True. Some of them come and lead huge organisations. Others come here and just sit' – Mummy indicating with her hands folded in her lap, a deep meditation position. So they're here, just being a force for good.'

I recall Papa speaking of an example in India where some construction workers, digging into the ground, saw blood on their implements. They immediately stopped digging and climbed down to see what had happened. They found the now damaged but still upright body of a sadhu in samadhi, that had been covered by earth for clearly an extremely long time.

I was one day talking to my beloved Gurubhai, Swami Chandikananda, about Papa. He said, 'I've spent a lot of time in India and have been to many ashrams, and visited many holy men, but I have never come across his equal.'

Kanyakumari and Maya Ma



On the trip to India in 1973, Papa and his small group visited among many other places, the Vivekananda Kendra and Kanya Kumari. It's on the southern most tip of India, off which stands the Vivekananda rock memorial and temple (pictured further down).

A woman Paramahamsa known as Maya Ma, often unclothed, lived on the beach at Kanyakumari, among the rocks, surrounded by a pack

of dogs. If there was something to be eaten, she would feed the dogs and put a portion of that same food in her own mouth. When people first became aware of Mother's presence, they assumed she was homeless or mentally deranged.

A wonderful anecdote which instantly changed opinions about her: One of the canine companions somehow got hit by a car on the nearby road. It was badly injured, with abdominal entrails handing out. Bystanders thought the dog was dead and carried it to Mother. She took the unconscious animal onto her lap, gently pushed the intestines back into its body, took some raffia that was lying around and bound it over the dog's body to keep the wound closed. Within a short space of time, the dog was moving about again as if nothing had happened.

Mother would at times wander into shops that were close by and the vendors and owners, feeling blessed, were thrilled if she took something from them to feed the dogs. It's said that on occasion Mother would walk into the sea and hold out her hands. When she turned back there would be a fish in either hand which she fed to the dogs.

There was a moment once at Vasishtha guha, with Papa and Swami Thribhuvan standing near a tree with a group of raucous birds in the branches. Swami Tribhuvan commented on 'such noisy birds'. To which Papa said, 'Yes, except, they're not birds.' Some souls, to have proximity to the holy, may use a variety of bodies to do so. Mother's dogs were a case in point.

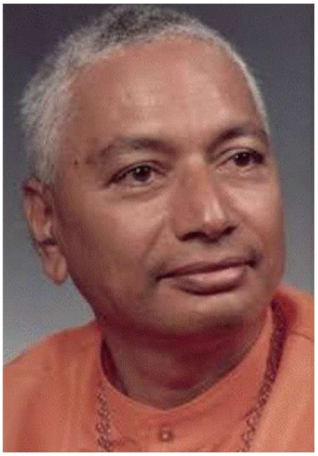
Papa approached Maya Ma and sat down in her presence. She took a handful of shells and worshipped Papa by pouring them on his head.

Mother appeared after a long time to have one disciple. In her bodily great age, it is said that the disciple and his family took care of Mother's needs and according to available reports, she left the body in 1991.



Swami Om Devi

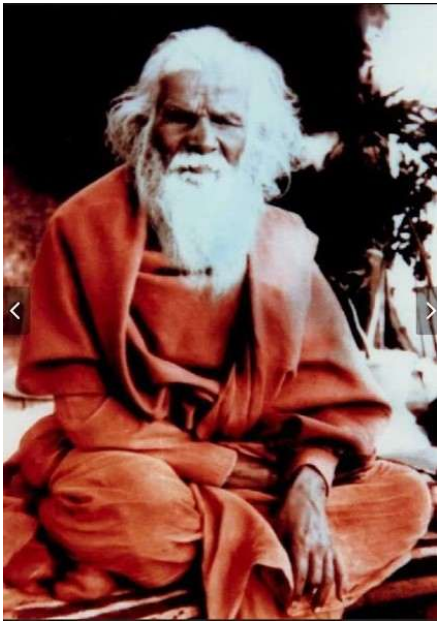
In our early years at the Avoca ashram, an elderly white woman by the name of Swami Om Devi, used to occasionally come and visit. I vividly remember her always bringing an orange mesh pocket of vegetables with her. She was a disciple of the delightful Swami Venkastesananda Saraswati (pictured) head of the Divine Life Society (DLS) ashram in Mauritius. He was a direct disciple of Swami Sivananda Saraswati, the founder of the movement.



Our brother, brahmachari Maharaj, was being troubled by a damaged knee. When Mataji came to know of it, she motioned him over and placed her hand on his knee. I remember him telling me that he felt a comforting warmth flowing into his knee and a very short while after, his knee was back to pain-free, normal

functioning. She was a serene presence, and I found it so novel that she pronounced ‘AUM’ as in the electrical symbol, ‘Ohm’. Bless her memory.

Swami Purushottamananda on sincerity



Our Guruji – Swami Purushottamananda, was invited to give a talk at the Rishikesh ashram of the Divine Life Society. At the appointed time, Guruji appeared on stage, and sat quietly in his usual diamond posture. (A yoga asana in which the person’s knees are on the ground and the buttocks rest on the heels.)

He looked at the audience and said, ‘Sincerity.’ He closed his eyes and sat in silence for many minutes. After a time, he opened his eyes and again said, ‘Sincerity.’ He again closed his eyes and after quite a long while, opened them again, and said, ‘Sincerity.’ Then he slowly rose and left the stage. Papa said often that if there was a ‘secret’ ingredient to spiritual life, it was sincerity. Without it, there can be no progress.

The misunderstanding that wasn’t

In my own time with Papa there were a few examples of seeming ‘misunderstandings’. In the early days of the ashram, when I was assisting on the technical front with the production of one of Mummy’s plays, on a stage built down in the Avoca ashram

amphitheatre, all seemed to be going well. Except that John Tunmer – who oversaw the sound effects, seemed to miss producing the sound of horses' hooves that we needed. I lifted the bottom of the curtain, so I could see him and said, 'Horses!' The play proceeded well and at the end Papa came backstage to compliment the actors on their performances.

Quite unexpectedly, Papa turned to me and said, 'Why did you say to someone, 'Don't be so stupid'? I was aghast. I knew I hadn't said that to anyone. I hadn't engaged with anyone but John. But I was certain that Mummy's son, Lokesh, who was one of the performers, had indeed said it. He spoke an almost accent-free English, hence the supposed confusion. I simply kept quiet.

