

My memories of Guru Nitya — Howard Thoresen — June 10, 2020

I began studying yoga in 1959 when I was 13 years old. I received a weekly lesson in the mail from Self Realization Fellowship (SRF), the organization founded by Paramahansa Yogananda, famous for his *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Yogananda died in 1952 but SRF continues to this day. Yoga—at that time much more defined as a spiritual practice than as a mode of exercise—became my passion, but there was little on offer in West Seattle in 1959. There was a Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, which I attended on Sundays like a church service, and there was a small meditation group run by some former students of Yogananda's student, Oliver J. Black. There were books on the asanas, and some translations of (mostly esoteric) texts. Once in a great while a teacher would pass through town and give a talk or workshop. In college I studied with a famous Buddhist scholar, and Buddhism felt like a better fit with my experience than the neo-Hinduism I had been studying. I continued my practice of meditation and asana, and I briefly attended some of the religious groups that were sprouting up in the 60's such as Kundalini Yoga and the Hari Krishna cult. By 1968 I had completed the correspondence course and broken with SRF over their refusal to support my Conscientious Objector status. I moved to Portland, Oregon, as an actor in the American Theater Company which was based at Portland State College, now PSU.

One day in, I think, 1970 [actually 1971, on his second visit to the US, having been invited by Professor Raum of Portland State University], I saw a hand-made poster that said, as I recall, "Bhagavad Gita Class" and gave a time and room number at the University. I went to the class and I believe Swami Nitya was introduced by Peter Oppenheimer. The

impression I received was that Peter had “discovered” Nitya in India and brought him back to Portland, like some exotic animal. But Swami Nitya was different from the gurus. The teachers I had encountered talked about magic and mystery, about occult powers and cosmic consciousness, and they had a method to sell—but Swami Nitya spoke like a scholar, albeit a witty and charming one. His presentation was respectful of the text without presenting it as a kind of bible for gullible believers.

I don’t think I attended very many *Bhagavad Gita* classes, but I went as often as I could. I was an actor and I was doing my alternate service as a teacher in a school for high school dropouts. One day Johnny Stallings visited the school, as part of some job he had dealing with social services, and we chatted briefly about Yogananda. Some time later Johnny came to a play my theater company was doing: *Rhinoceros*, by Eugène Ionesco. Then one day Johnny appeared at my door and told me he wanted me to meet someone. I agreed and he drove me to a small house in, I think, Northwest Portland. Swami Nitya was standing on the front porch. In this period, my hair was very long, but I had clean shaven face. When Johnny introduced me, the Swami said, “Last night I dreamed I had shaved off my beard and (pointing at me) there I am!” In some other “spiritual” context this might have felt like an omen, but with the Swami it felt like an ordinary joking comment anyone might make.

I don’t remember much about the afternoon. I think someone made fruit soup and the Swami critiqued it. At one point a bunch of young people gathered and Swami Nitya gave an informal talk, speaking directly to many people there. I remember his saying to some intense young man, “Don’t sacrifice love in your life—it would be a big

mistake!” and I wondered if he felt he himself had made a mistake in becoming a celibate.

I admired Swami Nitya but I didn’t want to become a disciple. My period of guru infatuation had ended when I left Yogananda and I didn’t believe in gurus any more. I never felt that the Swami wanted the slightest bit of devotion from me. I became friends with Johnny, who was also involved in the theater. I don’t recall the sequence, but I believe the Swami returned to Portland often, and I remember he and his group attending the summer Shakespeare plays my theater company presented in the Portland Parks.

I don’t have too many specific memories of Guru Nitya. I attended his class on the *Gita Govinda*, and I remember him singing some of the text and playing the roles of the lovers. I remember he was talking about Ganesha and he said that he and Ganesha had something in common, and drew a cartoon of a man with a big belly on the blackboard. I remember one time he was ill and we did a performance of *Pericles* in his back yard while (I think) he reclined on a chaise lounge. I remember once he was packing his suitcases and he had a copy of *Cosmic Consciousness* by Richard Bucke and he said he had found it useful in his thesis. [I’m starting to wonder if it was actually *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James—the works have a connection.] I wondered at the time if he meant a specific thesis or his life-project, but I didn’t ask. I remember him saying that when he set out for America, his guru told him to be wary of beautiful young women and grinning young men.

Some fragmental memories: Johnny told me that because Nitya was a Swami, people would ask him questions about yogasanas and other

health issues, diet and so forth. The Swami might like to have an ice cream cone but the puritanical American yogis didn't like that, or were confused by it. Another thing Johnny told me was that one time Nitya came out of the bathroom and some of his students were sitting outside the door, as if they'd been listening...Nitya said, "You think I don't shit?" I remember a story about Yogi Bhajan, the founder of Kundalini Yoga. Supposedly he said to Nitya, "I was a businessman, wearing my Sikh turban, and all these young Americans would come up to me in the airport and ask me about yoga and exercise and meditation. I felt I had to do something for them." I remember once a woman gave him an aesthetic version of the traditional offerings to a guru—I particularly "see" small pieces of firewood beautifully wrapped. Nitya showed it and said sweetly, "She thought I might not accept it!"

I remember one talk about a discipline of painting Jesus. Every day, as I vaguely recall, the devotee would make a new painting of Jesus. I assume this practice, in addition to being a devotional practice in itself, also would be an aid in imagining Jesus, in making his presence more real, perhaps leading to a vision of Jesus. I can't say if Guru Nitya explained it that way. But what I remember was he said that then one day he met a homeless person and suddenly he saw! And he said that when you have such a realization you are so sorry for all the so-called spiritual things you have said. [This story is about Nitya himself, and is told in full in *Love and Blessings*, the chapter titled The Light of the World and the Life of All Beings.]

A talk that made a big impression on me was on "Food and Freedom." It was given at Portland State and Nitya drew a big cross, which was a tool he often used to illuminate some issue, on the blackboard. At the

top of the cross he wrote “Freedom”, and at the bottom of the cross he wrote “Food”. I think he drew a curved arch from the top to the bottom, and he said you could analyze a person depending on where they were on that arch—how much Freedom a person would sacrifice for how much Food. I believe he said that artists were near the top of the arch—they would sacrifice a little bit of freedom to earning a living, but not much. Some people were willing to sacrifice *all* their freedom for food, and that unfortunately included most of the people who were running the governments of the world (this was the 1970’s and among many of us the establishment was not popular!).

I couldn’t possibly have it correctly after all these years, but it feels to me like I can hear him say, “A man like me—I claim my freedom absolutely. If you give me something to eat, I will take it, but if you don’t—I won’t eat. If you say, ‘But you will die if you don’t eat’, well, then, I will die. I will not sacrifice one bit of my freedom for food.”

I only saw Swami Nitya in Portland, Oregon. I understand that in India he had a different role, with different responsibilities. Of course he was a human being, as complex as anyone; and I know nothing about his inner struggles, anxieties, desires, etc. If I ask myself what I learned from him, what was my overall impression of him, what I remember most is a kind of ease. My impression was that he took one project—what I observed were texts like the *Gita Govinda*—and explored it thoroughly. He studied the text and the commentaries, recited it, sang it, thought about it, wrote about it, taught a class, produced a book, and then he went on to the next project. One of his students said to me, “He didn’t have a method.” A method would have been a kind of tether, and Guru Nitya had chosen to be free. His

choosing freedom over food was not the result of struggle—or, if it was, the struggle was long over and he roamed gaily in his freedom, pursuing his interests deeply and with joy.