Ernest Wood
Is this Theosophy …?
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CHAPTER VII
AN INDIAN YOGI § 1

[165] IN my earliest days in India I had developed a particular friendship for a certain Mr. K. Narayanaswami Aiyar, who had been a High Court Advocate, but for some years had given his time entirely to the activities of a travelling lecturer, an avocation in which he had shown great ability and had acquired a reputation all over the country. He looked the part of a wandering religious teacher, having a very enthusiastic and impulsive manner, a humorous and happy disposition, long shaggy grey hair and beard, and a nose which had originally been aquiline but had been flattened by an accident in his younger days.

We once spent a considerable time together in Benares. It was winter, and too cold in the north of India for the bare feet usual in the south. To meet this contingency Narayanaswami had bought a pair of yellow boots, with no idea as to fit. They were altogether wrongly shaped for his unspoiled feet, and too small for him anyhow. But he persevered in forcing his feet into them, much to the entertainment of Babu Bhagavan Das and myself, who were his particular friends. He made a curious spectacle, with his yellow boots and his otherwise yogi-like dress and countenance, but inside he could bear pain as only yogis can.

Many times we walked together the whole length of the steps and terraces of the Benares water-front, poking our noses into everything, and learning much about the miscellaneous Hindu life that finds its way to Benares. His favourite spot on these walks was the burning-ghat. We would stand for a long time watching the bodies being placed on the pyres, covered with wood and finally enveloped in flames. [166]

He used facetiously to remark that he wanted to get used to this process before his own turn came. Perhaps there was something of sincerity in that remark, however, for it is consistent with a certain type of Indian mind to inure themselves to trouble before it comes, like those perverted yogis who hold their arms up until they wither, or sit on beds of spikes, or surround themselves with fires in the heat of summer under the blazing sun, and thus, in the brief but expressive words of Sir Edwin Arnold, seek to "baulk hell by self-kindled hells."

Narayanaswami was a man of great learning, and considerable ability in the handling of the Sanskrit language, his subject of especial interest being Yoga, and the study of the Minor Upanishads in which there is much yogic lore.

One day he came to me at Adyar and told me that he and some other friends had met a great yogi, who was actually one of the Masters, who lived in a little cottage within a mile of the railway station of Tiruvallam, about eighty miles from Madras, on the line to Mysore and the west coast. He proposed that we should go and talk with him. He was sure that this was the great Master alluded to among the "star names" as Jupiter, the Master of the Master who had taught Mme Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott.

Mr. Leadbeater had often spoken to me and to others of a great Master corresponding to this description. T. Subba Row, an occultist of the preceding generation, now dead, had taken Mr. Leadbeater one day to see that Master, and he had explained some points and given him a diagram which he had used in one of his books. Mr. Leadbeater did not feel at liberty to say much about that Master. He did not think that anyone could find him unless it was his desire. At the time of his visit the Master occupied a little cottage within a mile of the railway station, living as a small landowner, his greatness unsuspected by the people, among whom he moved freely. He was elderly, a little short of stature, had a white beard and had lived there for a long time.

I was decidedly open to conviction as regards both these accounts, but I was always ready for experience, so one morning Narayanaswami and I set off by train. We arrived at the Tiruvallam railway station in the middle of the day, walked across the fields along the little ridges of earth which form the borders between the cultivated plots, and came to the cottage, which stood on a little rising ground beside the [167] main road leading from Madras to Calicut. We found there only a very old woman, said to be over ninety, who told us that the *swami* had gone some days before to a certain village. We went there. He had moved on. In this search we travelled in several ways—on the railway, in bullock carts and on foot by both day and night.

At last we came upon him early one morning, sleeping in the front room of a little house in the main street of Muttuku, a large village. We sat quietly near his feet on the platform on which he lay, and waited. Soon the old man awoke and sat up. Narayanaswami said a few words to him in Tamil. Then he spoke to us by name, told us that he had specially waited in the village that night because he knew we were on our way to see him, said he had seen us at the railway station and in certain of the villages to which we had been—gave us in fact quite a sketch of our wanderings in search of him.

He was a blind man. When a little later on I stayed with him for a week at his cottage, alone except for the old woman, I used to see him groping his way round the walls to find the doorway when he came in from the fields. Often the old woman or I would lead him. Yet he had a little bullock cart, in which he used to make long tourneys from one village to another.

I can form no theory as to how he drove—perhaps the little bull knew where he wanted to go and also knew the way—or how he avoided the traffic on the roads, little as it was. In all these accounts I am only recording what I have seen, and rarely attempting explanations. I have not tried to explain, for example, how it was that Mr. Leadbeater could not converse with the dead boy because of the language barrier, and yet could understand what people were saying in the past lives, or how the student's father conversed with me on his nocturnal visit though we had no language in common, and spoke also to my Muhammadan friend under the same conditions.