The coat saga

In a similar vein, one night, we were about to leave Papa's room to go to the home of a devotee. It was chilly and I said, 'Will Papa wear the coat?' To my horror, Papa gave me a stern look and said, 'Hmm! I've never been spoken to like that, by anyone.' I was mortified, but couldn't think why Papa said that, so I didn't respond. I got Papa's coat out of the wardrobe, brushed off a big dried muddy footprint left by some dog that had given love to Papa, and off we went to the devotee's house.

I experienced an actual sense of grief. Even all these years later, I can still remember the awfulness of that moment. Just the idea that I might have said something which offended Papa. Very late that evening we got back to the ashram and after people had finally left, it was just Papa and me in his room. I couldn't contain my anguish any longer and said, 'Papa, please forgive me for what happened earlier. I asked, 'Will Papa wear the coat? I'm not sure if the 'will' part was indistinct, but I would never speak to Papa in a disrespectful way.' Papa turned to me with tears in his eyes and said, 'Ah. See how

much we love each other? That was protecting you for the future.' All the angst and sorrow immediately lifted from me.

Ashram-appropriate clothing

Along the same lines, I was with Papa one day when in the sternest possible terms, he scolded a young woman who had arrived at the ashram wearing skin-tight jeans. In the 1970s this was not the sort of thing one would wear to a holy place or when knowing one would encounter monks. But each word of the admonition made me more and more embarrassed for the young woman. When she left, I said to Papa, 'I felt so sorry for her getting such a scolding.' Again, Papa said to me, 'That's to protect her in the future.'

As it happened, her life became a real mess in later years, when Papa was no longer around in the body to give advice. I thought then of what Papa had said so often. That he sometimes scolded people about something, not necessarily because they had done something wrong, but to prevent them doing that or similar things in their future. Only the Guru knows what she or he is protecting the disciple from. It's what a good parent does when you're moving potentially dangerous items out of range of a toddler or animal. They don't know that the danger was there, or even that we've protected them from it.

Sannyasini Scolding

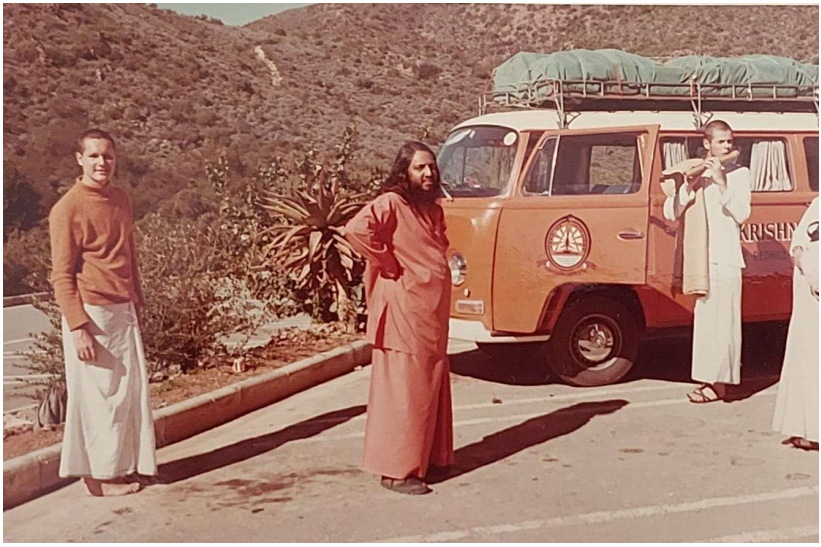
In a similar way, Papa one day started to scold one of the nuns at the ashram. I immediately started getting up to go away and give them some privacy, but Papa said, 'No, stay!' I sat down again. Papa went full steam ahead scolding my gurubhen. I sat there wishing the earth would swallow me up. And it got worse, when having spelled out what he was unhappy with, Papa turned to me and said, 'Francis, say something!' Not only was this a sannyasini sister of the same bodily age, but someone I loved dearly. I can't even recall what lame thing I

might have said. I just vividly remember my extreme discomfiture at being an observer when someone else was ‘getting it in the neck’.

Papa never once raised his voice at or scolded me about anything. If a correction was needed, it would be by a gentle hint or a suggestion for how something might be done another way. For which I was, and still am, very grateful. As I’ve written elsewhere, Papa said several times to me, ‘The gardener treats each flower in the garden according to its needs.’

Speaking of correcting or advising someone, Papa said, ‘Tell the truth in the way that commits least injury.’ But that’s for us laypeople or householders. What the wise ones do with their simulated ‘anger’ is not for us to query or debate.

Consideration for others



Papa with (on the left), Brahmachari Gangadhar and Brahmachari Maharaj (with flute).



Brahmachari Gangadhar (front) with Brahmacharini Sri on his left. Behind him on his right, Br Ramsunder Shah. In the back row from the left, Sr Henny Schimmel, Mummy (middle) and Bhabhi Singh.

Papa was a stickler for developing the attribute of considerate behaviour in all of us. We used to get together in the mornings in the ashram kitchen after service, to have breakfast, which usually comprised bread, peanut butter, and cornflakes along with delicious hot ashram chai. I recall my brother Atmaprakash saying of the tea, 'I like it hot, vite and sveet' in his German accent. And it was always those three things. At breakfast one morning I noticed brahmachari Gangadhar pouring water onto his cornflakes, instead of milk. I didn't want to comment at the time, but when I later asked someone why he was doing that, it appeared he'd used the last available milk at

some stage and not left any for the others. So, Papa's prescribed tapasya for him was to do without milk for a time. I suffered empathically when fellow sadhakas were punished or scolded. Even if (as always) they'd thoroughly earned the scolding. I mentally suffered along with them.

Whilst talking about him, our brother brahmachari Gangadhar, was very in touch with nature and animals and used to keep the ashram gardens neat and tidy, along with the section in the old ashram which had some fruit trees and many rocks. The administration block is today where that garden was. Gangadhar would carefully and creatively paint inspirational slogans and slokas on the rocks, so that visitors could do a little meditative meander in the garden.

The milk of understanding

Sitting with a small group at Papa's feet one day, I was quietly mulling something Papa had said. Papa immediately commented, 'You see how he sits quietly absorbing the milk, drop by drop. One day the cup will overflow.'

'Look after your teeth. The more teeth you lose, the more concentration you lose.' - Papa

Do thoughts travel?

I was once chatting to Papa about thoughts 'travelling' as people refer to it. I said to Papa, 'In thinking about this, if consciousness is an unbroken entity, it means something doesn't travel through it but, rather like tapping a brick, you'll instantly feel the tap on the other side of the brick, too.' Papa's response was, 'I'm happy that you thought that one through.'

