Which is not unduly obvious, as I am about to explain.

Jnana in Banaras
- Sages in Varanasi -

Edited by Matthew Brown
Jnana in Banaras
- Sages in Varanasi -

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Subjective Nolli map of Godowlia traffic circle, 2006.
Varanasi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, is found on the banks of the Ganges River in Northern India. Over the span of millennia the city has been known as Banaras, Varanasi, Kashi or Benares. There is a tradition in India of writing devotional works, or mahatmyas, to places of great spiritual power. This is my mahatmya to Varanasi. The word jnana means wisdom, insight into the Absolute Reality, or realization of the fundamental oneness of the universal Self. Someone who has reached this state of universal presence, wisdom and love is called a jnani (pronounced in English, something like “yah-nee.”) So this book is a love song to Varanasi, tracing the anecdotes of great jnanis who have passed through or spent many years in Banaras. It is my feeling that the city is saturated with the wisdom and devotion of these and many other visitors, including the thousands of Hindu pilgrims who come on a ritual circuit every year, bathing at five holy ghats (sandstone platforms and steps leading down into the river), worshipping the Ganga River and visiting temples dedicated to the god Shiva.

Me in a newspaper clipping
from 2001, Dasaswamedh Road
I could have written this whole book by reading what others have written, then paraphrasing them. Instead, I decided to quote them directly. I hope this does not step on anyone’s toes. On the other hand, since I am not making a penny from publishing this to the Internet, hopefully they will understand that I am doing it out of gratitude for their solid scholarship and devotion! So I will begin with a lengthy quotation from Diana L. Eck’s fantastic book, *Banaras: City of Light*, to explain a bit about the city’s long association with spiritual practice and teaching, before launching into the anecdotes, which themselves are rather short, but make for some tasty reading.

“The Forest Hermitages and the Wisdom Traditions of Kashi

In some Hindu weddings, even today, the groom will appear at the doorway of the bride’s home, shortly before the extensive marriage rites are about to begin, and announce to his future father-in-law that he is going to renounce the world and go to Banaras to study the Vedas. This is a ritual threat, and it initiates a round of pleading, bantering, and bargaining in which the bride’s family, with gifts and promises, inevitably dissuades the young man from his noble goal.

Similarly, in some parts of India the initiation sacrament for young men includes a mock journey to Banaras. The rite is called the *upanayama samskara*, the sacrament of ‘leading forth’ the young student to the guru, from whom he receives the sacred thread worn by all twice-born males and the initiatory *mantra* which he will repeat every morning of his life. Immediately afterwards, the initiate takes seven steps in the direction of Banaras, a ritual enactment of the ancient journey to the fountainhead of all wisdom.

Perhaps as early as 1,000 B.C. the Forest of Bliss, which attracted the worship of *yakshas* [pre-Aryan nature spirits associated with trees, pools and plant growth] and *nagas* [pre-Aryan serpent deities associated with pools and streams] also attracted religious seekers, ascetics, and yogis, who found this to be an ideal place for their hermitages. The centuries that saw the rise of the great kingdoms of North India were also a time of religious unrest and new philosophical thinking. The sages and seekers of this period were not primarily the brahmins, who guarded the traditional Vedic rites of the Aryans, but were called *shramanas*, ‘ascetics’ who were teachers of a new, introspective, non-brahminical wisdom. This period produced a whole range of new philosophical perspectives, from the idealism of the Upanishadic sages, who claimed that Reality lay beyond the apprehension of the senses, to the materialism of the Lokayatas, who contended, rather, that Reality is precisely what can be apprehended by the senses. This time also saw the
rise of new spiritual disciplines, like those of the Jainas, the Buddhists, and the yogis. In this period Varanasi became known as a center of learning. By the sixth century B.C. it was not as important a political center as were Shravasti to the north, the capital of Koshala, or Rajagriha to the east, the capital of Magadha. But Varanasi was more than a city; it was also the sacred *kshetra*, the “field” or the “precincts” that stretched out to the adjacent land of pools and groves, where seekers and sages had their retreats.

The most famous seeker of this age was Siddhartha Gautama, born a prince in small kingdom that had been subsumed by Koshala. The story of his quest is well known: how he left a life of luxury to wrestle with the questions of sickness, old age and death; how he spent years in the forest, practicing spiritual disciplines and asceticism with one teacher and then another; how he left his companions and teachers behind to seek a ‘middle way’ in an age of extremism; how he sat in deep meditation at the place called Gaya and saw deeply into the nature of things. He came to be called the Buddha, the ‘Awakened One,’ and after his enlightenment or awakening, he struck out for Varanasi to teach what he had seen to his companions, for he knew they would be there. He walked the two hundred miles from Gaya and crossed the Ganges by ferry to reach Varanasi. There in a park in the suburbs of the city he found his former companions and preached to them the teachings that have come to be called The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path. In this first sermon of the Buddha he ‘turned the wheel of the *dharma,*’ which has been in motion ever since. As the historian Moti Chandra writes, ‘Varanasi at this time was so celebrated that it was only suitable for the Buddha to teach a new way and turn the wheel of the law there.’

The park was called Rishipatana, for its *rishis* or ‘sages,’ and also Mrigadaya, ‘Gift to the Deer.’ The place has long been known as the ‘Deer Park’ and is associated with a Jataka tale in which the king of Varanasi gave the park to the deer as an asylum. The modern name, Sarnath, is said to come from the ‘Lord of the Deer,’ Saranganatha.

There at Rishipatana the Buddha is also said to have attracted his first lay followers. He taught a young man named Yasha, the son of a Varanasi merchant. The story of how Yasha turned from a life of worldly pleasure and riches to a life of renunciation and seeking is similar to Buddha’s own story. Yasha was enlightened by the Buddha’s teachings and became a monk. His parents also came to hear the Buddha and became his first lay followers.

The Buddha is said to have spent his first rainy season retreat there at Rishipatana before beginning his life as an itinerant teacher. Each year he and his monks would spend the four months of the rains in a park or retreat center on the outskirts of one of the major cities of North India, such as Shravasti, Rajagriha, or Vaishali. Several times during his long career, he returned to Varanasi’s Deer Park for the rainy season. A monastic retreat, called a *vihara,* was soon established there, and after the Buddha’s death this was one of the four places mentioned where a shrine or *dagaba* was to be built and to be visited by pilgrims with ‘reverence and awe.’
For 1,500 years Sarnath continued to be an active monastic center of Buddhism. In the third century B.C. the Buddhist Emperor Ashoka had a great stupa [reliquary mound for ritual circumambulation] constructed there. In the Gupta period of the fourth to sixth centuries A.D. Sarnath became one of the great centers of Buddhist art, producing exquisite sandstone images of the Buddha. When Hiuen Tsiang visited Varanasi, which he called ‘Polonisse,’ in the seventh century, he reported that there were some thirty thirty monasteries and 3,000 monks. While Varanasi grew increasingly famous as a Hindu place of pilgrimage, it continued to have a significant Buddhist monastic presence until the twelfth century, when Qutb-ud-din Aibak’s armies demolished Sarnath as well as Varanasi’s great Hindu temples. While the Hindus recovered from the blow, the Buddhist tradition, dependent entirely upon its monks, monasteries, and centers of learning, was virtually eliminated.

