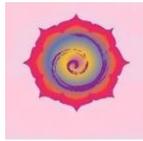


THE LIGHT OF THE SELF

A Memoir of a Spiritual Awakening

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I am grateful to the editor of *Mountain Path* for granting permission to incorporate revised sections of the following articles in this book:

- “Practicing in the Presence: Awakening to Nondual Awareness in the Spiritual Presence of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi” *Mountain Path* 55:3 (July–September 2018): 39–46.
- “At the Gate of Ramana’s Ashram,” *Mountain Path* 51:3 (July–September 2014): 9–16.
- “The Sanctuary of Sri Ramanasramam.” *Mountain Path* 46:1 (July 2009), 93–100.

This memoir is not meant as a *personal* autobiography but as an account of the gradual unfolding of the spiritual life in a pluralistic setting. Names have been changed and some situations have been altered to protect the privacy of the people who have been part of this account. Some events presented in the book are composites of events of a similar nature that have been compressed in order to bring more narrative order into the telling of this story.

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All this is really Brahman.

—Chandogya Upanishad 3.14.1¹

Without other light or guide

Save that which in my heart was burning.

That light guided me

More surely than the noonday sun.

—St. John of the Cross

*Dark Night of the Soul*²

Asking who I am while seeing the Self—

this changeless being is pure, blissful consciousness.

—Sri Ramana Maharshi

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CHAPTER ONE

An Unexpected Awakening

When I was nineteen, a spiritual voice suddenly spoke within me, saying, “Look to God!” This inner voice seemed to come from a mysterious region beyond the horizon of ordinary consciousness. It came like a cold, sharp wind, clearing and emptying my mind—like lightning silently flashing in the dark clouds of a winter night. Aroused from a bleak mood by this radiantly hopeful thought, I fervently asked God to show me the way, and I vowed to throw aside everything that I had ever desired, if only God would guide me. In the moment that I prayed this prayer, a wave of joy surging from the deepest plains of my mind blew across my consciousness and created in an instant the faith, hope, and courage that would inspire me to build upon the ruins of my old existence a completely different kind of life than the one I had been living up to that point.

If this awakening had happened among evangelical Christians, they would have claimed that I had been saved or born again. But as a Catholic in Brooklyn in the America of 1970, this language was unfamiliar to me because evangelical Christianity was not visible in the Catholic parishes where I grew up. Except for a fleeting encounter at seventeen with an evangelical youth

group from Michigan walking through the neighborhood on a hot summer's night talking about Jesus, I had no connection with that kind of Christianity. I had seen the faces of evangelical Christian preachers flash across the television screen now and then, but Protestants got little hearing or recognition in the parochial world of the Irish and Italian Catholicism of my childhood, so I didn't give them a second thought.

Although this awakening had the spiritual power and authority of the evangelical born-again experience, nothing in it pointed me toward Jesus or any traditional teaching about God. From a realm of mysterious and purifying power, a nameless force reached into my chaotic existence and righted me. I felt as if I had been touched from deep within my awareness and made whole. But nothing about this experience suggested—nor did the idea occur to me—that I should return to the Catholic Church or become a born-again Christian because it was an experience ungrooved by the teachings of any particular religious tradition.

This spontaneous illumination was not merely an emotional event because the mood of exaltation that accompanied it passed within weeks. More lasting was the conviction, now etched indelibly on my awareness, that my life was grounded on an immovable rock of immortality, wisdom, and strength. Given my traditional Catholic upbringing, I spontaneously applied the name *God* to this mystical intuition, though I felt no need to justify my newfound certainty in light of inherited dogma and traditions. Untroubled by academic questions about the validity of perceptions, judgments, and interpretations, I didn't doubt the reality or meaning of this experience. I simply reveled in it.