In which capacity?

I was in the old ashram downstairs kitchen, when the doctor-devotees were discussing Papa's then very poor bodily health, a few months before his mahasamadhi. Papa was lying on his bed upstairs,

in an almost childlike state, radiating love, but periodically weeping, speaking aloud to the Divine Mother, and appearing very detached. Papa's state of being caused considerable anxiety, because many devotees thought this was a precursor to Papa giving up the body very soon.

Various diagnoses were being discussed downstairs in the kitchen eating area by a group of ashram doctors. A particularly pompous doctor said, 'In my official capacity, Swamiji is suffering from depression.' I was amazed, thinking, how on earth can you venture to analyse the mental state of a saint? The other doctors didn't respond. All of us then went directly upstairs to Papa's quarters.

When we'd all settled in the room, without opening his eyes, Papa said in a long, drawn-out way, 'H……, H….., do I come to you in official capacity?' There was total silence.

Papa then opened his eyes and looked at me kneeling next to his bed. He asked, 'Francis, what do you think this is? To which I answered, 'Papa it seems to be the same state in which the Lord Jesus fully surrendered to divine will on the cross, by saying, 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?' So, it's a state of total surrender to the will of the Divine Mother.' Papa said to those in the room, 'See? I feel he understands me.'

The all-seeing and hearing Guru

A wonderful lesson for all of us that whether the Guru is in the body or not, She or He hears, sees, and knows everything. There are no secrets. I remember prostrating to Papa one day. As I straightened up from kissing his holy toes, Papa looked at me and said, 'I know *everything* about you.' In a completely matter of fact, comfortable way, I responded, 'I know.'

It was at this time, when Papa had been in a gravely ill state and many thought it was the end, that Papa, Mummy and I were in his room. Papa had been lying still and silent for the longest time. Then very softly, he said, 'The tide is turning.' Clutching at hope I answered, 'For the better, Papa?' To which he replied, 'Yes.'

Papa then said, 'When I leave this body, it is to be cremated.' My mind immediately went back to a conversation many years previously in which Papa had given Mummy and me specific instructions for the burial of his body in the grotto at the ashram. With Gurudev's ashes at his head.

I asked softly, 'So Papa no longer wants the body buried in the grotto at the ashram?' To which Papa said, 'That is correct.' This was quite a moment. Because when I asked Papa in our original conversation what the reason was for burying and not cremating the body, Papa had said, 'Whoever burns this body will burn forever.' A terrifying thought. So this was a deeply significant script change.

No secrets – no masks

One day, when people were streaming into the ashram and prostrating to Papa with much outward devotion, Papa said to me softly, 'When they prostrate here, it's like I'm looking into glass boxes.' There were no secrets.

The internal graveyard

Some devotees were flesh-eaters but for some reason, liked to present themselves as dedicated vegetarians. One day when some were prostrating to Papa he said softly and with a twinkle in his eyes, 'It's a graveyard inside', meaning bones from the meat.

It's important to note that there was no judgement in this comment. Papa reminded us several times, that the Lord Jesus said, 'It is not

what goes into your body which defiles it, but that which comes out.' Speech being the villain. Unkind words. Lies. In the long life that Papa has given this body, I have found many vegetarians to be truly awful people. Seeing some kind of moral superiority in not eating meat. And behaving as if that confers sainthood on them. Give me decent, kind, honest meat-eaters any day of the week, I say. And yes, I too, am a vegetarian. But a kind one, I hope.

Papa's kutir

Important note: What is called Papa's present day 'kutir' at the Avoca ashram, is not the original. Papa never set foot in this structure. What stands at the Avoca ashram today was constructed after 2020, at the noble motivation of Papa's pre-monastic brother, Basha. But it bears little resemblance to the original structure, which was a pentagon – five sided - with adjacent bathroom. Both of which were incomprehensibly demolished many years ago. At whose instruction, and why, I have no idea. But below is the original and the story about it.

When I first arrived at the ashram, Papa was sleeping in a room upstairs in the main building, which became like a furnace in hot weather. There wasn't any ceiling insulation. A fellow devotee, Shyam (John) Whitfield, was a very practical person. He brought in sheets of styrofoam (an inexpensive but very effective insulator) which he glued to the old, pressed metal ceiling, using contact adhesive. Thus, reducing the temperature of the room. But Papa still had to leave the room to use the bathroom, so there wasn't ideal privacy.



Our beloved brother John Tunmer, (pictured), Shyam and I were inspired to build a kutir for Papa, close to the far end of the ashram shrine building. We set to it and dug the foundations for a pentagonal (five-sided) shape.

Each afternoon Shyam and I would hurry from work, and with John Tunmer, who was resident at the ashram, we'd carry on with the construction, all the while having great fun. And I must confess, hoping that we might escape the evening shrine service.

These services were conducted by the hardest working person I've encountered in my life. Brahmachari 'Sevak', who had been at the ashram when Gurudev was still in the body. He was a slim, austere tapasvin and adept hatha yogi, who brooked no nonsense. Although we were of a similar age, everyone respected Sevak as being our senior and his word was law.

If you borrowed tools from Sevak you made sure you handed them back spick and span at the end of the day, as of course, it should be. Sevak was responsible for producing the ashram publications. Being the Jyoti, a spiritual booklet series for adults and the Dipika, which was aimed at children. The press building was home to a large and very temperamental Heidelberg printing machine. The type-setting was still done in little wooden trays – and by hand, and Sevak was a master not only of this, but also coaxing the old machine into running job after job. A multifaceted and gifted man.

Sevak used to lead the evening services. And as Papa had instructed him, anyone at the ashram at the time of evening service and aarthi, was required to attend the service. No exceptions.

We'd keep our heads down and carry on with building the kutir, hoping that somehow, they'd forget we were down there. But Sevak never forgot anything. Someone would be sent down to say sweetly, 'Sevak says please come up for service'. That would mean a quick wash-up and the end of construction for that day, because after service it would be too dark to continue.



The services without Papa in the shrine were testing. Sevak had a strong, nasal, booming voice. And our brother Gangadhar, (seen here with Papa) already mentioned, also had a big voice. We used to work from a little prayer booklet, produced on the ashram Jyoti Press printer. In it were all the basic mantras to Master, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Hanumanji, Mother Kali, Lord Shiva and various other gods and goddesses. We would chant through the same mantras each night, followed by a reading from Master's

Gospel (the blessing of doing so often falling to me), prior to the offering of aarthi.

