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CHAPTER 1

My Parents and Early Life

The characteristic features of Indian culture have long been a search for ultimate verities and the concomitant disciple-guru* relationship.

My own path led to a Christlike sage; his beautiful life was chiselled for the ages. He was one of the great masters who are India's truest wealth. Emerging in every generation, they have bulwarked their land against the fate of ancient Egypt and Babylonia.

I find my earliest memories covering the anachronistic features of a previous incarnation. Clear recollections came to me of a distant life in which I had been a yogi† amid the Himalayan snows. These glimpses of the past, by some dimensionless link, also afforded me a glimpse of the future.

I still remember the helpless humiliations of infancy. I was resentfully conscious of being unable to walk and to express myself freely. Prayerful surges arose within me as I realized my bodily impotence. My strong emotional life was mentally expressed in words of many languages. Amid the inward confusion of tongues, I gradually became accustomed to hearing the Bengali syllables of my people. The beguiling scope of an infant's mind! adultly considered to be limited to toys and toes.

Psychological ferment and my unresponsive body brought me to many obstinate crying spells. I recall the general family bewilderment at my distress. Happier memories, too, crowd in on me: my mother's caresses, and my first attempts at lispings phrase and toddling step. These early triumphs, usually forgotten

* Spiritual teacher. The *Guru Gita* (verse 17) aptly describes the guru as "dispeller of darkness" (from *gu*, "darkness," and *ru*, "that which dispels").

† Practitioner of yoga, "union," ancient science of meditation on God. (See chapter 26: "The Science of Kriya Yoga.")

quickly, are yet a natural basis of self-confidence.

My far-reaching memories are not unique. Many yogis are known to have retained their self-consciousness without interruption by the dramatic transition to and from “life” and “death.” If man be solely a body, its loss indeed ends his identity. But if prophets down the millenniums spake with truth, man is essentially a soul, incorporeal and omnipresent.

Although odd, clear memories of infancy are not extremely rare. During travels in numerous lands, I have heard very early recollections from the lips of veracious men and women.

I was born on January 5, 1893, in Gorakhpur in northeastern India near the Himalaya Mountains. There my first eight years were passed. We were eight children: four boys and four girls. I, Mukunda Lal Ghosh,* was the second son and the fourth child.

Father and Mother were Bengalis, of the *Kshatriya* caste. Both were blessed with saintly nature. Their mutual love, tranquil and dignified, never expressed itself frivolously. A perfect parental harmony was the calm centre for the revolving tumult of eight young lives.

Father, Bhagabati Charan Ghosh, was kind, grave, at times stern. Loving him dearly, we children yet observed a certain reverential distance. An outstanding mathematician and logician, he was guided principally by his intellect. But Mother was a queen of hearts, and taught us only through love. After her death, Father displayed more of his inner tenderness. I noticed then that his gaze often seemed to be metamorphosed into my mother's gaze.

In Mother's presence we children made an early bittersweet acquaintance with the scriptures. Mother would resourcefully summon from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* suitable tales to meet the exigencies of discipline; on these occasions chastisement and instruction went hand in hand.

As a gesture of respect for Father, in the afternoons Mother

* My name was changed to Yogananda in 1915 when I entered the ancient-monastic Swami Order. In 1935 my guru bestowed on me the further religious title of *Paramahansa* (See pp. 221 and 391).

would dress us children carefully to welcome him home from the office. He held a position, similar to that of a vice-president, in one of India's large companies: Bengal-Nagpur Railway. His work involved travelling; our family lived in several cities during my childhood.

Mother held an open hand toward the needy. Father was also kindly disposed, but his respect for law and order extended to the budget. One fortnight Mother spent, in feeding the poor, more than Father's monthly income.

"All I ask, please," Father said, "is that you keep your charities within a reasonable limit." Even a gentle rebuke from her husband was grievous to Mother. Not hinting to the children at any disagreement, she ordered a hackney carriage.