Although this awakening was sudden and unexpected, it was not my first mystical experience. My first conscious experiences of the divine ground of life had occurred much earlier in my life at St. Francis Xavier, the Catholic church in Brooklyn's Park Slope, where the sisters at the church's elementary school would march us on the first Friday of each month for a

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ceremony known as the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. As the censers swung by the altar servers filled the sanctuary with the aroma of frankincense and clouds of smoking incense, the priest chanted in Latin and held aloft the blessed host ensconced in a starburst of gold known as a monstrance. Kneeling among dozens of children in school uniforms, we began singing a medieval Latin hymn:

*O salutaris hóstia
Quae caeli pandis óstium
Bella premunt hostília
Da robur, fer auxílium.*

“O saving victim, opening wide
the gate of heaven to man below.
Our foes press on from every side;
Thine aid supply, Thy strength bestow.”³

I had no idea then what the Latin words meant, though my classmates and I knew the words by heart. As we sang and knelt before the altar, my mind became concentrated and full of anticipation because, without fail, as the first words of the hymn rose from us, I felt a sunburst of ecstasy within me. An inner world of inexpressible beauty and truth would suddenly and unaccountably open up in my mind, and I was drawn to the verge of a higher and truer realm of being. A golden silence would fall over me, quieting and calming my thoughts, just as a thick snowfall at dusk brings a blanket of silence and peace, even to the streets of New York. That was as close as I got then to the spiritual essence of Catholicism, and even now this hymn evokes, with greatly reduced effect, that sense of union with the divine that it then awakened in me.

Yet, over the decade since those dawning mystical experiences, Catholicism as a spiritual reality had slowly faded out of my life, and I didn't connect the sudden opening of my mind to the divine on the morning of my awakening with the Catholic Church. It wasn't that I refused to view my awakening in the light of the Church's teachings. It's just that I didn't sense a connection between what had happened to me and to Catholicism, so I didn't think about talking to a priest about it.

Looking for a hint about my next step after my awakening, I spent hours browsing in the volumes of spiritual wisdom in Weiser's legendary metaphysical bookstore on lower Broadway. I experienced a sense of intuitive familiarity with many of the mystical Hindu and Buddhist teachings that I encountered in these books. I didn't read to become a scholar, but to deepen my insight into the hidden mystical reality that had transformed my perception and expectations about life. I can't say now how I first heard about Weiser's, but it wasn't a place that anybody in my neighborhood had ever visited. Perhaps I had read about in the underground press—in *Rat* or *The East Village Other*—or in *The Village Voice*.

I began to sit in the lotus position and to meditate, as recommended in some of the books I was reading, but I made little progress in what I found alternately to be a tedious watching of my thoughts or an uneasiness about losing myself in a reality greater than my ego. But sometimes when walking the long avenues of Manhattan from the subway stop at Battery Park up to Hell's Kitchen, where I worked, I fell into a meditative stillness of mind, and I sensed the hidden metaphysical depth of life from which the vibrant activity of Manhattan and my walking body arose simultaneously.

One afternoon, I was inwardly absorbed while waiting for the light to change at the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue when I was startled by the unexpected sight of a column of Hare Krishna devotees dancing on the sidewalk alongside Bryant Park. They were singing exuberantly in an unfamiliar language, and the brilliantly colored *saris* of the women and the

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saffron and yellow *dhotis* of the men—traditional Indian garments—contrasted sharply with the blander clothing of the passing crowds. I stared curiously at them for a few seconds before continuing up Fifth Avenue without engaging in conversation with any of their similarly dressed companions, who were selling magazines and incense.

When I saw the devotees again a few weeks later—this time in front of a bookstore in Greenwich Village—I stopped and stared just long enough for one of them to approach me before I hurried back to the safety of the crowd of pedestrians that had swelled about them. These oddly dressed young people intrigued me, and I vaguely remembered having seen them dancing in a park in lower Manhattan a couple of years before, but I still didn't realize that they were part of a religious movement.

The next time I ran into the devotees, they were chanting and dancing under a billowing canopy at a festival for the first Earth Day in Union Square Park. I stopped to watch, and a young woman draped in a flowing red and gold *sari* approached me smilingly and offered me a copy of *Back to Godhead*, a magazine that reported on the Krishna-consciousness movement and its beliefs. Her face was serene, and she spoke softly about loving God and going back to Godhead, or the ultimate, divine source of life, by chanting the names of Krishna, a Hindu deity with blue skin who plays a flute.

