

A Boy's Guru, by Thomas Palakeel

In 1976, a student in the ninth grade, I sent for a book of Zen stories and received a letter from the author himself. Those were the days everyone was sending and receiving long letters and I composed a letter to the revered author, Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati, confiding in him that all I wanted in my life was to write stories and that I had already published my work in children's magazines.

The reply came. In a tiny string of pearl cursives Guru applauded me for choosing the important calling of the story writer and said, "Story writers are people who absorb the dreams and terrors of contemporary experience. They connect themselves to the immutable truths about our lives. Just as laboratory experiments help advance the progress of science, stories provide the basis for a society's dreams. Haven't you noticed how the parables of Jesus and Buddha still lead us in our life journeys? Stories are essential for our survival."

Guru offered a reading list: Aesop's fables, Grimm's fairy tales, The Little Prince, Tagore, Gorky, Tolstoy, and Hugo. He asked me to learn everything about the language of stories. He mentioned that his philosophy students in America wrote stories and poems for him. Encouraging me to send him my stories, he added: "In separate mail, you will receive some of my other books and a copy of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, a book everyone is reading these days. If you are able to write letters in English, please write to my student Johnny Stallings. You can learn from each other."

Thus the teaching began. My command of the English language

was so shamelessly poor I could not write to Guru's student or take full advantage of the books that started arriving in the mail, but I studied the words and the joinery of the sentences, picking at words, like a bird. In the story of the seagull, a blend of ethereal black and white photographs, lyrical prose and allegorical plot about seeking perfection, I found comfort, affirmation, and the value of a life devoted to words. It had come at the right moment when I was most vulnerable. After my initial successes publishing stories in children's magazines, I had begun to stumble. I was yet to find a firm academic footing at AKJM English School. My health was troubling me, and there were hardships at home—the future looked bleak. It was common among Catholic boys of my generation to think that as a last resort they could enter priesthood as an escape, but I was too much a rationalist to consider such an action, although inexplicably I was fascinated by the ubiquitous Indian image of the ascetic—*sannyasi*, *swami*, *bhikshu*, Guru—which, in fact, explains my interest in the book of Zen stories.

When Guru went abroad, the correspondence ceased, but I kept in touch through the essays he published in a wide of range of periodicals. One of his essays, which ran as a series in Kalakaumudi Weekly, received much attention in Kerala as a critique of the present travesty of education, but for me it opened my eyes to the concept of East-West University that Guru was envisioning as a worldwide contemplative fraternity. I also took much delight in reading about his adventures in liberal arts education at the universities in America, where he was often a visiting professor at the time. What I liked the most was the boldly unorthodox and fearless thinking Guru brought to bear on every subject.

I started my own pursuit of educational fraternity, especially forging friendships with adults, seeking out professors who happened to sit with me in the bus in the mornings, the headmaster and the teachers at our school, not to mention our parish priest. My eldest brother's classmate Sebastian, a proof reader at the English language newspaper *The Indian Express*, once took me on a tour of the revered paper and sent me home with two autobiographies, *The Seven Storey Mountain* by the American monk Thomas Merton and *The Golden String* by the English monk Bede Griffiths, who had founded an ashram in Vagamon, the hill town near our home. I read the books in some depth, taking delight in the fact that I was now able to read substantial books in the English language. I noted the fact that the famed Christian monks were largely shaped by the Indian ascetic tradition. In my youthful conversations in the next few years, monks and ascetics came up as often as the names of movie stars, popular musicians, philosophers, and most importantly, novelists writing in Malayalam and English. I gave up all my efforts to improve my grades in mathematics and the sciences and proceeded with the understanding that I would specialize in Malayalam or English in college. I even had the audacity to start writing a novel in English, a foolhardy exercise I undertook after reading that one summer Thomas Merton and a group of his friends had raced against each other, writing novels. I decided to call my novel *Return to the Beginning*, imitating Bede Griffiths's book *Return to the Center*, which had just appeared in London, and I made a trip to the ashram just to read a couple of chapters in their library.