In addition to the Buddha and his followers, Varanasi also attracted seekers of the other great heterodox tradition, the Jainas. The Jaina spiritual leaders were called jinas, ‘victorious ones’ or tirthankaras, the ‘ford-makers,’ and the line of these legendary leaders extends far back into the dim past. According to Jaina tradition, the seventh jina, Suparshva, was born in Varanasi and his mother was the earth herself. The twenty-third jina, Parshvanatha, is the first to be dated historically. He lived in the eighth century B.C. and is said to have been born in Varanasi. Parshvanatha was following in the sixth century B.C. by the jina Mahavira, a younger contemporary of the Buddha, who also visited Varanasi during his forty-two years of itinerant teaching.

From the time of Parshvanatha to the present Jainas have continued to have a presence in Varanasi and to count it among their own sacred tirthas. In the fourteenth century, the Jaina scholar Jina Prabha Suri traveled throughout India and wrote about the major tirthas of the Jainas in a book called the Vividha Tirtha Kalpa. There in his chapter on Varanasi he mentions a temple of Parshvanatha, perhaps the same temple that today still stands in the Jaina compound in the Bhelapura district of the city. He describes the life of the city with its yogis and rogues, its temples, tanks, and monkeys – a familiar description even today. Jina Prabha Suri closes his account of the city saying, ‘Who does not love the city of Kashi, shining with the waters of the Ganges and with the birthplace of two jinas?’

The period that produced the speculations and the disciplines of Mahavira and the Buddha also produced the philosophers and seers whose teachings and dialogues are found in the Upanishads. While they may be called orthodox in the sense that they took the Vedas as authoritative, their concern was not with the ritual dimensions of the Vedas, but rather with the interior knowledge of their meaning. The questions of these seekers, like those of their heterodox counterparts, were life’s most profound questions: ‘What is the cause? What is Brahman? Whence are we born? Whereby do we live? And on what are we established?’ These were the questions seekers brought to the hermitages and ashrams of Banaras. The answers were not the possession of the privileged brahmins alone. Indeed, many of the great teachers of this age were kshatriyas,
members of the ruling class. One Upanishad describes a striking reversal: the king of Kashi, Ajatashatru, becomes the teacher of a brahmin sage, who has taught all he knows of Reality to the King. Ajatashatru asks, ‘Is that all?’ The brahmin replies, ‘That is all.’ The brahmin then becomes Ajatashatru’s pupil. The King then goes on to teach him of the One Brahman, concluding: ‘As a spider might come out with his thread, as small sparks come forth from the fire, even so from this Soul come forth all vital energies, all worlds, all gods, all beings.’

The pursuit of wisdom, *jnana*, has always been an important strand of the Hindu tradition. *Jnana* is not conventional knowledge, but liberating insight, the deep-seeing that changes one’s entire consciousness of oneself and the world. It was the pursuit of such insight into the nature of things that gave rise to the philosophies of the Upanishads and the disciplines of yoga and later produced the various schools of philosophical thought. It is significant that the views of the Upanishads and the philosophies that emerged from them were called *darshanas*, ‘points of view’ or ‘perspectives.’ *Darshana* comes from a verb meaning ‘to see,’ and it conveys the understanding that any philosophy is one way of seeing a truth that can be viewed from different angles. The Sankhya and Yoga, the Mimamsa and Vedanta, the Nyaya and Vaisheshika – all emerged as ‘orthodox’ *darshanas*, in that they assume the authoritative nature of the Vedas. Although they articulate different theories of causation and enumerate different means of arriving at valid knowledge, they share a common goal: liberation, *moksha*. In this they might all be considered ‘religious philosophies.’ Through the centuries, the *darshanas* emerged and defined their views in debate and dialogue with one another.

Varanasi has long been associated with the pursuit of this transforming wisdom. The ashrams of ancient India were its universities, so to speak. Around the great urban centers of Mithila, Taxila, and Varanasi were whole colonies of ashrams, where students would apprentice themselves to teachers in order to learn the Vedas. Varanasi outlived all the others as such a center and became synonymous with classical learning. The ritual journeys to Varanasi ‘to study the Vedas’ became, as we have seen, a part of initiatory and wedding rites in distant parts of India. This place of learning came to be called Brahmavardhana, the ‘Increase of Brahman,’ meaning the place where the wisdom of Brahman increases. And, of course, the name Kashi also referred to the city as a center of ‘enlightenment,’ the place where the nature of Brahman is illumined.

Through the centuries, students would have encountered many of India’s greatest philosophers and scholars in Varanasi’s ashrams: the grammarian Patanjali in the second century B.C., the philosopher Shankara in the eighth and ninth centuries, the theologian Ramanuja in the eleventh. With the increasing organization of the *sannyasins* [spiritual renunciates], instigated by Shankara in his grand tour of India, monastic centers began to develop. Each of the great orders of *sannyasins* and each of the major sectarian movements had a monastery or a forest retreat in Kashi. The representation of all the major religious movements in Kashi remains an important part of the city’s sacred geography today. The followers of Shankara and Ramanuja, Madhva
and Vallabha all have their monastic centers, as do the Tantric Gorakhnathi yogis and the frightful Aghoris, the South Indian Vira Shaivas and the North Indian Kabir Panthis.

The ancient traditions of renunciation and the seeking of wisdom are still visible in the streets of Banaras, as the sannyasins, distinctive in their faded orange clothing, carrying a staff and water pot, make their way to the river to bathe or collect their daily alms from householders in the neighbourhood of their monasteries. Particularly during the four months of the rainy season the sannyasins gather here in large numbers, interrupting their otherwise itinerant lives with a period of rest and retreat, much as the holy men of India have done for over 2,500 years.”

- Diana L. Eck, Banaras: City of Light

Varanasi Riverfront, circa 1870
1. Buddha

“It is a fact, admitting of no dispute, that Sakyamuni, the last and only really historical Buddha, on attaining the mysterious condition of Buddhahood under the Bodhi tree in the neighbourhood of Gaya, traveled to Benares, and proceeded to the Isipittana Vihara, or monastery, now known as Sarnath. This may have been in the sixth century B.C. Here he announced the change which had come upon him, and the transcendental and superhuman, not to say divine state, in which he imagined he found himself. The five Bhikshus, or religious hermits, men of considerable note in the early history of Buddhism, who had formerly been associated with him, but had subsequently abandoned him, and who happened, at that time, to be at the Isipittana monastery, embraced the
new religion, and became disciples of Buddha. At Sarnath, Sakyamuni first began to ‘turn the wheel of the Law,’ in other words, to preach the famous doctrines of Dharma and Nirvana, which were destined, in later years, to exert such an extraordinary influence over a large portion of the human family….

It is plain that Benares must have been, at this time, a city of power and importance, the weight of whose opinions on religious topics was very considerable in the country generally; and therefore, that it was of the utmost consequence to secure its countenance and support on any great subject affecting the religious belief of the entire nation. That this was the real reason why Gautama wished to commence his career from Benares, admits of no controversy….

In any case, Benares is a city of no mean antiquity. Twenty-five centuries ago, at least, it was famous. When Babylon was struggling with Nineveh for supremacy, when Tyre was planting her colonies, when Athens was growing in strength, before Rome had become known, or Greece had contended with Persia, or Cyrus had added luster to the Persian monarchy, or Nebuchadnezzar had captured Jerusalem, and the inhabitants of Judaea had been carried into captivity, she had already risen to greatness, if not to glory.

Nay, she may have heard of the fame of Solomon, and have sent her ivory, her apes, and her peacocks to adorn his palaces; while partly with her gold he may have overlaid the Temple of the Lord. Not only is Benares remarkable for her venerable age, but also for the vitality and vigour which, so far as we know, she has constantly exhibited.”