Now I realized that they were members of a Hindu religious movement, and I felt an immediate interest in them. But I couldn't think of anything to say or ask, so I paid for the magazine, and the devotee moved on, leaving me frustrated with my wooden tongue. While riding the subway home, I looked through the magazine and was surprised to see that the Hare Krishna devotees' guru was the author of a new translation of the Bhagavad Gita that I had picked up in a bookstore a few weeks earlier. I hadn't been able to make much of the book, which strikingly displayed on its pale purple cover a black negative image of Vishnu standing on a lotus flower, but I felt happy just

holding it my hands because it symbolized a secret world of spiritual knowledge that I was eager to enter.

A few weeks later, I ran into the devotees again in Greenwich Village. It was late May, and the rhythmic ringing of *karatalas*, small cymbals that are a fixture of Hindu temple worship, resounded through the streets, which were teeming with tourists and shoppers. I looked through the stream of traffic crowding Sixth Avenue and Waverly Place and saw a band of Hare Krishna devotees dancing and chanting in front of a newsstand on the corner of West Eighth Street. I was going to walk over and watch, but just then a tall Hare Krishna devotee walked smilingly toward me. His saffron *dhoti* fluttered in the evening breeze, and his thin, ascetical face shone softly in the twilight. He handed me a magazine and told me to chant Hare Krishna—which was just a string of meaningless sounds for me at that point. When I asked him what *Hare Krishna* is, he said that it's a *mantra*, or a sacred chant that's used to call upon a deity and to evoke a transcendent state of mind. He said that my life would become sublime if I took up the regular chanting of the *mahamantra*, or what his guru called “the great chanting for deliverance”: *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*.

I said that I would be willing to give the chanting a try. Sensing a convert, he invited me to the Hare Krishna temple in the East Village for what he called “the Sunday feast”—a time of chanting with the devotees and a meal of festive Indian food and desserts. Although I hesitated to go, not knowing what I would be getting into, my curiosity about the devotees and an attraction to the Hare Krishna mantra, which grew deeper and more compelling the more I chanted it, led me the next Sunday afternoon to the then psychedelized streets of the East Village.

It was late in the afternoon when I climbed the sagging staircase of a Second Avenue apartment building. The glossy green walls reflected the garish gleam of bare light bulbs. At the top of the first landing, a long cloth

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printed with scenes from Hindu scriptures fluttered in the doorway to an apartment that had been converted into a Krishna temple. From inside the apartment came the sound of Indian devotional music. Unfamiliar cooking aromas and the acrid, but sweet odor of burning incense filled my nostrils.

I was halted on the threshold by a devotee in a *sari* who impatiently motioned for me to wait in the hallway because I was late for the start of the ceremony. I complied and sat uneasily in the gloomy hallway. The curt greeting made me feel like an intruder, and I had just decided to bolt down the stairs when from a room beyond the hallway a woman began to sing in an Indian language to the accompaniment of bells, drums, and *karatalas*. Then a male devotee with a shaved head came out of the kitchen and smilingly led me into the living room where a crowd of Hare Krishna devotees and hippies were dancing before astonishingly lifelike and elaborately outfitted images of the Hindu divinity Shri Krishna and Shrimati Radharani, his divine consort. The young woman who had told me to sit and wait was leading the chanting while waving a fan made of peacock feathers before the deities, who stood with transcendent smiles in the midst of a profusion of flowers, other Hindu deities, and garlanded pictures of Hindu gurus. Suddenly, a shock of love and recognition surged through my body, a sensation that surpassed the spike of spiritual bliss I had felt years earlier at Benediction. A gentle flame blazed up within me, and I began to dance along to the chanting. As I danced with the devotees, I felt as if I had broken through to a pure and eternal level of blissful awareness, and everything within me urged me to dive in without looking back. I knew then that I had found the next step forward on the path.

After the ceremony, platters of colorful sweet and spicy foods were brought in from the kitchen. The devotees called the food *prasadam* and said that it was Krishna's grace because it had become identical to Krishna when it was offered to him during the ceremony. We were eating God himself—just like Catholics at Mass, a devotee explained as the food was served.

Another devotee insisted that I eat as much as I could so that my “spirit-soul” would be purified and led onto the path that leads “back to Godhead”—back to life in the divine, that is, in the words of Prabhupada, their Indian guru. Since the food was an exotic and tasty mixture of sweet and hot flavors that were entirely new to me, I ate far too much, and I felt uncomfortably yet happily full after the meal.