"Good-bye, I am going away to my mother's home." Ancient ultimatum!

We broke into astounded lamentations. Our maternal uncle arrived opportunely; he whispered to Father some sage counsel, garnered no doubt from the ages. After Father had made a few conciliatory remarks, Mother happily dismissed the cab. Thus ended the only trouble I ever noticed between my parents. But I recall a characteristic discussion.

"Please give me ten rupees for a hapless woman who has just arrived at the house." Mother's smile had its own persuasion.

"Why ten rupees? One is enough." Father added a justification: "When my father and grandparents died suddenly, I had my first experience of poverty. My only breakfast, before walking miles to my school, was a small banana. Later, at the university, I was in such need that I applied to a wealthy judge for aid of one rupee per month. He declined, remarking that even a rupee is important."

"How bitterly you recall the denial of that rupee!" Mother's heart had an instant logic. "Do you want this woman also to remember painfully your refusal of ten rupees, which she needs urgently?"

"You win!" With the immemorial gesture of vanquished husbands, he opened his wallet. "Here is a ten-rupee note. Give it to her with my goodwill."

Father tended first to say “No” to any new proposal. His attitude toward the stranger who so readily had won Mother’s sympathy was an example of his customary caution. An aversion to instant acceptance is really only honouring the principle of “due reflection.” I always found Father reasonable and evenly balanced in his judgments. If I could bolster up my numerous requests with one or two good arguments, he would invariably put within my reach the coveted goal—whether a vacation trip or a new motorcycle.

Father was a strict disciplinarian to his children in their early years, but his attitude toward himself was truly Spartan. He never visited the theater, for instance, but sought his recreation in various spiritual practices and in reading the Bhagavad Gita. Shunning all luxuries, he would cling to one old pair of shoes until they were useless. His sons bought automobiles after they came into popular use, but Father was content with the trolley car for his daily ride to the office.

Father was not interested in the accumulation of money for the sake of power. On one occasion, after he had organized the Calcutta Urban Bank, he refused to benefit himself by holding any of its shares. He had simply wished to perform a civic duty in his spare time.

Several years after Father had retired on a pension, an accountant from England came to India to examine the books of Bengal-Nagpur Railway. The amazed investigator discovered that Father had never applied for overdue bonuses.

“He did the work of three men!” the accountant told the company. “He has rupees 125,000 (\$41,250) owing to him as back compensation.” The treasurer sent Father a cheque for that amount. My parent thought so little about the matter that he forgot to mention it to the family. Much later he was questioned by my youngest brother Bishnu, who had noticed the large deposit on a bank statement.

“Why be elated by material profit?” Father replied. “The one who pursues a goal of even-mindedness is neither jubilant with gain nor depressed by loss. He knows that man arrives penniless in this world, and departs without a single rupee.”

Early in their married life, my parents became disciples of a great master, Lahiri Mahasaya of Banaras. This association strengthened Father's naturally ascetical temperament. Mother once made a remarkable admission to my eldest sister Roma: "Your father and I sleep together as man and wife only once a year, for the purpose of having children."

Father met Lahiri Mahasaya through Abinash Babu, an employee of a branch line of Bengal-Nagpur Railway. In Gorakhpur, Abinash Babu instructed my young ears with engrossing tales of many Indian saints. He invariably concluded with a tribute to the superior glories of his own guru.

"Did you ever hear of the extraordinary circumstances under which your father became a disciple of Lahiri Mahasaya?" It was on a lazy summer afternoon, as Abinash and I sat together in the compound of my home, that he put this intriguing question. I shook my head with a smile of anticipation.

"Years ago, before you were born, I asked my superior officer—your father—to give me a week's leave from my office duties in order to visit my guru in Banaras. Your father ridiculed my plan.

"Are you going to become a religious fanatic?' he inquired. 'Concentrate on your office work if you want to forge ahead.'