The Buddha is rumoured to have bathed at the Mahanirvan Ghat, near the Jain Ghat.
2. Shankara

“The most formidable philosopher in the history of Hinduism, Shankara made a lasting contribution to Indian life. His role as a man of penetrating intellect, subtle spiritual insight, and organisational energies is of crucial significance to the subsequent development of Hinduism as a whole. He supplied the theological underpinning for pilgrimage to sacred tirthas [crossing-over places from the mundane to sacred] and firmly linked the worship of images with the whole edifice of Hindu metaphysics and philosophy on a pan-Indian scale. He also mobilised the ascetic orders of monks in a manner parallel with that of Buddhism, through a network covering the sub-continent.

Shankara, a high-caste acharya from Kerala, developed the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. He built on the ‘four great utterances’ of the Upanishads: “Thou art That”, “Atman is Brahman”, “I am Brahman”, “Consciousness is Brahman”. The highest experience of which a man is capable has no characteristics, is unthinkable. Its essence is its firm conviction of the oneness of itself. “He is the Self; he it is who should be known”. The forbidding singleness of this vision has the precision of a laser beam.

When he first came to Benares as a young man, Shankara tells us he already possessed a theoretical grasp of Vedanta, but it was only theoretical. According to Indian tradition, intellectual understanding is as nothing without spiritual insight. This insight, he says, could not be attained without a guru, and he goes on to relate how he received a revelation of the Truth from a man in Benares. The story presents a startling juxtaposition: Shankara epitome of the haughty brahmin – and a chandala, or outcaste. One day, having taken his bath in the Ganges, Shankara was walking along one of the city’s narrow lanes lost in thought. Suddenly, an outcaste crossed his path. This was too much for Shankara’s notions of high brahmin status and he exploded. “Move away there,” he cried. But the chandala stood his ground and with complete self-possession proceeded to reprimand the arrogant young scholar:

What do you mean, honoured brahmin? Do you wish to remove your body from physical contact with mine, or do you wish to distinguish your spiritual Self and the spiritual Self that is in me? Is there any difference between the sky reflected in the Ganges and the sky reflected in a chandala’s waterpot?

What kind of state is this if you can get carried away by visions of bliss but your mind still makes a distinction between a brahmin and an outcaste?

The quintessence of Spirit that pervades the universe, as manifest both in the Creator and in the ant, is one and the same. I too am identical with that Spirit, I am not the external form which you merely see with your eyes.

How can it matter if the guru who points this out to you is a chandala or a brahmin? I am Brahman and this changing world is the projection of my Consciousness. Once you are firmly convinced that the Absolute is indeed the adamantine ultimate, what does it matter if he who has taught you that is...
Do you not see that the whole world is transitory, while Brahman is eternal? Surely you must know that this can only be perceived by a mind that is quiet. Of course I can see that the fire of Selfhood burns brightly within you, honoured brahmin. Just so you have fitted yourself to be an instrument of the divine will. What does it matter any more to you that your guru is an outcaste? Such distinctions are of no account, for the real guru is the inner yogi of tranquil mind, who sees the divine in his own heart, and its omnipresence in the hearts of all other creatures, men and gods.

Surely you know that Brahman is the Ocean of Infinite Bliss? Anyone whose mind is steeped in those marvellous Waters is worthy of respect, Him I consider to be a real teacher. This is my belief. What is yours?

-Manisha Panchaka

Shankara recognizes the truth in these words; he even goes so far as to claim that the *chandala* is really no less than Shiva in disguise.”

-Richard Lannoy, *Benares, a World Within a World: The Microcosm of Kashi Yesterday and Today*

“Shankara travelled to Kashi, where a young man named Sanandana from Choladesha in South India, became his first disciple. As per legends, while on his way to the Vishwanath Temple, Shankara came upon an untouchable accompanied by four dogs. When asked to move aside by Shankara's disciples, the untouchable replied: "Do you wish that I move my ever lasting Ātman ("the Self"), or this body made of food?" Realizing that the untouchable was none other than god Shiva himself, and his dogs the four Vedas, Shankara prostrated himself before him, composing five shlokas known as Manisha Panchakam.”

3. **Kabir**

“Listen to the unsounding drums and bells!
Take your delight in love!
Rain pouring waterless, rivers flowing
in streams of light.
One Love floods the whole world,
though few can truly see.
Blind are they who hope Love may be seen by reason’s light,
for reason is the cause of all life’s loveless isolation…”

Although he was one of the earliest of the great Benares reformers, Kabir (1440-1518) – weaver, poet, musician – is the most modern. He speaks to us directly, uncompromisingly, as a distinctly recognisable individual. His original and unusually eclectic personality comes across in translation more vividly than most Indian poets of the mystical kind…. He succeeded in holding together, seemingly without effort, an extraordinary range of diverse Indian spiritual traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi. He is one of the supremely representative geniuses of Indian history.

I am not pious – nor am I ungodly,
Nought do I care for rules or good sense,
I speak for none, take heed of none,
Am neither master nor slave,
Neither am I bound, nor yet free,
Neither attached nor unattached.
I am not remote – but nor am I too close.
I shall go neither to heaven nor to hell.
I work – but work does not enslave me.
Few understand what I say: he who does is unconcerned.
Kabir seeks neither to create nor to destroy.”

-Richard Lannoy, *Benares, a World Within a World: The Microcosm of Kashi Yesterday and Today*
“Your senses and limbs are still active; they are not under your control. By meditation this weakness of your mind should be overthrown. How intensely should one meditate? While Kabir meditated, a dog bit him. Someone came and told him, ‘A dog has bitten you.’ Kabir replied, ‘The dog knows and the skin knows.’”


“Kabir, the great poet-sage says in a verse:

I recited the sacred names, a million times;
performed austerities and penances
But I did not realize myself.
When I met the perfect Master, Niranjan – the Unblemished
Instantly I realized the Highest
And abided in the state of Non-Attention – *alak*."

*(alak = The state before conception.)*

- Nisargadatta Maharaj, from *The Nectar of Immortality*, Ed. Robert Powell
4. Ramakrishna

Ramakrishna in samadhi
“As Ramakrishna approached Benares in a boat, crossing the Ganges, he saw in a vision that the city was made of gold; that is to say, he saw that the subtle form of the city had been made golden by the love and faith of its innumerable devotees throughout the ages. Ramakrishna had such a strong sense of the sacredness of Benares that he was even careful not to relieve himself within its limits. Nevertheless, he was disappointed. ‘I had expected,’ he said later, ‘to find everybody in Benares merged in samadhi, contemplating Shiva twenty-four hours a day; and everybody in Vrindavan wild with joy in the company of Krishna. But, when I got to those places, I found it all different.’

Mathur rented two houses, side by side on the Kedarghat in Benares, and lived there in pomp. Whenever he went out, a servant held a silver umbrella over his head. Ramakrishna had his own palanquin, since he was unable to walk far without the danger of losing outward consciousness and falling. Mathur fed Brahmin pundits and gave them presents. This caused them to squabble enviously amongst themselves. He also indulged in worldly conversation with other rich landowners. All this pained Ramakrishna; he wished himself back in Dakshineswar.

Still, not all of his experiences were disappointing. He went to see the famous holy man, Trailanga Swami, and found him indeed holy. ‘I saw,’ said Ramakrishna, ‘that the Universal Lord Himself was using the Swami’s body to manifest His presence. All Benares was illumined by his stay there. He was in an exalted state knowledge. He had no body-consciousness. The sand there gets so hot in the sun that no one can walk on it; but he lay on it comfortably. I cooked rice pudding and brought it with me and fed him with it. At that time, he couldn’t speak to me because he had taken a vow of silence. So I asked him by signs whether Ishwara was one or many. He replied by signs that Ishwara is known to be one when a man enters a state of samadhi; but as long as any consciousness of “I” and “You” persists, Ishwara is perceived as many. I told Hriday, ‘In him you see the condition of a true Knower of Brahman.’”