The old gentleman spoke very freely of occult matters, talked about the various Masters familiar to Theosophists, and of the coming of a great teacher whom he called Nanjunda, said that I would not leave India soon, as I expected to, but only after Nanjunda came. He remarked: " Your pupil will be your teacher," referring I supposed to Krishnamurti, from whom in fact I did afterwards learn a good deal of common sense, and whom I also came to regard as [168] much more deep-sighted than either Mrs. Besant or Mr. Leadbeater—though he would not pronounce himself to be or not to be the great Teacher whose coming had been predicted, even when in 1928 to 1930 Mrs. Besant

was publicly proclaiming him as such, and saying that there had been a blending of the consciousness of Krishnamurti and that of the Teacher.

Narayanaswami and I enjoyed conversation with the old gentleman for an hour or two. He expressed great liking for me, presented me with a string of beads (rudraksha berries) taken directly from his own neck, and also his rather worn deer skin, and sent us both off thinking that life was good, and was going to be marvellous indeed in the future.

§ 2

A month or two afterwards, in the same year, 1910, I visited the old gentleman at his cottage and stayed there about a week. The cottage—built of irregular pieces of stone—consisted of one oblong room with a small portion partitioned off by a low wall at one end. There were only two doors, front and back, opposite each other in the middle of the long sides. Between the doors, exactly in the centre of the room, was a seat hung from the central beam by chains. Hanging from one of the chains were a drum and a horn. The old gentleman, whose name was Nagaratnaswami, though he was usually known as the Kurruttu Paradeshi (meaning a blind wanderer) or the Mottu Paradeshi (a wanderer living on a mound), used generally to sit on that swing-like seat. For food, the old woman would spread his leaf on the floor, as she did mine also. For bathing, he would sit outside and pour water over himself with one hand while he rubbed himself with the other. The water-pots used while I was there were very small, as there was quite a drought at the time.

When I arrived, some villagers were digging a deep well for him—really a large hole in the ground, a pit, perhaps twenty-five feet in diameter, slightly narrowing as one descended the circular pathway cut in the side. Several men dug, while women carried up baskets of earth. In the afternoon we went out to this well. My arrival had been very auspicious; water had just been struck in one corner of the excavation, so nothing would satisfy the Paradeshi [169] but that I should be the first to bathe there, while he and the workpeople and a few young men who had come up from the village to satisfy their curiosity, sat on the pathways on the shady side of the pit, which was opposite to the little hole of extra depth, perhaps six feet in diameter, where the water had been found.

Wearing a single loin cloth, I got down into the yellow clayey water, splashed about in it and then sat on the side of the hole. It was while I was sitting there that frogs began to appear—any number of them and of various sizes. Their inevitable appearance on such occasions is almost as much a mystery as many of the occult happenings in India. Although blind, the old gentleman laughed heartily when the frogs began to jump on me, and called out with increased amusement when one of them got itself entangled in my cloth.

I did not mind the contact at all. I had always liked frogs. They had been frequent visitors, almost residents, in my room in the quadrangle. There, in the nights, various kinds of flying things would come in, seeking the light; then lizards would come out of their corners and frogs would hop in from outside, seeking the flying creatures which would fall from the lamp or cluster on the shining parts of the white-washed walls. Most people used to chase the frogs away from their rooms, for they feared that snakes would follow the frogs, as they sometimes did, though in several years only about half a dozen ever came into my room. Once I killed a snake which was on the window-sill, by slamming the shutter so as to trap it and then beating it with a stick. Never again! I

thought the sight of that unhappy snake would follow me to my dying day. Two or three times a snake glided past my foot while I was sitting, once actually touching it; but under such circumstances I think they are quite harmless, as they are not aggressive. The numerous cases of snake-bite in India are due to accidents. A villager, working in a field or walking along a path or a lane, happens to tread on one of them.

Only once I was in such danger. I had gone to my bathroom in the night. There was bright moonlight outside— such as I have seen only in India; one could read by its light, and could see the colours of the leaves and flowers. Moonlight can give colour when there is enough of it. But in the bathroom there was only a glimmer of light coming [170] through the slats of a Venetian window not perfectly closed. I put my hand out to open the Venetians a little further, and rested it quite firmly, though gently, as it fortunately happened, on a snake which was lying along the cross-piece in the middle of the shutter. I felt it, of course—very nice to touch, smooth, cool and not damp. It moved very slightly. I withdrew my hand gently, went back to my room, returned with a lamp, and threw water from a tin dipper at the snake until it took the hint to depart and slipped away between the partially open slats. The student in whom I was interested also once had a very narrow escape. He was going to take dinner with the English Sub-Collector and his wife and had dressed himself in European clothes for the occasion, and was wearing boots. That was lucky for him as going along the drive he happened to tread on a snake. But I was talking about frogs in the new well at Tiruvallam.

While we were sitting in the pit the Paradeshi kept up a running commentary of remarks, of which I have kept some notes. "Wood has come here because he is my brother. I understand him when he speaks English. He was a king at Hastinapura about eight hundred years ago, and I was his son. He was then named Dharmaraja. His subtle body looks like glass, without any dust; yours are full of dust. He is all gold. I am having this well dug for him. I knew him even before his birth. The northern people worship a white Krishna. Colour of skin depends upon climate. There are only four real spiritual gurus (teachers or guides) in the world. Etc."