"Sadly walking home along a woodland path that day, I met your father in a palanquin. He dismissed his servants and conveyance, and fell into step beside me. Seeking to console me, he pointed out the advantages of striving for worldly success. But I heard him listlessly. My heart was repeating: 'Lahiri Mahasaya! I cannot live without seeing you!'

"Our path took us to the edge of a tranquil field, where the rays of the late afternoon sun were crowning the tall ripple of the wild grass. We paused in admiration. There in the field, only a few yards from us, the form of my great guru suddenly appeared!*

"Bhagabati, you are too hard on your employee!' His voice

* The phenomenal powers possessed by great masters are explained in chapter 30, "The Law of Miracles."

was resonant in our astounded ears. He vanished as mysteriously as he had come. On my knees I was exclaiming, 'Lahiri Mahasaya! Lahiri Mahasaya!' For a few moments your father was motionless with stupefaction.

"Abinash, not only do I give *you* leave, but I give *myself* leave to start for Banaras tomorrow. I must know this great Lahiri Mahasaya, who is able to materialize himself at will in order to intercede for you! I will take my wife and ask this master to initiate us in his spiritual path. Will you guide us to him?"

"Of course.' Joy filled me at the miraculous answer to my prayer, and the quick, favourable turn of events.

"The next evening your parents and I entrained for Banaras. Reaching there on the following day, we took a horse cart for some distance, then had to walk through narrow lanes to my guru's secluded home. Entering his little parlour, we bowed before the master, enlocked in his habitual lotus posture. He blinked his piercing eyes and levelled them on your father. 'Bhagabati, you are too hard on your employee!' His words were the same as those he had used two days before in the grassy field. He added, 'I am glad that you have permitted Abinash to visit me, and that you and your wife have accompanied him.'

"To their joy, he initiated your parents in the spiritual practice of *Kriya Yoga*. *Your father and I, as brother disciples, have been close friends since the memorable day of the vision. Lahiri Mahasaya took a definite interest in your own birth. Your life shall surely be linked with his own; the master's blessing never fails."

Lahiri Mahasaya left this world shortly after I had entered it. His picture, in an ornate frame, always graced our family altar in the various cities to which Father was transferred by his office. Many a morning and evening found Mother and me meditating before an improvised shrine, offering flowers dipped in fragrant sandalwood paste. With frankincense and myrrh as well as our united devotions, we honoured the divinity that had found full expression in Lahiri Mahasaya.

* A yogic technique, taught by Lahiri Mahasaya, whereby the sensory tumult is stilled, permitting man to achieve an ever-increasing identity with cosmic consciousness. (See chapter 26.)

His picture had a surpassing influence over my life. As I grew, the thought of the master grew with me. In meditation I would often see his photographic image emerge from its small frame and, taking a living form, sit before me. When I attempted to touch the feet of his luminous body, it would change and again become the picture. As childhood slipped into boyhood, I found Lahiri Mahasaya transformed in my mind from a little image, cribbed in a frame, to a living, enlightening presence. I frequently prayed to him in moments of trial or confusion, finding within me his solacing direction.

At first I grieved because he was no longer physically living. As I began to discover his secret omnipresence, I lamented no more. He had often written to those of his disciples who were over-anxious to see him: "Why come to view my flesh and bones, when I am ever within range of your *kutastha* (spiritual sight)?"

At about the age of eight I was blessed with a wonderful healing through the photograph of Lahiri Mahasaya. This experience gave intensification to my love. While at our family estate in Ichapur, Bengal, I was stricken with Asiatic cholera. My life was despaired of; the doctors could do nothing. At my bedside, Mother frantically motioned me to look at Lahiri Mahasaya's picture on the wall above my head.

"Bow to him mentally!" She knew I was too feeble even to lift my hands in salutation. "If you really show your devotion and inwardly kneel before him, your life will be spared!"

I gazed at his photograph and saw there a blinding light, enveloping my body and the entire room. My nausea and other uncontrollable symptoms disappeared; I was well. At once I felt strong enough to bend over and touch Mother's feet in appreciation of her immeasurable faith in her guru. Mother pressed her head repeatedly against the little picture.