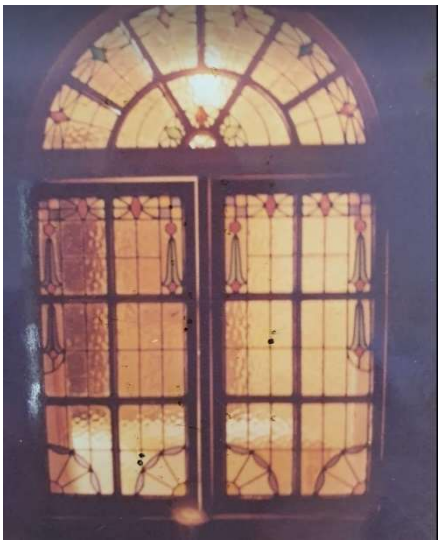
But inevitably, just a few minutes into the chanting, Sevak and Gangadhar's booming voices would go out of synch. Gangadhar should of course have followed Sevak's lead. But he didn't. And we were then reduced to whispering what Sevak was chanting, because it would have produced a real tower of Babel cacophony if we added to the volume.

I didn't enjoy these services when Papa wasn't there. I wasn't used to sitting cross-legged on the floor. My back ached and my mind would be on the kutir construction. And poor brother Shyam had a genuine allergy to burning incense. Within seconds of us being in the shrine, he'd be sniffing and sneezing uncontrollably.

Sevak's continuing mission

Sevak (pre-brahmachari name 'Nad') left the ashram after Papa's passing and built with his own hands, a community soup kitchen and feeding centre attached to the family home in one of the impoverished areas of Stanger, now renamed KwaDukuza.

Mummy and I visited his mother there after his passing from bladder cancer. His mother pointed out the spot in front of his bedroom window where he used to sit when no longer able to walk so that 'I can see my little garden from here.' He was a very special sadhaka who commanded respect and was a wonderful role model for us.



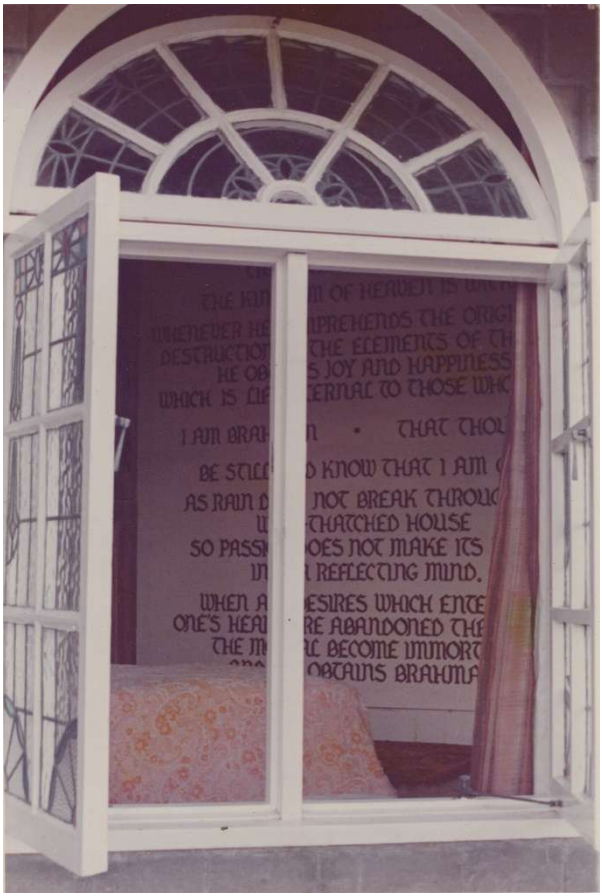
At weekends, our little trio would beaver away at working on the kutir. John Tunmer had sourced a beautiful repurposed stained-glass window with an arched top, which got built into the kutir, looking out onto the forested ashram grounds. It came from a place called Atomic Demolishers. We took a silly satisfaction in that name, for some reason.



As the kutir reached the appropriate wall height, we got ready to install the long, creosote-treated (against termites etc.) poles to support the envisaged thatched roof. But we needed a centre pole to which the others could be attached. Very thoughtlessly, in hindsight, we used a sturdy but untreated pole that lay, unused, on the ashram grounds. We would later pay a price for this. The roof poles were put in place. We bag-washed the interior and exterior walls with a cement slurry, so it would have a more natural appearance and blend better with the surroundings than would a painted exterior.

John Tunmer engaged a skilled traditional amaZulu thatcher, and in a short while, the expertly thatched roof was completed. Papa intentionally didn't come down to the kutir to see how it was going, for which we were grateful, because we wanted the final product to be a surprise. But we had asked Papa if he had any specific requests

though, for the interior. Papa asked for Sanskrit slokas to be painted on one of the interior walls. I was a display artist at that time and decided that the most practical way of doing this would be to prepare two large, wooden panels onto which we could calligraphy the slokas and later fit them to the wall. Whenever I got the chance at my little flat near the Greyville racecourse in Durban, I would work away at painting the various slokas onto the large sheets of prepared chipboard. You can see the slokas through the window of the kutir in the picture. Papa chose the specific verses.



Each letter was traced onto the prepared boards using cardboard stencils which had been cut for me by a helpful and talented work colleague. Using a pencil, I would trace the outlines of the letters and words in a particular sloka, and then carefully fill them in with brown paint.

Mother saves the day

We decided that we needed a little sign for outside the kutir, to commemorate its opening. I worked away at this using Letraset press-on letters, rubbing them onto the carefully primed and protected wooden surface. You'll see that I got the spelling of 'Brahmacharis' wrong, having left out the first 'h'. When all the lettering was done, I needed to thoroughly weatherproof the sign.



Artists' fixative could be used on most items (as it had been on the cardboard murti of Mother Sarada Devi, mentioned much earlier) without making any colour or other physical change to the item. But these were very thin, gold-foil letters. And the fixative spray, contained alcohol as part of the solvent, which I hadn't thought about. I shook the can and began to spray the fixative to hold the letters in place, and to protect them from the marine varnish with which I was then going to seal the entire sign (including the back and edges) against the weather. To my horror I saw the first indication of the letters beginning to blister as the alcohol in the spray affected them.

In an awful moment that seemed to last for ages, I visualised having to start the time-consuming process all over again, from scratch.