After the feast, a devotee stood up, thanked us for coming, and asked if anyone wanted to move into the temple. A couple of longhaired young men and a young woman raised their hands and they were led into another room. The suddenness with which one could join the Krishna-consciousness movement surprised and tempted me. I wasn’t ready to shave my hair, and I wasn’t ready to give up my hippie uniform of bell-bottoms and chambray work shirts, so I went home that night after talking until late in the evening about the teachings of the movement. But I saw that the path ahead was now open to me.

After the next Sunday feast, I was riding the subway to Brooklyn and chanting the Hare Krishna mantra on my *mala*, a Hindu rosary, when the material universe abruptly lost its solidity, and I became aware of an inner, calming light. I tuned out the clatter of the wheels of the train as it wobbled through the tunnel under the East River, and I dedicated my life to Krishna. I felt calm after making this decision, for now I knew that nothing else mattered other than that I was going to leave this world behind and take up the pure and noble life of a devotee of Krishna.

After the next Sunday feast, I told the temple president about my decision while he and a party of devotees were preparing to go out chanting in the streets of lower Manhattan. We spoke while he shouted commands at the chanting party. A nervous energy bordering on ecstasy crackled from him, and he impatiently pounded the heads of a *mridangam*, a large clay drum hanging across his chest. He invited me to move into the New York temple immediately, but, to his disappointment, I said that I wanted to go to New

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Vrindaban, a rural ashram recently started by Hare Krishna devotees on an isolated farm in the mountainous panhandle of West Virginia. He brushed aside my request for a letter of introduction and said that if I just showed up there, I would be welcome. That was assurance enough for me, and from that moment forward one thought possessed me—I must go to New Vrindaban and become a devotee of Krishna.

A couple of weeks later, after quitting my job and saying goodbye to my family and friends, I took an overnight bus to Wheeling. When passengers began partying in the back seats, I moved toward the front of the bus and strained to see something of America through the dark windows. I had renounced the world and its pleasures for Krishna and I wasn't going to let myself be deterred by the prospect of a joint and a bottle of beer.

When I arrived in Wheeling the next morning, it was a Sunday and no local buses were running to Limestone, the town nearest to New Vrindaban, so I started hitchhiking. The empty streets around the bus terminal gleamed in the clear morning light, and I felt out of place there, but a man with a lazy laugh driving a pickup truck stopped to give me a ride, and my confidence returned. After he let me out in Limestone, a smudge of shops along a U.S. highway, I began walking with my thumb out along a dirt road that rose along a ridge to New Vrindaban, which was five miles away. The rolling hills seemed to shine with the same unearthly light that was welling up within me.

In this mood, I knew that I could walk all day without tiring. Enlightenment seemed within easy reach, and I thought that in a short time the pain of egocentric existence would be eliminated, and I would become a wise and revered yogi, dispensing light and hope to all who came to me seeking wisdom.

A ride with a wary farmer took who asked if I was going up to see “them Hair Kreesnuhs” took me to a narrow, muddy road beside a one-room schoolhouse, which led into thick foliage beneath a towering mountain ridge.

I had rarely been outside of New York, so I hesitated before stepping onto the forest path. The rustle of the ocean of leaves overhead, so unlike the noise of the city, was a comfortless sound, but I was determined to take up a new way of life, so I plunged in and followed the dark and overgrown trail. The gloominess of the road began to sap my confidence, and I wondered why I was walking on a road that apparently led nowhere. I thought about turning back, particularly when I began to think that I might get lost and be stranded in the woods. Calming myself by chanting the Hare Krishna mantra, I pushed on, hoping that I would soon see a house or some people.

Finally, after an hour of walking, the steadily ascending road broke free of the forest and opened onto a splendid vista. On top of a winding ridge across a gently sloping hollow stood a weathered barn and farmhouse, which were shadowed by a towering willow tree and surrounded by fields in which men with shaved heads and women in *saris* were hard at work. I had found my way to New Vrindaban, and my new life of service to a God unknown to my ancestors could now begin.

¹ My translation. Except where noted, translations in the following pages are my own.

² *The Obscure Night of the Soul*, in *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*, Volume 1, trans. David Lewis (London: Longmans, 1864), stanzas 3-4, pages 323-324.

³ Thomas Aquinas, translated by Edward Caswall, in *The Hymnal*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: The Century Co.: 1894), # 227 (in the public domain).