One day in Benares, Mathur took Ramakrishna on a boat trip to see the holy places. As they approached the chief burning-ghat near Manikarnika, the air was full of smoke; for many bodies were lying on the funeral pyres in the process of cremation. At the sight, Ramakrishna’s face expressed ecstatic joy and the hairs of his body stiffened. He came out from the covered part of the boat, walked over to the bows and passed into samadhi. The boatmen ran to catch him, lest he should fall into the water. But, this time, Ramakrishna did not fall; he remained standing erect, with a wonderful smile. Hriday and Mathur stood protectively beside him but did not touch him. The boatmen gazed at this extraordinary figure in astonishment.

Later, when Ramakrishna had returned to outer consciousness, he told them that he had seen a tall white figure with matted hair approach each funeral pyre in turn, carefully raise each individual soul from its cast-off body and whisper into its ear the particular name of Brahman that liberates a soul. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the pyre, sat Mother Kali, untying the knots of bondage created by the individual karma and thus setting the soul free. The pundits who were present confirmed the truth of this vision from their knowledge of the Scriptures. For it is
written that, if the individual soul gives up its body in Benares, it will immediately be liberated from the wheel of rebirth and death, through the grace of the Lord Shiva.”

-Chrisopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*
“Anandamayi is pre-eminent among women; but also, and by common consent since her death in 1982, she was one of the half dozen most outstanding Indian spiritual figures of the twentieth century. She numbered many eminent men and women among her followers. There were fewer foreigners than might be expected, partly due to the language barrier, for Anandamayi spoke only Bengali and Hindi. But she was a brahmin and there was more ritual than usual, and along with that there was very strict observance of orthodox dietary rules and pollutions rules, with access to shrines and living quarters regulated in such a way that life as a resident foreigner could be very difficult to sustain. But one reason why these rules may have been imposed so strictly was the need to ensure there would never be any grounds for the male-dominated priestly hierarchies beyond the ashram walls to level criticism against an establishment headed by a woman who was, moreover, a widow. While the rules, which rigorously excluded all sexual activity and all stimulants, were very strict, the atmosphere was always genial and good-
humoured, broadminded and devoid of dogmatism and fanatical zeal. Quite apart from anything else, one could always be sure of meeting interesting people at the numerous ashrams of Anandamayi, particularly the one in Benares, where people of many remarkable talents congregated, while artists and scholars from abroad only occasionally came and went.”

- Richard Lannoy, Benares, a World Within a World: The Microcosm of Kashi Yesterday and Today

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Atmananda (Blanca Schlamm) (1904-1985)

*This photograph was taken while Atmananda was still known as "Miss Blanca" by her students and friends at Krishnamurti’s Rajghat School*
"Blanca's Youth, 1904-1930"

Blanca was born on 7th June 1904 in Vienna, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish businessman from a Polish family and her mother was from a Czechoslovakian family. There were early tragedies in her life. When Blanca was two years old her mother died after giving birth to a baby girl. This girl, Blanca's beloved younger sister, died of diphtheria when she was 17 years old, shortly before Blanca's 19th birthday. Blanca and her sister had been lovingly cared for and provided with the comprehensive education that their father wished for them. They had one tutor who spoke only French until the children were fluent in that language, and then another who only conversed in English. They had music lessons at a young age and were taken to concerts and operas. Aged eight, Blanca already showed outstanding musical talents.

The best available grand piano was bought for her and she took her practice very seriously, becoming a prodigy and giving her first acclaimed public recital when she was 16 years old. At an early age Blanca became interested in literature and read widely. Before the First World War, Vienna was the capital of a Central European empire, with a very rich cultural and intellectual life; the city of Freud, Klimt, Mahler, Kreisler, Mach, Wittgenstein and Popper. After the war, the empire was dismantled by the victorious allies and a poverty-stricken Austria was the result. Blanca's family became poor and Vienna became the oversized capital of a small, mostly agrarian state. When she was 16, while walking alone through a park, pondering the senseless destruction around her, one of the defining moments of her life occurred. "Suddenly, all matter - trees, rocks, the sky, water - was vibrantly alive and filled with a divine light in which there was no separation between the seer and the seen, but only an ecstatic unity which was by definition eternal love."

For one timeless moment all this was overwhelmingly revealed to her and this revelation was to be the driving force of her life from then on. It is interesting to note that the great Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (1838-1916), had a very similar experience aged 17-18, which completely shaped his subsequent life and philosophy.

Many people in Vienna were disillusioned and some had turned to the Theosophical Society (founded in 1875) to satisfy their thirst for knowledge and certainty. The leaders of the Society had proclaimed the young Jiddu Krishnamurti (JK 1895-1986) as the 'Vehicle' for the anticipated 'World Teacher'. The Society made JK the head of one of their internal groups called 'The Order of the Star in the East'. JK had been educated and trained by the Society to fulfill this role and had started his world travels, visiting Vienna in 1923. He was an intelligent, charming and attractive young man. Blanca had been brought up to critically examine statements and views presented to her, the mind being considered the ultimate arbiter. She had been attracted by the teachings of Theosophy, had joined the Vienna branch and had quickly reached the innermost circle of the branch. It was at that stage she decided to keep a diary to record her spiritual work and progress. The first entry is 'Vienna 21st April 1925' when Blanca was nearly 21. The diary was written in English and, with breaks, contains some 800 entries.

The Theosophical Society celebrated its 50th anniversary at its headquarters in Adyar, Madras in December 1925, with more than 3,000 delegates from all parts of the world. Blanca attended
this, on her first trip to India. There she met the leaders of the Society and was enthusiastic about Theosophy and her progress in this system of belief. She returned to Vienna in February 1926 from where she moved to Huizen in Holland where she became organist to the Liberal Catholic Church, a Christian group in the Society. Nearby was Ommen, where the Order of the Star held an annual summer camp attended by members from all parts of the world and by the Society leaders including JK.

Blanca threw herself into the various activities of Theosophy including attendance at Ommen. She became more and more attracted to JK and his teachings. At the 1927 camp JK declared that he had become united with the 'Beloved' (the Universal), his individual self having been destroyed. At the 1929 camp, JK made his famous speech, declaring that "Truth is a pathless land and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever". He then dissolved the Order of the Star in the East. At one stroke, JK had destroyed the foundations of the Theosophical Society, its hierarchical structure, as well as the search for and reliance on external assistance in spiritual growth. This iconoclastic approach, which JK followed for the rest of his life, caused enormous distress and division to members of the Society. Blanca was terribly upset at many of her previous beliefs being shattered, but she was very impressed by JK’s actions and words and decided to terminate her church commitments and returned to Vienna in 1930. The last entry in her diary for that period is 'Huizen, 17th August 1929'.

**To India as a Teacher (1930-1943)**

The years 1930-1935 were spent in Vienna, giving piano lessons, performing, and continuing with the devotion to JK’s teachings. JK had started an experimental school situated in a beautiful pastoral spot on the Ganges on the outskirts of Benares at Raighat, for students and teachers to live according to his philosophy. There was a shortage of suitable teachers, so Blanca was requested to go there. She arrived in India in 1935. Blanca's teaching ability was highly praised. In addition she gave classical music recitals of piano on All India Radio. In trying to implement JK's teaching, which denied all authority and gave apparent freedom to teachers and pupils, Blanca began to see the shortcomings of his philosophy. By the year 1939, when she saw JK for the last time before the Second World War (which JK spent in California), at his Rishi Valley school in South India, she had reached breaking point and felt she could not give him her previous full support. However, both his teaching and personality continued to influence her until the last time she saw him in 1961.