"O Omnipresent Master, I thank thee that thy light hath healed my son!"

I realized that she too had witnessed the luminous blaze through which I had instantly recovered from a usually fatal disease.

One of my most precious possessions is that same photograph. Given to Father by Lahiri Mahasaya himself, it carries a

holy vibration. The picture had a miraculous origin. I heard the story from Father's brother disciple, Kali Kumar Roy.

It appears that the master had an aversion to being photographed. Over his protest, a picture was once taken of him and a group of devotees, including Kali Kumar Roy. It was an amazed photographer who discovered that the plate, which had clear images of all the disciples, revealed nothing more than a blank space in the centre where he had reasonably expected to find the outlines of Lahiri Mahasaya. The phenomenon was widely discussed.

A student who was an expert photographer, Ganga Dhar Babu, boasted that the fugitive figure would not escape him. The next morning, as the guru sat in lotus posture on a wooden bench with a screen behind him, Ganga Dhar Babu arrived with his equipment. Taking every precaution for success, he greedily exposed twelve plates. On each one he soon found the imprint of the wooden bench and screen, but once again the master's form was missing.

With tears and shattered pride, Ganga Dhar Babu sought out his guru. It was many hours before Lahiri Mahasaya broke his silence with a pregnant comment:

"I am Spirit. Can your camera reflect the omnipresent Invisible?"

"I see it cannot! But, Holy Sir, I lovingly desire a picture of your bodily temple. My vision has been narrow; until today I did not realize that in you the Spirit fully dwells."

"Come, then, tomorrow morning. I will pose for you."

Again the photographer focused his camera. This time the sacred figure, not cloaked with mysterious imperceptibility, was sharp on the plate. The master never posed for another picture; at least, I have seen none.

The photograph is reproduced in this book.* Lahiri Mahasaya's fair features, of a universal cast, hardly suggest to what race

* See photo section page 9. See also painting of Sri Sri Lahiri Mahasaya on photo section page 10. While in India in 1935-36, Paramahansa Yogananda instructed a Bengali artist to paint this rendering of the original photograph, and later designated it as the formal portrait of Lahiri Mahasaya for use in YSS/SRF publications. (This painting hangs in Paramahansaji's sitting room at Mt. Washington). (*Publisher's Note*)

he belonged. The joy of God-communion is slightly revealed in his enigmatic smile. His eyes, half open to denote a nominal interest in the outer world, are also half closed, indicating his absorption in inner bliss. Oblivious of the poor lures of the earth, he was fully awake at all times to the spiritual problems of seekers who approached for his bounty.

Shortly after my healing through the potency of the guru's picture, I had an influential spiritual vision. Sitting on my bed one morning, I fell into a deep reverie.

"What is behind the darkness of closed eyes?" This probing thought came powerfully into my mind. An immense flash of light at once manifested to my inner gaze. Divine shapes of saints, sitting in meditation posture in mountain caves, formed like miniature cinema pictures on the large screen of radiance within my forehead.

"Who are you?" I spoke aloud.

"We are the Himalayan yogis." The celestial response is difficult to describe; my heart was thrilled.

"Ah, I long to go to the Himalayas and become like you!" The vision vanished, but the silvery beams expanded in ever-widening circles to infinity.

"What is this wondrous glow?"

"I am Ishwara.* I am Light." The Voice was as murmuring clouds.

"I want to be one with Thee!"

Out of the slow dwindling of my divine ecstasy, I salvaged a permanent legacy of inspiration to seek God. "He is eternal, ever-new Joy!" This memory persisted long after the day of rapture.