When I heard that Guru had returned from abroad, I wrote again, bragging giddily about my accomplishments, and, surprise, I

received an invitation to visit him in Varkala. I reminded him that I had grown up in a Catholic household and that I was completely ignorant of Vedanta and Guru wrote back: “If you understand ‘Love your neighbor,’ that’s Vedanta, the recognition that you are your neighbor.” My family readily approved. Had it not been for my newfound academic confidence, it was unlikely my father would have allowed me to make the long trip.

It was my first train journey, the first long trip on my own, and I vividly remember arriving at the Gurukula, late at night, hungry. The taxi driver charged one rupee less than the rate agreed. When I entered the soft, sand-filled grounds, right away I found Guru reclining in a chair under a mango tree. Seated around the Guru was a large circle of men and women, lay people dressed in the traditional Kerala whites. I detected a few *sannyasis* in saffron, and a couple of students from America. A blind man seated next to Guru was holding forth about what sounded like astrophysics. I sat down in a chair in the back, growing nervous. Unable to pick up the thread of the conversation, I wondered whether I had made a mistake. Lacking the courage to introduce myself to Guru, I considered slipping away.

In the night I slept on a wooden bench, and in the morning, I joined a group I saw marching toward a pond in a nearby coconut grove. While bathing in the pond, I struck up a conversation with two grown men who had also come from far away. After the bath, I accompanied them to the kitchen, where I ate breakfast with a growing crowd of men and women who had come from all over Kerala to attend the annual convention.

I spent my first day listening to the convention speakers with some bewilderment. Whenever Guru spoke I could relate

completely. In my diary I copied down a passage that appealed to me immensely: “The feet of the farmer plowing in the field are the feet of God, the tired hands that weave and stitch, the hands that hammer iron into a plow, and that hands that carve wood and lay bricks are the hands of God. The love of those who love one another is God’s love.” My diary entry includes a rather bombastic summation: “Guru reversed my search for God.” What I meant was that the skeptic in me had found an acceptable attitude toward the concept of God.

After the classes every morning, I considered introducing myself to Guru, but finding him besieged I decided to leave him alone. I was no longer nervous. Never once did I see him show impatience with anyone. Only on the day after New Year’s, before leaving for home did I stop by the tiny cottage where Guru was staying. A crowd had formed at the door, people who had traveled long distances to attend the convention were bidding farewell, many had brought presents, fruits, a man handed over a book on economics he had just published; the man explained the theory which I thought was ridiculous, so, finally, when it was my turn, I handed over the 152 page manuscript of my English novel, which was no less ridiculous. Guru took a look at the handwritten stack and beckoned me to sit next to him on the edge of his daybed.

Smiling, Guru looked up and said, “I expected someone with a long beard.

”For me, the moment was resonant of the Gospel According to Matthew. When the disciples try to chase the children away, Jesus tells them: “Let the children come to me.”

It was the beginning of a long association with Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati and with Guru’s friends, conducted primarily

through letters and books, although over the years I visited Guru at various locations, Cochin, Trivandrum, Coimbatore, Ooty, Chennai, and once in Crown Point, Indiana. In Chennai, my first day as a student at Loyola College coincided with Guru's arrival from Australia and it was on that occasion I was introduced to many of Guru's friends who would become lifelong friends, especially Nancy Yeilding, Bob Tyson, and the late N. C. Kumaran, whose Chennai home was always open to me. I corresponded with Nancy Yeilding, who edited my novel and helped me develop as a writer. A few years later, when I started a nonfiction project on grassroots environmental activists in India, Peter Oppenheimer reached out to me.