Spontaneously I cried out loud, saying, ‘Mother, please help me!’ In that instant the thought flashed through my mind, ‘Fan it!’ I grabbed a flat sheet of cardboard and like an energetic pankhawallah, briskly fanned the sign. It instantly evaporated the alcohol, and the letters mercifully remained undamaged.

I proceed to spray, fan, spray, and fan until the letters were sufficiently protected for me to start the next day, coating it in successive layers of the marine varnish that John Tunmer had recommended. With Papa’s grace, that sign is still in existence today. More than a half century later. Spelling mistake and all.

We decided to prepare a little raised structure to the right of the front door to the kutir, so that on handover, we could ask Papa to press his feet into moist cement and leave his footprints there. We bought a bed and mattress along with a little louvred cupboard, a pot plant and curtains and all was ready for the big reveal and handover.

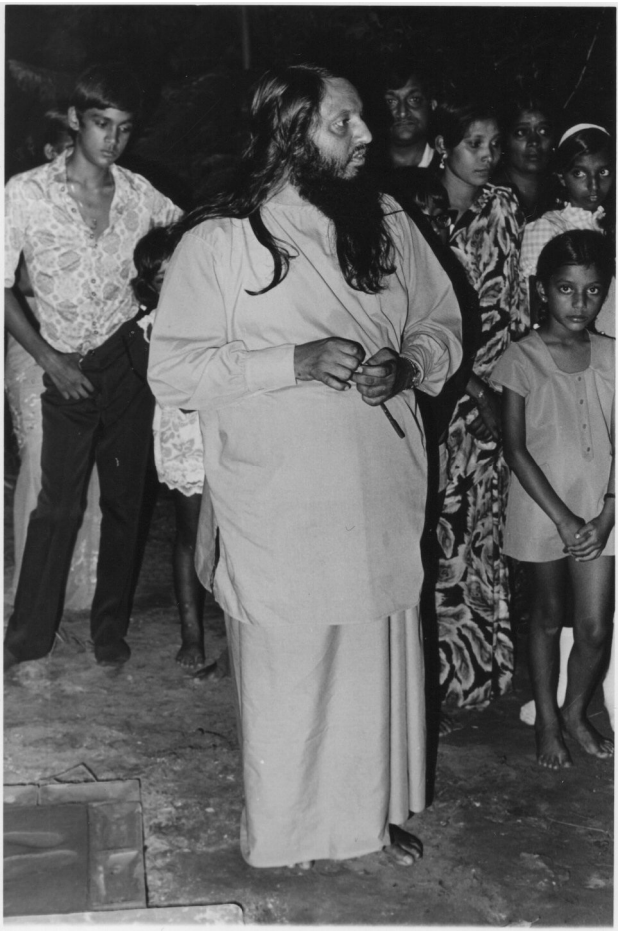
In the evening, we’d planned for Papa to come down while there was still sufficient daylight to hand over the kutir. Papa was in a high state and the devotees (who had been forbidden by Papa from coming down to the kutir while it was under construction), were going to get their first proper glimpse of it. The boys supported Papa as he stood on the prepared moist cement slab to leave his footprints.



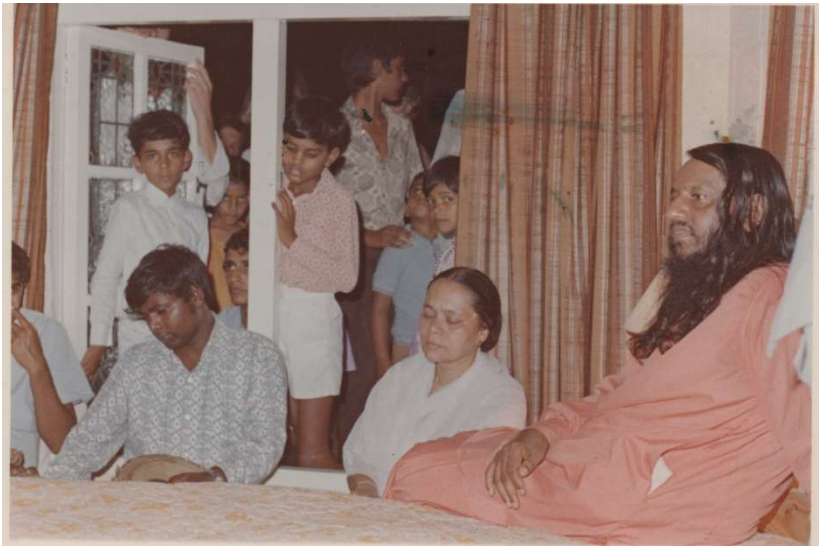
John and Shyam had the exact right cement consistency, and the footprints were well defined. They then washed Papa's feet. You can see the beautiful imprints of Papa's feet in the accompanying photograph.



(Regretfully, along with the incomprehensible demolition of the original kutir at some point, those holy foot impressions were lost.) Papa was handed the key to the kutir.



Devotees were singing and chanting. Papa then gave the door key to Sri and asked her to open it. Papa entered and stood still in contemplation for some time. Then he moved to the other side of the bed and sat on it, (as you can see in the picture). His mood deepened even further and for those who didn't know him, they might have thought his expression was one of sadness rather than of deep introspection.



(An ink-damaged) picture of Papa sitting on the bed in his new kutir. Mummy meditating and one of the young musicians playing bhajans on the harmonium. Enthusiastic little supporters visible in the frame of the stained-glass window.

At some point before the handover festivities ended, Papa said, 'This place may someday become a shrine, if you are all worthy of it.'

The Beetle Strikes

Let's go back to that centre, roof supporting pole in the kutir, for a moment. John Tunmer had cut it off to about a one-metre length once the roof poles were secured to it. We'd then installed a rustic looking light fitting to the bottom of it.

The three of us were down in the kutir one night doing something or other for Papa. Papa wasn't in the room. In a moment of silence, we could hear a sound as if an insect was chewing away at something. We remained silent until John Tunmer stood on a chair and isolated the sound as coming from the short centre pole section. John took out his pocketknife and pulled away a little piece of bark. And there sat a plump white worm. We carefully put the worm into a little glass

jar and the next day we got it to the entomology department at the university of Durban Westville. The expert opinion was that this was a Phoracantha (eucalyptus long-horned borer) beetle larva. It would wreak havoc with any woodwork. What do to?

Fast forward and we called in a company who draped an enormous tarpaulin over the entire structure and fumigated it with a gas for about two days. During this process, any remaining beetles would have been dispatched to their ancestors. But we had forgotten to remove the pot plant and it too, had sadly withered and died.