Another early recollection is outstanding; and literally so, for I bear the scar to this day. My elder sister Uma and I were seated in the early morning under a *neem* tree in our Gorakhpur compound. She was helping me in my study of a Bengali primer,

*A Sanskrit name for the Lord in His aspect of Cosmic Ruler; from the root *is*, to rule. The Hindu scriptures contain a thousand names for God, each one carrying a different shade of philosophical meaning. The Lord as Ishwara is He by whose will all universes, in orderly cycles, are created and dissolved.

what time I could spare my gaze from the nearby parrots eating ripe margosa fruit.

Uma complained of a boil on her leg, and fetched a jar of ointment. I smeared a bit of the salve on my forearm.

“Why do you use medicine on a healthy arm?”

“Well, Sis, I feel I am going to have a boil tomorrow. I am testing your ointment on the spot where the boil will appear.”

“You little liar!”

“Sis, don’t call me a liar until you see what happens in the morning.” Indignation filled me.

Uma, unimpressed, thrice repeated her taunt. An adamant resolution sounded in my voice as I made slow reply.

“By the power of will in me, I say that tomorrow I shall have a fairly large boil in this exact place on my arm; and *your* boil shall swell to twice its present size!”

Morning found me with a stalwart boil on the indicated spot; the dimensions of Uma’s boil had doubled. With a shriek, my sister rushed to Mother. “Mukunda has become a necromancer!” Gravely, Mother instructed me never to use the power of words for doing harm. I have always remembered her counsel, and followed it.

My boil was surgically treated. A noticeable scar, left by the doctor’s incision, is present today. On my right forearm is a constant reminder of the power in man’s sheer word.

Those simple and apparently harmless phrases to Uma, spoken with deep concentration, had possessed sufficient hidden force to explode like bombs and to produce definite, though injurious, effects. I understood later that the explosive vibratory power in speech could be wisely directed to free one’s life from difficulties and thus operate without scar or rebuke.*

Our family moved to Lahore in the Punjab.† There I

* The infinite potencies of sound derive from the Creative Word, *Aum*, the cosmic vibratory power behind all atomic energies. Any word spoken with clear realization and deep concentration has a materializing value. Loud or silent repetition of inspiring words has been found effective in Couéism and similar systems of psychotherapy; the secret lies in the stepping-up of the mind’s vibratory rate.

† Since the partition of India in 1947, Lahore is in Pakistan.

acquired a picture of the Divine Mother in the form of the Goddess Kali.* It sanctified a small informal shrine on the balcony of our home. An unequivocal conviction came over me that fulfillment would crown any of my prayers uttered in that sacred spot. Standing there with Uma one day, I watched two boys flying kites over the roofs of two buildings that were separated from our house by an extremely narrow lane.

“Why are you so quiet?” Uma pushed me playfully.

“I am just thinking how wonderful it is that Divine Mother gives me whatever I ask.”

“I suppose She would give you those two kites!” My sister laughed derisively.

“Why not?” I began silent prayers for their possession.

Matches are played in India with kites whose strings are covered with glue and ground glass. Each player attempts to sever the string held by his opponent. A freed kite sails over the roofs; there is great fun in catching it. As Uma and I were on a roofed, recessed balcony, it seemed impossible that a loosed kite could come into our hands; its string would naturally dangle over the roof.

The players across the lane began their match. One string was cut; immediately the kite floated in my direction. Owing to a sudden abatement of the breeze the kite remained stationary for a moment, during which its string became firmly entangled with a cactus plant on top of the opposite house. A long, perfect loop was formed for my seizure. I handed the prize to Uma.

“It was just an extraordinary accident, and not an answer to your prayer. If the other kite comes to you, then I shall believe.” Sister’s dark eyes conveyed more amazement than her words. I continued my prayers with intensity. A forcible tug by the other player resulted in the abrupt loss of his kite. It headed toward me, dancing in the wind. My helpful assistant, the cactus plant, again secured the kite string in the necessary loop by which I could grasp it. I presented my second trophy to Uma.

“Indeed, Divine Mother listens to you! This is all too uncanny for me!” Sister bolted away like a frightened fawn.

* Kali is a symbol of God in the aspect of eternal Mother Nature.