In 1942 Blanca decided to go to Tiruvannamalai, South India, to see Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, hoping that he would be able to give her the peace of mind she had been unable to obtain from JK's teachings. She stayed for about six weeks. After an interval of over 12 years, her diary recommences with an entry 'Ramanashram, 17th May 1942'. Whilst there, Blanca felt peace and the power of the higher Self; talked to other seekers; visited the mountain Arunachala and had various visions and dreams. She greatly benefited from the experiences she had there, but the mental obstacles caused by her upbringing, experience of Theosophy and JK's teachings still remained. Aware of these obstacles and with tears in her eyes, she asked Ramana Maharshi why she could not get rid of her egotistical resistance to His teaching. His reply was: "Take the
resistance into your heart and keep it there!" The entries in the diary show that Blanca did not fully understand that the heart was Ramana's term for the innermost Self, whereas Europeans view the heart as the seat of the emotions. It appears that the latter interpretation was uppermost in Blanca's mind and it would take many more years before she fully understood Ramana's meaning. Throughout the rest of her diaries Blanca makes reference to Ramana with deep reverence and affection, but her destiny was to become the disciple of another guru.
Initial Discipleship and the Last 12 Years at Rajghat (1943-1954)

The guru whose disciple she was about to become was Shri Anandamayee Ma (1896-1982), referred to by her followers as Ma (Mother). She was one of the most outstanding religious figures in modern times, and was the last great representative of the Hindu renaissance that began with Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886). Ma was born in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and had from her childhood exhibited the most amazing spiritual maturity and beauty. Her consciousness was completely non-dual and she considered her mission to be the preservation of genuine Hindu religious and philosophical traditions which were under attack from the materialism of the West. She had more than 30 ashrams in India and Bangladesh (after partition), and spent her adult life travelling and visiting each as the spirit moved Her. She had an ashram at Bhadaini in Benares, near to Rajghat where Blanca was teaching. Blanca wanted to visit Ramana Maharshi in Tiruvannamalai again, and possibly also Sri Krishna Menon, another highly respected guru who lived in Trivandrum, South India. However as she still had German nationality during the war (Austria having been annexed by Germany in 1938), travel restrictions were imposed on her by the authorities, and she could not go. In the summer of 1943, whilst
Blanca was at the hill station of Almora, she was urged by a friend to visit Ma who was there with some of her devotees.

Ma addressed a few words to Blanca, but as the former spoke Bengali and not English, there was no opportunity for a conversation. Blanca noticed that she had not been treated as a stranger, rather as though she were an old friend and she was impressed by Ma's joy and beauty, also the inward beauty and purity that shone in the faces of some of her devotees. Later that year, Blanca met Ma again in Benares, but Ma was in the middle of a large crowd of singing and dancing devotees, which disturbed Blanca; nevertheless she felt that there was something very special and fascinating about her.

Another person who played an important part in Blanca's spiritual Odyssey, was Lewis Thompson, an English poet of genius and a spiritual seeker in the same age group as Blanca. His quest had taken him from Europe to Ceylon and India, where he had met and stayed with many of the outstanding gurus of the time. He had a very artistic, sensitive and unworldly nature, as well as a critical and razor-sharp intellect. As a result of his experience, he had an intuitive ability to distinguish between true and false gurus. In the winter of 1944, Lewis came to stay at the Rajghat school as he was anxious to resume his spiritual enquiries and to meet Ma and other teachers in Benares. He was the only other Westerner with Blanca at the school, so a friendly relationship started. This lasted till Lewis's death in 1949 and had many ups and downs. Blanca admired her friend's poetic ability and great spiritual knowledge, but was appalled by his changes of temperament and inability to look after his worldly wellbeing. Conversely Lewis was free in his criticism of Blanca's spiritual endeavours, but supplied Blanca with sound advice on those spiritual topics of which she was ignorant. They were spiritual soul-mates and because of Lewis's unworldliness, Blanca helped her friend financially like an older sister. It was Lewis who persuaded Blanca to pursue her relationship with Ma.

Through the good offices of a translator Blanca had her first lengthy and private conversation with Ma on 24th March 1954. Ma did not commonly give spiritual instructions but only to those persons with whom she felt a spiritual connection, a connection which was divinely inspired rather than the result of her personal desire or will. Under these circumstances, any instructions which she gave were designed to meet the specific needs of the enquirer. These instructions entailed the transmission of a subtle but quite profound power which the recipient would be enabled to follow. For Blanca this was the beginning of the guru-disciple relationship. Blanca first explained her spiritual history and background. She then asked questions as to how to resolve the conflicts in her mind; very similar to the question she had addressed to Ramana Maharshi. Ma explained that as long as the mind was turned outward to the world, conflicts were inevitable. It was necessary to turn the mind inward, dwelling on that which is permanent, to make it steady and quiet. She explained that at this stage of Blanca's life it was not necessary to withdraw from worldly activities, but the time would come when solitude became imperative. For the present spiritual practice, Ma recommended meditation building up to three hours daily, breathing exercises, enquiry into what is permanent and what is fleeting and discrimination between these.

Blanca should keep a daily spiritual diary, recording her experiences, her feelings and the changes in her outlook. All her experiences should be viewed as a spectator, both the ups and the
downs. Blanca was questioned about her attachments and told Ma that music was the strongest. Ma felt that this was not a problem. She also encouraged Blanca to discuss these matters with Lewis. Blanca had the impression that Ma wanted to help Lewis, using Blanca for that purpose. Conversely, it may be that Ma had asked Lewis to help Blanca. Blanca recorded in her diary after the interview that Ma was completely convincing. Blanca felt that it was not another person talking to her, but her higher Self talking with her normal self. Ma's words were the outer expression of something taking place at a much deeper level. It was an experience beyond words, but all the more real for that.

Blanca immediately followed Ma's instructions with some success, but within three days doubts arose in her mind, due to the conflict with JK's teaching at that period, which deprecated formal meditation. The diaries now record her continuous spiritual practice, her frequent talks with Ma and Lewis, her frequent visits to various of Ma's ashrams and her many difficulties. These difficulties arose because she could not reconcile JK's teachings with those of Ma. Her European background was offended by the dirt and noise and by the lack of privacy and proper sanitation. Her classical music background initially prevented appreciation of the Indian devotional music and singing. Finally, the orthodox Hindu rules made her feel unwelcome and an outcast in some of the ashrams. There was much pain, and tears flowed on many occasions. Blanca had been trained since childhood to judge for herself and therefore found the requirements to obey the guru's instructions, whether she understood the reason for these or not, to be contrary to her personality. This and what she considered to be the unfairness and unreasonableness of some of her surroundings, caused Blanca's strong temper and anger to rise, leading to friction with some of the ashram's inmates.