Papa used the kutir for about a year before we managed to build a bathroom next to it. You can see the exterior of the bathroom below and the interior from the accompanying pictures. The thatching of the roof was almost complete – so the wooden poles would come down.



Bathroom plumbing

Papa was away from the ashram for the day. We needed to locate the sewage pipe running from the single upstairs ashram toilet, so Papa's toilet could be connected. John Tunmer somehow or other pinpointed a likely place for it, close to Papa's kutir. He dug down a little way and uncovered a ceramic pipe with a removable cover on part of it. He guessed that it was the one leading from the main building.

His creative idea was to go and flush something from the upstairs toilet inside the main building and see if it washed down through the pipe. I hope this doesn't sound sacrilegious, but with few options, we took some toilet paper, sprinkled it with kumkum powder to make it highly visible, dropped it into the upstairs toilet and flushed, accompanied by much merry laughter. There was a loud 'hurrah' from below, confirming that the marked wad of paper had indeed sailed by. We were delighted that John's very smart idea worked and that the pipe was identified. The toilet duly got connected.

Later that evening, when Papa was back at the ashram, he said, 'I heard laughter coming from upstairs during the day'. Bear in mind, that Papa hadn't been at the ashram at the time. We then told him the reason for the merriment, and he was as pleased as we were.



The completed kutir.





Ambiguity

There were times that Papa would say something which could be interpreted in two ways. This was most often when he was in an indrawn state, and where I felt it inappropriate to question or further

interrogate the comment. One example was when Papa said to me one day, in an unmodulated, neutral tone of voice, 'May you live so long you glorify my Master.' It could have meant this body will live so long as it glorifies Master's name in some tiny way. Or that it will live so long that people will marvel at Sri Ramakrishna's grace in keeping it around for so long. I must confess I'd prefer that it isn't the latter possibility.

Papa and inspiration

Papa constantly set little challenges and originated projects to inspire the ashramites. One of them was the Community Service Awards. We had trophies made, and based on a voting system, a shortlist was drawn up of people who were making a significant contribution to society and their immediate communities.



The function went off well. Papa had asked me to be what was called in those days the MC, and each speaker, in addition to their award, received a beautiful tea bowl made by the potter, Andrew Walford. This is an internet picture of a tea bowl, but Andrew's bowls were made in the Zen style – same shape but non-pictorial glazing. Exquisite to look at. There were six bowls in total. Wrapped and ready to give, along with the community award trophies. When the fifth and last person had received their award and tea bowl, Papa said on microphone, 'Oh but I wanted to give you one as well.' Some dear soul had made off with the remaining tea bowl. Then, something lovely happened. Papa said to one of the boys, 'Go and fetch my tea bowl from the kitchen, which



the young man did, and Papa then gave his own bowl to me. What prasad and what a blessing.

Challenge vs. routine

Referring to me in a small group discussion one day, Papa said, 'He likes a challenge.' At the time I didn't understand it, but as life progressed, I see that I do indeed rise energetically and more easily to a challenge than to routine or repetitive tasks. It was this understanding of each person's strengths and weaknesses, that Papa used to help us grow.

Arrivals and departures

Whenever we arrived at the ashram, Papa was meticulous in insisting that we went to greet Master in the shrine. The same applied on departure. I recall the end of one visit where I'd been feeling discontented and fed up with everything. As I prostrated before Papa to take my leave, my thought was, 'I'm not coming back here. This is the last time.' Papa took hold of my hair (yes, I did have a full head of hair in those days) and looked me in the eyes. Gently, he said, 'These things have to happen.' In that moment all the tension and discontent disappeared.

I then went into the shrine to bid farewell to the gods, as I always did on departure. I asked Mother and Master for only one thing, which was, 'Please bring me back. Keep me at your feet.' And they have, for all these decades. We've seen so many people come and go and fall by the wayside, join other organisations, or lose contact completely.

But with Papa's grace a little band of us are still connected, albeit as a mini diaspora.

Don't disturb anyone's faith

Papa stressed to us numerous times, that the proper way to guide others to a broader or new perspective was a) Take them from where they are and b) Do not disturb their existing faith.

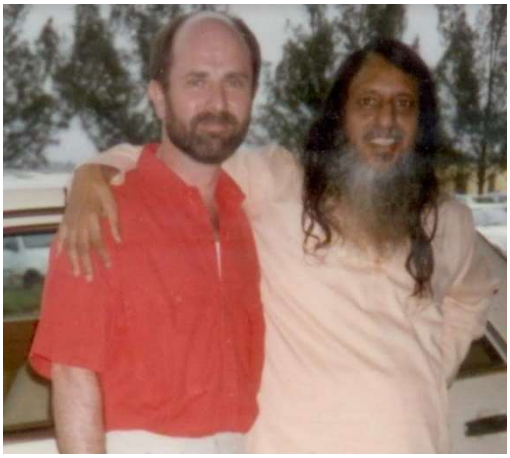
I saw a very old man at the Avoca ashram shrine door with Papa one day. Papa was about to take him into the shrine for some or other reason. Papa said to him, 'Take out the belt.' The old man removed the belt and dropped it outside the shrine door before he and Papa entered the shrine. I saw in action, the 'take them from where they are' dictum. This was an orthodox old Hindu man. To whom the idea of taking a leather (animal skin) belt into a holy place, would not have been acceptable. Had Papa not done that, he might well have wondered what kind of holy man he was dealing with. It's that meticulous attention to detail that we saw in Papa, time and time again.

The old Avoca shrine atmosphere

The Avoca shrine in the 1970s had a delightful atmosphere. Particularly in the very early morning or the evening, at which times the soft blue, fluorescent lights hidden in recesses down the sides of the shrine would give everything a soft glow. The pictures of our beloved holy trio were separately lighted on the altar itself. Unknown to many people at the time, a container with part of Gurudev's ashes was located behind the shrine.

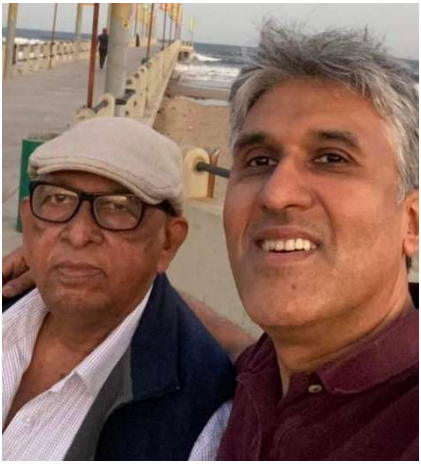
The shrine always had the sweet smell of agarbatti, lobaan, or hawan samagri, depending on what had most recently happened in it. Sitting there in the quiet, there was just the gentle hum of the fluorescent ballasts. Otherwise, total silence.