Guru's books and periodical essays were the most crucial in my development. An early work, the little known *An Intelligent Man's Guide to the Hindu Religion*, which I bought on my very first visit, influenced me deeply in the sense that I started looking at religious iconography and the language itself with a new pair of eyes. Guru's commentary of the Bhagavad Gita remains one of the most important books in my life. When I heard that the book was about to be published by Vikas in New Delhi, as a college student I did not have two-hundred rupees. I approached a newspaper back home with a promise to write articles from Chennai, the editor advanced me the money, and, with one of the first copies fresh out of the press before me, I undertook a prolonged study. After the paper disintegrated I had to buy another copy, and I can claim that if I have acquired any clarity about the philosophical heritage of India and the West, epistemology and metaphysics especially, it all came from the probing Socratic dialogues I found in the commentary.

By the time I started college education, Guru's intellectual interests had become my interests. Had it not been for that chance correspondence early in my boyhood, I doubt I would have taken higher education as seriously as I did. Three years later, as I was completing my BA in English, my fiction and non-fiction in English had begun to appear in journals in India and abroad. I set out on a grand tour of India to interview grassroots activists and public intellectuals. On my return from the three month trip, which took me as far north as Rishikesh, the Inlaks Foundation shortlisted me for a possible scholarship to study at Oxford. With some vanity I expected a brisk transition into a writing career. Unfortunately, I was awarded only a consolation prize and a generous grant, and I found myself with no other immediate plans. In order to stay in the metropolis, close to my friends, I enrolled in a language course in French, but within months, a severe illness forced me to return home.

While recovering, I was at a loss about my future. I could see that I would be swallowed by the responsibilities of what was then a large joint-family. In spite of my lifelong attraction to the ascetic path, I did not run to the Gurukula. Having noticed that many Gurukula friends I had met in Varkala, Ooty and Chennai, had formally accepted *sannyas*, I wrote to Guru apologizing for my failure to follow their example. Guru told me that he never thought of me as a contemplative and that what I needed was not contemplation but rest. In letter after letter Guru cautioned me about "burning the candle on both ends"; one such letter came intact with a red felt pen drawing of the spent candle, an image I have had to recall frequently over the years.

I rested, my health improved, and I enrolled in the MA English

program at the local St. Thomas College. I did so reluctantly but the faculty turned out to be even better educated and more gifted than the professors at the prestigious Loyola College. I kept writing and publishing again. Soon after I finished my degree, I was accepted into the creative writing program at Eastern Washington University. There were some bottlenecks with my transcripts, but the distinguished novelist John Keeble, who directed the writing program at Eastern Washington, looked out for me and kept my graduate assistantship open for another term, and finally, in late 1985, I flew out into the big world. Throughout the flight I kept thinking of the bird in *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* who wanted to be a better bird.

A few years ago, while preparing the verse-letters Guru wrote to my sister for press, I saw a line in one letter describing me as one of his “treasures.” I shuddered at the thought. He was the treasure and I was the one who failed to open the treasure. For instance, moved early on by Guru’s sublime literary style in Malayalam, I tried to imitate him. Convinced that Sanskrit was his secret I took it as my second language in college but I gave up the effort too soon.

When I joined Bradley University as a faculty member in 1993, the first new course I developed was largely made up of work by the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese writers Guru had introduced to a generation of Malayalam readers through his literary essays: Wang Wei, Li Po, Tu Fu, Matsuo Basho, Ihara Saikaku, Seami Motokiyo. My instruction of The Bhagavad Gita was based entirely on Guru’s commentary.

In 1999, in the months following Guru’s passing, my parents visited us in Illinois. All of us had many tender memories; my

mother remembered Guru taking over her kitchen on a visit to our home and my father recollected his own adventurous trip to visit Guru in Varkala—he had ended up at the larger Shivagiri ashram and a young sannyasi personally accompanied him to the proper destination! In honor of the memory, my mother read out to my father Guru's autobiography *Yathicharitham*.

As I write this in 2013, I am the father of a son who has just started ninth grade and a daughter studying at the college where I have been teaching English Renaissance literature and creative writing for the past twenty years. I know that I have failed to grow fully in the abundant sunlight into which Guru replanted me early on in my boyhood and I have squandered opportunities to study with Guru while he was living, but his books are here, in two languages, and I know the richness and the delight will last.