Sometimes she suffered from lack of sleep due to the lack of privacy and the constant travelling. In November 1945, Blanca experienced an inner change, which made her more reconciled to her many problems. She had an unearthly vision of Ma when she was in her company, which reminded her of her mother who had died when Blanca was two. Ma now became her mother and her beloved. She was the ideal of all her devotees and personified what Blanca had longed for, for the last 15 or 20 years. Ma gave her a new name, Atmananda; this is how she is referred to in the rest of this article. In May 1946 she was allowed 14 months leave of absence from Rajghat; she wanted to follow her quest more fully, without having to attend to her teaching duties. She started to live in the Calcutta ashram and to travel to various other ashrams with Ma. Atmananda who was fluent in English, French and German, started to learn Hindi and Bengali, so as to be able to talk to Ma and to integrate with the new life. She was given a mantra initiation by Ma and learned to treat outer events as part of an external drama. She was also able to converse inwardly with her guru, which helped her in the many periods when she could not be together with Ma. Gradually Atmananda's ego began to shrink, although many difficulties still arose in daily living. Atmananda had many friends in India and the West with whom she conversed and corresponded. These friends followed her experiences with great interest and some of them wanted to know about Ma for themselves. At this stage she decided to apply for Indian citizenship, which in due course she obtained.

In July 1947 she returned to Rajghat. Because of her problems, she discussed JK and his teachings many times with Ma. Ma had no difficulties with JK's teachings on self-awareness, observation and analysis, but for her this was only one of many important spiritual practices. Her
view was much wider and deeper than that of JK. Ma's advice to Atmananda was to continue with her spiritual practices and to remember that she belonged to Ma; apart from that she could read or think about JK’s teachings whenever she liked. At the end of the Second World War, JK recommenced his international speaking trips. In December 1948 he was in New Delhi and had a meeting with Ma in the garden of the home of Atmananda's childhood friend Kitty, wife of the prominent Indian politician Siva Rao. The diary summarises the conversation between Ma and JK as follows.

Ma said, "Pitaji (respected Father), why do you speak against gurus? When you say one does not need any guru, sadhana (spiritual practice) etc., you automatically become the guru of those who accept your view, particularly as large numbers of people come to hear you speak and are influenced by you". JK then replied, "No, if you discuss your problems with a friend, he does not thereby become your guru. If a dog barks in the dark and alerts you to a snake the dog does not thereby become your guru!" This conversation sheds light on one of JK's peculiarities. At his public meetings he always emphasised that he was not talking at his audience, i.e. making a speech, but was simply carrying on a conversation with them. In most cases this was a ludicrous assertion, because JK's talks were mostly one-sided leaving little opportunity for anyone to respond. Even if there was a response, JK nearly always made negative comments about any questions or remarks addressed to him. It seems that this policy of JK was the result of his claim that he was not a teacher, having abandoned that role in 1929. Ma by her remarks, showed to JK that this attitude of denial was a self-delusion.

In January 1949 JK came to Rajghat and met Atmananda for the first time since 1939. She had been terrified anticipating the meeting, but though they treated each other politely, she found him
to be at a lower spiritual level than Ma. She felt that JK was the Theosophical Messiah, a Westerner who had only a limited understanding of the depth and breadth of the Indian religious and philosophical tradition. Later, JK made negative remarks about her association with Ma and suggested she should leave Rajghat. However, another five years were to elapse before this took place. In June 1949 whilst she was at Ma's Solan ashram away from Benares, Lewis died in Benares. She knew he was penniless and believed he had died from overeating after a period of starvation. She was extremely upset and believed that for a period after his death he was still near her to give her guidance and comfort. Lewis had made her his executor and had left her a small image of the child Krishna. In 1950 Ma taught Atmananda the ritual of worshipping this image, using a mantra, sandal paste, water, fruit and flowers; she then performed this ritual daily. It brought to her memory that in 1929 when she left Huizen, she had said that she would never perform rituals again. She had clearly moved on since then. She adopted Indian dress, learned Hindi and Bengali, began to appreciate Indian music and felt less out of place in the ashrams.

Anandamayi Ma, photographed by Richard Lannoy

Full Discipleship (1954-1985)

Atmananda's increasing involvement with orthodox Hindu society inevitably changed her ability to continue at Rajghat. Exactly nine years after her first lengthy interview with Ma, on 24th March 1954, she was asked by the school manager to leave the school and join Ma in an ashram.
Although this was her desire, the practical problems which such a move involved, i.e. no longer having a regular income, losing independence, facing the difficulties of living permanently with non-Europeans etc., had to be surmounted. After discussion with Ma, in whom she trusted completely, Atmananda, aged 50 in June 1954, left Rajghat and her professional life as a teacher and musician.

From that point on, her diary entries become less frequent. She continues with the life and travelling she has experienced since she accepted Ma as her guru, but there are new tasks which she readily fulfils. She becomes the editor of the English version of the ashram magazine, a faithful and almost single-handed duty which she carries out for 30 years. She also translates other publications of Ma and assists other authors concerned with Ma's teachings. She inwardly thanked her dead father for having provided the foresight and means of learning so many languages. She became a translator for Ma of the many Westerners who more and more took an interest in Ma's teachings, and of the smaller number who wished to join the ashram. When Atmananda first stayed at the ashrams, she had only Ma to protect and defend her against the problems which arose for her in the strange surroundings. Ma did this task carefully, but was not always available when the problems arose. Now when Westerners came into the ashrams, Atmananda with all her experience and ability, was able to smooth the path for others, to stand up for justice and fairness and help her Indian fellow disciples understand the difficulties which the Westerners faced.

She was at the centre of the small group of Western disciples. She was very glad to have that position, because she realized that the ability to converse and exchange confidences with people of similar background, was invaluable. The last entry in her diary describing her own views, is from Hardwar, 12th February 1962: "Much happens daily in terms of consciousness... To concentrate on the divine in everyone helps solve the problem, whereas reacting only increases the negativity. One should feel that whatever comes is sent by God. Nevertheless, I still get irritated at times. In the evening I could do good work on the new book. How rich life is – so much happens in a single day, although outwardly there is nothing special".

The last entry in her diary is from Kishenpur (Dehradun) 23rd July 1963 and records a conversation between Ma and a French priest. In 1965 a Dutch devotee had a tiny but charming stone cottage constructed for Atmananda in Ma's ashram retreat of Kalyanvan near Dehradun. It is situated at an altitude of around 2,500 feet in a beautiful tranquil garden surrounded by ancient pine and jackfruit trees, with a view of the mountains. This was all and more than Atmananda ever dared hope for and she remained delighted with the place until the end of her life. Every afternoon she would walk a mile or so to Ma's Kishenpur ashram to lead the devotional singing which was faithfully attended by a group of local devotees. Dehradun is a fairly sophisticated community and she had many friends there.

In 1979, on Ma's instructions, Atmananda went to the pilgrimage town of Gaya to attend the rituals there to mark her formal entry into the final stage of renunciation in which one is completely dead to the world. Outwardly though, she kept this a secret. Ma died on 27th August 1982 and was buried at her ashram in Kankhal (Hardwar). Atmananda was not distracted by the gloom which descended on many of the ashram inmates, but instead appeared to be fired by a new intensity in fulfilling her duties. In 1983, Atmananda's book 'As the Flower Sheds its
Fragrance' was published which dealt with her experiences of Ma. She was also responsible for translating and assisting with the publication of three volumes of Ma's sayings in English. On 24th September 1985, aged 81, Atmananda died of diphtheria in the rest house for pilgrims near the Kankhal ashram; it was the same illness that had killed her younger sister aged 17 in 1923. She died in the sitting position on her bed, softly repeating the name of her guru. At her funeral, she was given the full traditional honours due to her as a Hindu renunciate and her body was submerged in a special area of the Ganges reserved for that purpose. She was probably the only Western woman accorded that honour.