Airport racetrack



I was blessed that on many occasions, Papa would insist on driving me to the airport. Many of these trips were the stuff of heart-attacks. My control freak nature has always been to arrive early, check in and have fuss-free boarding. But Papa would seemingly leave it to when I should already be checking in, to leave the ashram. We'd then drive at very high speed until we reached the old Durban airport in Mobeni. The King Shaka airport only came decades later. I never did miss a flight, but I also never got used to the wild dashes to make those flights.

Driving the Swamis



[Pictured – a senior Dr Naren Rana and his son Hemant.] The Pietermaritzburg ashram also hosted a once-a-year Children's Rally march and function, as did the other ashrams. Swami Balaramananda and another visiting swami joined Papa in Dr Rana's little manual drive, open mini jeep, to be part of the procession. It wasn't automatic transmission. And we were going to be driving at the back of the procession of walkers of all sizes and age groups.

In preparation for the function Papa decided that he wanted me in a dhoti and kurta, The only similar sized person around was Hriday – who didn't have a fresh set of clothing. Papa tied a dhoti around me and Hriday gave me a used kurta, absolutely reeking of sweat. This, for yours truly with borderline OCD on the hygiene front, was verging on being unbearable.

Be that as it may, there I was as the driver of the little jeep with Papa next to me and the two visiting swamis. The procession of devotees moved very slowly. And although I tried to be as gentle as I could even in first gear, the clutch on that poor little jeep began to get really annoyed at the necessary very frequent declutching, and at one point it began to smoke. I was experiencing horror at the thought of the swamis having to abandon the vehicle if it caught fire. Mercifully it didn't and the rally ended without incident. But I suspect, with a seriously worn clutch assembly.

Many years later when visiting the Pietermaritzburg ashram, I was highly entertained to see a large picture frame with a black and white photograph of the jeep with the swamis, but I had been cut out of the picture, leaving a weird looking chunk of the picture missing.

Mind and moon

'The mind is affected by the different phases of the moon. Devotees are advised to chant God's name so that the mind is firm and calm.' – Papa

The full moon has always had a significant impact on me. I either can't sleep properly for the nights leading to it and the nights after it, or feel very energised, or very depressed. It seems to have different effects at different times of the year. Papa had explained that because of the proximity of the moon to earth at full moon, the gravitational pull would affect the oceans (as it does) and produce spring tides, alter animal behaviour (and not just because the night is brighter than usual) and, because of the high percentage of fluid in the brain, human behaviour as well.

I once asked Papa if there was some way in which I could minimise the impact of the full moon on my mind. He thought for a few moments and then said, 'Hmm, you're very open to it.'

Papa then gave one of his glorious 'non-answers' as I thought of them. He said, 'If you're drinking over-limit water at the time, then reduce it. And if you're drinking under-limit water at the time, then increase it.' 😂 So, clearly no solution was intended. To this day, regardless of my water balance, the full moon still gets me every time. I routinely put a message on social media reading, 'Rising full moon tonight. Monitor mind, mood, manners, mouth, and motorists. There be crazies about.' It's astonishing the number of responses it receives. And I see the effect it has on the cats who moved in with me. They become hyperactive and restless.

Preparing For A Talk

Papa stressed the need to avoid over-preparing for a spiritual talk when asked to give one. He said that it's important to rely on one's Deity for the Guru's grace, that the words intended for that group of people will be spoken through us. Too rigid a framework is the death knell of spontaneity. Today one often sees clergy of all religions, essentially reading off a paper or an electronic tablet script.

When Balan Reddy, who became Swami Saradaprabhananda, was one day speaking well at the Avoca ashram, Papa said to me, 'Gurudev gave him that ability, when he was a little boy.'

When on another occasion I was talking to Papa about some upcoming talk, his words of reassurance were, 'Mother has taken her seat in you.' To this day, my preparatory thoughts are: 'Mother, I pray that my ego will be out of the way so that what you want to say or do, or touch or heal, or inspire or uplift, or reassure through this instrument, will be done.' And with Papa's grace, it is so.

I do the same thing in my business consulting and coaching. Always remembering to give thanks afterwards, for the privilege of being an instrument for the delivery of that grace.

The world is *not* a full-on illusion or delusion

Papa only ever discussed Advaita Vedanta with a small group of people. Those who've explored the topic will likely agree that the path of Bhakti [devotion] appears to be the easier one. But if one's mind is inclined more towards monism, it risks being a drier journey. I may have mentioned it elsewhere, but I always think of (now Saint) Mother Teresa of Calcutta when someone asked her about the joy of her spiritual life. She shocked them by saying that for more than fifty years she had not felt God's presence but continued the



journey and her mission based purely on faith. Papa told us many times, 'This is a pathless path.' And 'The highest good, is to die, doing, for the unknown.'

In a similar vein, Saint Theresa of Lisieux (pictured) kept a little diary. When she was experiencing a bleak period in her spiritual life, she wrote a note to Jesus, in which she said, 'If this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them.'

This is a real photograph of her, taken in the courtyard of the monastery of Lisieux Easter Monday, April 15, 1894.

I was never comfortable with the 'neti neti' (not this, not this) route of thinking. The books on Advaita seem to spend forever describing what 'It' was not or is not. It's always been easier for me to look at even teeming crowds and traffic and see them as tiny corpuscles running through the bloodstream of and as manifestations of the One consciousness. So 'iti, iti' – all this.

I was chatting with Papa one day about the Vedantic analogy of the rope and it being mistaken for a snake. I said to Papa, 'It can't be pure illusion. The rope can only be mistaken for the snake because something is actually there. So there's a substratum which we misperceive.' As Papa had said several times before, 'I'm glad you thought that through. The world and everything else that we describe as an illusion or dream is *not* unreal or untrue. But it's only a *partial* revelation or truth.' Reminding me yet again, that as Swami

Vivekananda said, we don't move from 'untruth to truth but from truth to higher truth'.

Reborn As A Deer?

I remember my internal consternation when the story about king Dasaratha worrying about his deer at the time of death, and claiming that he was to be reborn as a deer. This struck me as simplistic and frankly, ridiculous. Imaging wanting a paneer curry at the time of death? You'll reincarnate as milk, or rice?