These remarks were spoken in Tamil and translated to me by a young man from the village who happened to know English.

I stayed in that cottage simply waiting to see what would happen. Sometimes the young man knowing English would come up and then there would be conversation. One day I happened to say some words of sympathy which drew forth an explanation of the old gentleman's cheerfulness, which was constant, notwithstanding the inconvenience of his poverty and blindness. He laughed at me and said that my sympathy was wasted, for he was a very happy man. He said that he knew the reason for his blindness and poverty. In the past life which he had mentioned, although I had been a good man he, succeeding to my power and wealth, had been extremely selfish and had used his position [171] to do injury to people whom he disliked. His present difficulties were the outcome of those injuries done to others. But it had all turned to good. The villagers round about had been very kind to him and that was a happiness beyond anything that material wealth could give. He had come to learn to love others. If he had gone on as a rich man he did not think that he would have changed his nature voluntarily, but the law of *karma* had taught him.

§ 3

One afternoon, when I was alone with him, except for the old woman hovering in the background over some household task, the Paradeshi motioned to me to sit on the threshold of the front door. I sat sideways, half inside and half outside the door. He then established himself more carefully than usual, cross-legged on his swinging seat, facing the door. For perhaps half an hour he chanted verses, softly at first and then in an increasingly loud voice, while I sat wondering at this unusual procedure. Suddenly the verses came to a halt. He unhooked the drum and beat upon it with increasing force for a few minutes. Then he put the drum aside, took up the horn and blew upon it a long loud blast. At that moment rain began to fall, at first large heavy drops, like pennies—as the children used to say in England—then faster and faster until there was a steady shower, which must have lasted from five to ten minutes. Abruptly it ceased and the sun was shining as brazenly as before. The shower appeared to have covered a large field at least. I went out. Women had come from various cottages some way off, and were filling little pots with water from the various holes in the stony ground.

Another afternoon as I was lying on my mat spread on the earthen floor of the cottage, waiting for the heat of the day to pass, I had a striking vision. Up above me, at some little distance in a sloping direction, I saw the form of a young man of most serene and yet most positive aspect, looking towards me. He stood in an aura of what I can call only blue lightning. I cannot describe the impression of power that it gave to me. I thought this might have been the teacher Nanjunda, he whom Mrs. Besant and Mr. Leadbeater called variously the World Teacher—a translation of the term Jagatguru used in Hindu scriptures—the [172] Lord Maitreya—the teacher to be successor to the Lord Buddha in Buddhist tradition—and the Christ. When I got back to Adyar and told this to Mr. Leadbeater, however, he did not agree with that idea, but referred me to a description of another Master whom he called the Lord of the World.

Towards the end of the week the Paradeshi told me that he wanted me to stay there and take up the work that he had been doing for many years, so that he could retire from his old body. I asked him if that was the" Master's wish. A bit huffily he told me that it was his own wish. There were, he said, certain Bhairavas there—exactly what he meant I do not know—and he had to look after them. He was responsible in some way for quite a large territory. Would I stay and take over the job and release him? I did not understand the situation very clearly. I was not satisfied that the interpreter was correctly explaining what he said. I told the old gentleman that I would go back to Adyar and come again with a friend.

I persuaded Subrahmanyam to accompany me on my third visit to the Paradeshi, though he could spare only a single day. Then I elicited the information that he had not told Narayanaswami and others that he was the Master of the Master known to Theosophists as the Master of Mme Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott. They had misunderstood him; what he had said was that that Master was his own Master. The same Master, he said, was my Master. In that way we were brothers. According to him the name of our Master was Sitaram Bhavaji. That teacher had come to the south many years before. He had visited a temple standing in the river bed not far away. The Paradeshi had met him then, had become his disciple, and had afterwards seen him and been instructed by him clairvoyantly. That Master used to travel occasionally. He had been to England about the year 1850. Working with him there was a Kashmir Master, a younger man, who had been educated at Oxford. There was also a greater Master living in the mountains

north of Tiruvallam, who was very rarely seen. Mme Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott had both visited the Paradeshi. They had "dragged him out of his obscurity," and it was Colonel Olcott who had taught him to smoke cigars. I explained to him that nothing but the Master's direct wish could induce me to give up my present work; that I was sorry to leave him but it simply had to be.

[173] When I told Narayanaswami and the other friends who had been with him on his first visit to Tiruvallam that the Paradeshi had explained to me that he was not the Master of Sitaram Bhavaji, but that Sitaram Bhavaji was his Master, they insisted that the mistake must be mine, and continued in their conviction that they had met the great Master himself.

More then twenty years afterwards, in both 1933 and 1934, I happened to pass that way by motor-car. I found that the Paradeshi had died in the interval, and that some devotees had built a shrine beside the old cottage, now tumbled down, and were worshipping there the sandals, staff, drinking-pot and other small articles which had been used by him when alive. *Sic transit gloria mundi.* (Much the same was to be done to Mrs. Besant later on.) But I saw no trace of any successor who might be directing the "Bhairavas " in that somewhat desolate spot.