Atmananda, toward the end of her life

- Hans Heimer, *Blanca Schlamm - Atmananda (1904-1985): The Odyssey of a Western Seeker*
6. **J. Krishnamurti** (and Maurice Frydman)

“One day, Maurice Frydman and his friend Wanda Dynowska, who used to call herself Uma Devi and stayed here in the TS at Sevashrama, came to see him. She translated many theosophical works and also Krishnamurti's books and sent them through underground channels to Poland in the days when Communism was supreme. It was a tremendous work. Uma Devi's brother was killed during the War and in 1948 news was still trickling in and she had just heard that somebody else had died, which made her very unhappy. So Frydman, who always used to make things a little philosophical, said: 'What should one's attitude be to the dead?' Krishnaji answered: 'The Bible has it, Sir: Let the dead bury the dead.' That was all; nothing else. Some days before Krishnamurti left after a stay of six weeks, Frydman said: 'This chap Balasundaram should be put to work. He is very capable, but I cannot get him to work. Krishnaji, you are the only person who can persuade him. So, you should tell him to work with me, and we will start.'

I knew Frydman had his own way of doing things. In 1950, for one year he was the Secretary of the Krishnamurti Foundation and also of its Rajghat Center. He turned it upside down. So, when Frydman said that I should work with him, I replied: 'I will never work with Maurice Frydman. He says one thing and does another. He is most unreliable.'

Krishnaji just looked at me and responded: 'How can you say such a thing? He may have changed even at the last minute. What you say may be true, but he may have changed.' You see, this was so obvious. The teacher was thus teaching. His teaching flashed through even small things. In this case the lesson was that I should live without an image. It was a shocking lesson. Krishnaji remarked: 'I am just poking you to live, to become alive.'”

-Balasundaram, S.

http://www.teosofia.com/krishnamurti.html

“[Nisargadatta] Maharaj clearly had a great respect for Maurice. I remember on one of my early visits querying Maharaj about some statement of his that had been recorded in *I am That*. I think it was about fulfilling desires. Maharaj initially didn't seem to agree with the remarks that had been attributed to him in the book, but then he added, 'The words must be true because Maurice wrote them. Maurice was a *jnani*, and the *jnani*'s words are always the words of truth.'”

- David Godman

http://davidgodman.org/interviews/nis1.shtml
“Very humbly and hopefully I went to Benares for a week at Christmas, in order to discover whether I might find there that bridge that I sought between East and West. I sat at Mrs. Besant’s feet on various occasion, but on others, I must admit I danced with two American tourists (one fair, one dark) whom I had met at the hotel. Looking back on them, even from this distance of time, I am not surprised that my attention should have been distracted from the holy city of the Hindus. It is true that I searched for Sivanand Joshi, and also attended the lectures at the Central Hindu College, but my pursuit of knowledge was not as diligent it would have been had there not been a curly head, and a pair of bow-shaped lips, and a Virginian burr in my memory. But for this frailty I might have become wiser.

Or again, I might not.

As to Mrs. Besant, she was all that I had imagined her to be, in elegance, dignity, sincerity; and Krishnamurti, whom the esoteric section of the Theosophists believed was about to become the Saviour of the World, seemed a modest, handsome, straightforward lad. But I was very much disappointed in their friends.

Before the meetings, a venerable figure (who was later accused of abducting the Theosophical Messiah, but later acquitted) used to give us lithographed scraps of paper revealed to him by the Masters of the Great White Lodge. On their way from the snows of Tibet these thought-transferences seemed to me to have lost their sting and degenerated into platitudes. Krishnamurti generally sat on the platform with Mrs. Besant.

On one occasion he spoke. As bad luck would have it I had made an appointment this evening to dine with my friends, so I missed a scene which may (or may not) be remembered as epochal in future ages. For it was then that the Holy Spirit descended on Krishnamurti. “Great vibrations thrilled through the hall,” wrote an eye-witness later in The Theosophist, “and the slender figure took on a surprising majesty. Indians, Europeans, Americans, bowed their heads at the feet of the sixteen-year-old Brahmin boy, whose body was shaken by the Coming Avatar, and asked his blessing.” These things we missed for grilled chicken and Pol Roger.

I can never forget the debt I owe to Mrs. Besant. But the masters, the Great Ones, the Lords of Karma, and so on, were not for me. The fair and dark tourists taught me more of life.”

-Francis Yeats-Brown (aka Charles Claypon), Bengal Lancer

Note: Obviously this writer isn’t a realized sage, but his account of Krishnamurti is interesting. Also, it was through Francis Yeats-Brown’s book that I first heard about Varanasi. The story is an autobiographical account of a British soldier’s exploits in India during the First World War. It is also notable that he meets and studies with a guru who teaches him yoga on the steps of the ghats in Benares! This yoga knowledge later enables him to survive incarceration in a Turkish prison, and leads him to wonder if Jesus was also versed in yoga.
“Robert was born on January 21, 1928 in the Bronx. His mother was Jewish and his father Catholic. He once joked he took a lawyer with him when he went to Confession. He was a rebellious youth, always on the verge of getting into trouble. He questioned the practices of those around him, such as eating meat. His mother would sometimes kill chickens for the Sunday meal. Robert could not bear to watch or eat the meat. He was hounded by the question of how there can be a world where people ate animals, which was filled with suffering and death, and yet there supposedly was a God allowing all this. Of course, many people are tormented by that same doubt. He wrestled with this question until he was eleven, when one day, there came a sudden and overwhelming realization that there was no such world, it was an illusion! It did not exist. This is a very different kind of resolution indeed. Most people hounded by this question resolve it by dropping the question or turning to faith in some religious system. This eleven year-old's resolution was an adumbration of his future enlightenment.

Robert’s earliest memory was of a small, two-foot high dwarf with white hair and a white beard that would stand at the foot of his crib and jabber at him in a language he could not understand. He said the man was quite animated, and constantly ‘lectured’ him. This little man finally disappeared when Robert was seven. Years later, after his awakening experience, he was looking through a book on the teachings of Ramana Maharshi when he saw that sage’s picture. "I was shocked!" he said, "The hair on my head and neck stood straight up. The little man who had lectured me all those years was Ramana!"
After the little man disappeared, Robert developed a Siddhi, a power. He felt the world belonged to him. Whenever he wanted something, he just repeated God’s name three times and within minutes or hours, it would be given to him. Once, after he thought he would enjoy taking violin lessons and doing the God’s name mantra, his uncle showed up with a violin saying he thought Robert might enjoy learning. By the time Robert was 14, he hardly studied any school subjects at all. Whenever a test came up, he would again just say, "God! God! God!" and the correct answers would come. One day, just before taking an algebra test in Mrs. O'Reilly's classroom, he repeated God’s name three times. Rather than the algebra answers, something else came to him, a total complete enlightenment experience wherein was revealed the transcendent knowledge of life and death, of reality and illusion. The nature of this experience is expressed in one of his talks on this site.

Robert withdrew even more completely from the world. He stopped eating, stopped going to school, stopped hanging around with friends. His mother was quite concerned of course, and, which was quite unusual at that time (1942) sent him to see a psychiatrist. Apparently the psychiatrist told his mother he would grow out of it. Robert had no idea what had happened to him, and began exploring Eastern religious books to find some meaning for the experience. He began attending meetings with Joel Goldsmith, taking a bus miles away in the City.

One day, in a library, he spotted the book about Ramana Maharshi, which contained the photograph mentioned above. He also found the book, The Autobiography of a Yogi, by Paramhansa Yogananda, and made up his mind to stay with him. Curiously, those were two of the books I also discovered at a very early age. Therefore, at age 16, he left home to stay with Yogananda at the Self-Realization Fellowship campus in Encinitas, California.