Not long afterwards, a physically disabled, gentle young man named Ricky, from one of the northern Natal branches of the Centre, passed away. I'd met him at one of the Centre's functions in Durban. Unknown to me he had significant heart problems.

When his family discovered that he'd passed away in his bed, he was found to be holding a picture of Sri Ramakrishna held tightly to his chest. In telling us this, Papa stressed that it's not the exact single thought you have at the time of death, which may determine your next incarnation, but rather the prevailing and dominant pattern of thought. So the default of what dominates our thinking most of the time, is what will have an influence.

In similar fashion, our beloved Swami Thribhuvan gave up the body in the Ramakrishna Home of Service in the inner circle of Benares, having just called for a picture of Mother Sarada Devi. He was acknowledged by senior monks at the home to have exited via Nirvikalpa samadhi.

The Abbott and the cross

From childhood and into my early days at the ashram, I'd always been preoccupied with monasteries their architecture, the monks, their rituals and the like. I'd noticed that the Abbott (approximation

of the Mahamandaleshwar in a large ashram or Hindu monastic order) would, by way of blessing or a benediction, using the thumb of the right hand, make the sign of the cross on the forehead of any monk who was arriving or leaving his presence.

In the same way, when I'd one day prostrated to Papa, as I straightened up, Papa, with his thumb, made the sign of the cross on my forehead as a blessing. It was a wonderful moment because it took my mind back to the Abbotts and the Christian monks.



Papa and 'Guru Shakti' as Papa had named him and Mother Bhabhi Singh – wife of S.H. Singh – one of the stalwarts of the Centre. The picture was taken on Table Mountain in Cape Town in 1973.

When Guru Shakti was one day visiting the ashram, Papa somehow ended up taking his classic but beautiful green sportscar for a drive along Old North Coast Road. Standing high up on the hill at the ashram, we and Guru Shakti could see Papa going past on the road below, his long hair streaming in the wind of the open-topped car

but with smoke pouring out of the back of the vehicle. Papa had obviously not released the handbrake.

Being the quirky person he was, Gurushakti didn't have a conventional clip holding down the long hood of the car. Instead, he's installed a wide brown leather belt with a buckle, to hold it down. Ashramites could often be (as Papa not unkindly called eccentric people) 'a case'.

Guru Shakti was the homeopath, Fred Brown. We new arrivals at the ashram were in awe of him. Clad in a white dhoti and kurta, he'd lost the sight in one eye and although a slightly built man, he had a formidable and for us, imposing presence. I recall seeing him in Papa's downstairs office one day, with Papa's portable typewriter fully disassembled on the table in front of him. I was in awe.

My dad was a superb motor mechanic, and I was accustomed to seeing car engines disassembled into dozens of small components. But here was a huge spread of tiny items comprising nuts, screws, springs and the like. I asked, out of genuine concern, 'How will you ever know what goes back where?' His answer was, 'If it's for the Guru, it will all go back where it's supposed to.' Or something close to that. I never ever saw the typewriter in full bodied or skeletal form again, so I have no idea whether philosophy finally met actuality or not.



The two ‘Johns’ bidding adieu to Papa, Mummy, Sr Henny Schimmel and ashramites in the ashram VW Kombi, as they left for the April/May 1973 Cape Town trip. John Whitfield (Br Shyam) back to camera and John Tunmer talking through the window to Papa.



A youthful-looking Brother Ramsunder Shah. Mummy facing the ocean. This was likely on a trip to East London.

I was with Papa and Mummy one day when Papa said, 'When this body is no more, I want it buried in the grotto (at the old ashram) with Gurudev's ashes at my head. Today the Swami Nischalananda memorial hall covers that site at the ashram.

I said to Papa, 'So no cremation then, Papa?' Papa answered, 'Whoever burns this body, will burn for eternity.' I kept those instructions tucked away in my mind. They were to change many years later.

I have a son

A few months before Papa's mahasamadhi, he said softly from his bed, where his worn out an ill body lay, 'When the body is no longer here, carry a picture of me in your pocket, so I know I have a son.' I had a tiny version of the picture of Papa and me in the ocean reproduced, and had it encased in perspex, intending to wear it around my neck. I took it to the ashram to show Papa. As I handed it to Papa he said, 'Put in on my shrine and leave it with me for a little while.' I did that. Sadly, when Papa left the body, the picture never made its way back to me. But with His grace, Papa lives in my heart. And I know I live in his. Innumerable times he referred to me as 'My darling heart.'

Our farewell to Papa's body

The day on which Papa's body was cremated saw a great calmness among devotees. No floods of tears or emotional outbursts, just a quiet dignity.

Within minutes of Papa's body having been placed in the furnace, white smoke started drifting out of the crematorium chimney. It was a windless day. But for some reason, instead of rising, the smoke drifted down on both sides of the roofed, but otherwise

open waiting area and gently embraced all of us. Years later, ashram Mummy and I were talking about that. It was almost like a final embrace from Papa.

Swami Premananda received Papa's ashes from inside the building. He cooled the ashes with milk, and they were transported back to the Avoca ashram. The whole day seemed surreal. The loving, energetic and comforting physical presence of our Guru was no longer there. With his grace there was no unseemly behaviour from anyone. A spirit of calm and dignity pervaded the entire process.

Papa had said many times that he 'would be able to do so much more' when out of the body.

Monastic reactions to 'death'

Swami Premanandaji my gurubhai and I were once talking about sadhus and their reactions to other sadhus leaving the body. He told me this story. 'I was sitting with Swami Hari Har Tirth, my acharyaguru at Kailash ashram in Rishikesh, when someone came in and gave him news of a close brother monk who had just left the body. Quietly, this great Advaitin began to weep – tears rolling down his cheeks. Said Premanandaji, I looked on in amazement, not having expected such a reaction from a mahatma like this, to news of a mere physical death. Seeing my reaction, my teacher gently said, amidst his tears, 'You think I have no heart?'

Wrapping Up

Thank you, dear reader, for spending time with us and discovering some broad brush-strokes insights into our beloved Papa, Swami Shivapadananda. This is a work in progress and fresh versions will be uploaded from time to time.

If you or people you know were associated with the Ramakrishna Centre in its early days and would like to contribute memories or lend photographs for scanning and return, it'll be wonderful hearing from all of you.

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May Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda guide and bless you. With much love from all of us associated with the Ramakrishna Centre in South Africa.