Robert always had a few Yogananda stories to tell, including one about his initiation into Yogananda’s order of swamis. After the initiation, Yogananda whispered into Robert’s ear, "Will you always love me, no matter what I do?" Robert, somewhat taken aback by the question, and thinking to himself, "What is this guy planning to do?" just responded, "Of course!"

To make a long story short, Yogananda would not allow Robert to become a monk at SRF. As Robert confides, "He couldn’t wait to get rid of me. I kept asking why he taught all the practices, mantras, affirmations and healing techniques, when all of them missed the point of Self-realization." Yogananda’s expressed attitude was along the lines of, "I’ve done very well, thank you, doing things this way!" Because of the nature of Robert’s own spontaneous awakening, his connection to the little white haired dwarf, and Yogananda’s own devotional relationship with Ramana Maharshi, he told Robert to go to Ramana.

During the Fall of 1946, Robert arrived by train to the town of Tiruvannamalai, a few miles from Arunachala Mountain, where lay Ramanashram and his future teacher, Ramana Maharshi. He took a bullock cart to the Ashram, was admitted, and stayed the night. Early the next day while walking back from the mountain, towards the Ashram, he spotted Ramana walking down the path towards him. An electrifying energy coursed through his body, and the last of what men call an ego left him. He felt completely surrendered, completely open. As Ramana got closer, Robert stripped off his clothes, approached Ramana and dropped to his guru’s feet. Ramana reached down grabbing Robert by his shoulder, and looked into Robert’s eyes with complete love and...
said, "I have been waiting for you. Get up! Get up!" Robert said had Ramana asked him to leap over a cliff at that moment, he would have done so gladly.

Robert became different when he told this story. Most of the time he never talked about his past, and when he did, it was said more for entertainment than for teaching purposes. When he told this story he was sitting erect, almost standing out of his chair, and he looked outwards, above the crowd before him, almost as if he were seeing Ramana again. Tears came from his eyes as he stated he would have jumped off the cliff for Ramana, and he added finally, ‘This is how you have to be, completely naked before God, completely surrendered!’

- Edward Muzika,
“When I was in Benares, in India, I went to see a Jnani no one ever heard of, named Swami Brahmadanda, which means 'The Staff of God.' He had three disciples that had been with him for about 50 years. He was about 90 years old. I was invited to sit by him. I think I was the first Westerner to get permission to stay with him. So I sat with him for a few days, listening to him say nothing. He was mostly silent. On the third day that I was there he announced to his disciples that his body was in pain, that it was arthritic, but that he still had work to finish on this plane. He said he was going to leave his body the next day at 3:00 P.M., and take on the body of a younger person. He said that someone would slip on the street -- it was raining -- and would crack his head. "I will take up that body." I listened as I usually do, and we couldn't wait for tomorrow to come. (Laughter)

Nobody cared that he was going to die, we wanted to see if he could do what he said. (Laughter)

At 3:00, he was sitting in the lotus posture, he stiffened, and he did die! I felt for a pulse and there was none. I pinched him. Nothing happened. His body was an empty shell. We fooled around with his body for about a half hour to see if we could bring him back to life.

Nothing.

We heard a commotion outside. Sure enough, a young man had slipped on the street and hit his head. A crowd had gathered and a doctor was there. He was pronounced dead. All of a sudden, the young man got up and ran into the forest. No one ever heard of him again. Explain that one. This is a rare, but very possible phenomena. When you realize your omnipresence, when you begin to know who you are, that you are not the body-mind phenomena, that you are undivided consciousness, the absolute, then you know you can be everywhere at the same instant. You are everything.”

(Satsang transcription and photographs provided by Edward Muzika, [www.itisnotreal.com](http://www.itisnotreal.com))
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[http://davidgodman.org/interviews/nis1.shtml](http://davidgodman.org/interviews/nis1.shtml)


Muzika, Edward. *Robert’s Story*. (This and all other material relating to Robert Adams and Edward Muzika’s own awakening and spiritual teachings to be found as links from:)


Books:


“In Varanasi, the heart is starting to affect me” 1996.
Glossary of Indian Terms

*Advaita Vedanta*  
The “non-dual” wisdom tradition taught by Ramana Maharishi, Nisargadatta Maharaj and many other masters. Originally a reaction to unthinking adherence to ritual and focus on outer forms, *advaita* advocates an insight into the indivisible nature of Ultimate reality, wherein there is neither subject nor object. “Advaita” means “not two,” and “Vedanta” means “the end of the Vedas.” In other words, non-duality, the end of knowledge.

*Brahman*  
Universal consciousness.

*brahmin*  
Supposed to be the mostly “godly” caste of the traditional Hindu social order. Typically the priests and teachers, favoured under British rule as well.

*Dasaswamedh*  
Literally, “ten horse sacrifice.” Reference to an ancient ritual wherein the Brahmin king would let a horse wander for a year, during which no-one was allowed to disturb it. The area it wandered over would delineate the king’s territory. Then the horse would be sacrificed and eaten, but not, it seems, before spending an evening with the queen. This ritual gives Dasaswamedh Ghat its name. The ritual does not happen in the modern day.

*dharma*  
Originally accepted as “duty” or “obligation”, understood in Buddhism to mean the practice of the Buddhist path, emphasizing compassion, mindfulness, meditation etc.

*Ganga*  
The correct pronunciation of the river’s name, somehow changed by Europeans to “Ganges.”

*ghat*  
“Step”, series of sandstone steps and platforms leading down to the Ganges River.

*guru*  
A religious teacher who can show students the way to enlightenment.

*Jaini*  
Pertaining to the Jain religion, which is in the same family as Hinduism and Buddhism. Several Jaini *tirthankars* (saints) were born in Varanasi.

*jatakas*  
Folkloric tales from the Buddha’s lives, previous to his birth as Prince Siddhartha Gautama of the Shakyamuni clan in Nepal.

*-ji*  
Suffix to a person’s name, denoting respect. E.g., “Gandhi-ji.”
**Jnana**  Wisdom; non-dual perception; merging indissolubly in the Universal Self.

**karma**  Causative chain of events, each of which determines the nature of the next. Or, every action has an equal reaction.

**kshetra**  Pilgrimage route.

**Ma / Maa**  “Mother.”

**Mahadeo / Mahadev**  “Maha” means great, “Dev” means god. The “Great God” of Kashi is Shiva.

**mahatmya**  A traditional form of devotional or laudatory literature on a holy place in India. In modern terms, propaganda. Although I do not mean the current work to be one-sided, it must be admitted that many of the city’s lesser appealing sensory characteristics have not been described. I have attempted to describe Varanasi’s supra-physical vibration.

**rishi**  Seer, sage. Holy person.

**sadhu**  These are men who have given up worldly life to travel India as beggars, devoted to the ascetic god Shiva. A *sadhu* can be recognized by their beard, long dreadlocked hair, ash-smeared forehead, loincloth and brass *trisula*, or trident, the weapon of Shiva. They may spend their time in meditation, smoking *hashish*, or wandering on foot from one sacred location to another.

**samadhi**  An ecstatic state of meditative absorption, when the mind is turned inward.

**sannyasin**  A religious renunciant, a wandering mendicant. An ascetic devoted to austerities.

**tirtha**  Literally “ford” or “crossing”, also applies to places of natural power, where it seems divine forces or cosmic energy are crossing over into the mundane world. Important as a metaphor for “crossing over” from a life of worldly ignorance to one of non-dual wisdom.