

Remembering Nataraja Guru  
by Bailey Young (2009)

“A day like this. You can never appreciate it enough.”

The day was, as in Browning’s poem, at the morn; the morn past seven, but not by so very much, given the hint of crispness in the air and the clear quality of the light. The year was Spring by European reckoning, summer in the Indian: a day in May 1972. My snapshot caught the Guru outlined against the silhouette of the mountains over the valley from Fernhill, his light ochre clothes responding to the refreshing breeze. He was not talking to me in particular. It was one of those moments after the coffee class, before the morning puja that preceded the morning meal, a moment when one’s own newly reestablished cleanliness met the morning freshness and the day still stretched far ahead. “This is pure enjoyment. You can never enough appreciate such a day.” Several of us Western disciples, if that’s what I could then be called, were standing around in the space in front of the house when the Guru came out, accompanied by Madhavan. Of all the moments, few or many depending on how you look at them, that I spent in his presence, this is one of those whose memory has remained fresh for me, down the years. It was perhaps the first moment, or until then the fullest, when some echo of the Word he carried penetrated the confused and confounding swirlings of thought and sensation that I had carried from France to India (from Philadelphia to France, from adolescence to youth, from before I could remember to where I was) to lodge firmly in my understanding.

How did I come, did we come, to be there, just outside Ootacamund, the hill station high in the Nilgiris, that May morning, the very last May when it would have been possible for me to hear the Word from the lips of this man, this rotund, bearded bespectacled South Indian gentleman with the splotches on his balding pate, who had been compared jocularly (and had compared himself) in hippie San Francisco to the cartoon character Mr.

Natural? I can never think on it without emotion welling up. Where does that story properly start? With our brief visit at the Island Gurukula, Ezhumalai, our first definite encounter with the Gurukula universe? Was it there that we first heard about the Gurukula up in the mountains, and got directions how to get there? To tell the truth, though, we were not much impressed by this encounter, did not pick up from Freddy and Brigitte any vibes (as I would surely have put it then) that made us feel that whatever these people were up to held much promise or interest for us. Perhaps when we set out from Goa on our jaunt into South India, I had already jotted down in my notebook some reference to an ashram in Ooty among the places we might visit. We did not set out with any very clear and definite intentions, except that, now that we had experienced an India mediated through our association with Western hippies, now that we had lived a month on the beach, shared many a fruit-and-yogurt meal, chanted aum and danced under the full moon with our friends the Rainbow Gypsies, now that half a year had passed since leaving the West on what we had loosely talked of as a six month journey, now that the hot weather and the wet weather had still not arrived but we knew they were coming, now was the time to go on our own into the real India, to learn at last, perhaps, why it was that we had come, really, all this way. Yes, when I think about it again the emotion wells up. Seek and ye shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

I keep saying “we”. That’s Bailey K. Young, almost 28 years old in May 1972, who thought of himself as a kind of refugee (from his native USA, from the frustrations of PhD research, from the West and even from modern civilization), and Christine Merlie, a bit younger, a bit estranged from her good bourgeois French family, a bit engaged in progressive activities, such as helping immigrants learn better French, more than a bit unsure about how she wanted to proceed with her life after procuring some of the good diplomas (e.g., literature, linguistics) which might qualify you to go this way or that, but you need to know which way you want to go, and you don’t. They had met in the summer of 1969 on

an old farm in the south of France being fixed up for the retirement of the parents of a mutual friend; she had taken the initiative to come visit him in Philadelphia for the spring semester of 1970. He had joined her in Paris, in her six floor walk-up, cold water chambre de bonne on the Blvd Raspail that summer, when he came over with his fellowship to pursue his doctoral research project regarding archaeological evidence of the transition from the Roman Empire to the early Middle Ages. By the spring of 1971 they were still getting along well enough but both were feeling at an impasse where getting on with life was concerned. The idea of taking a break from all this, and just going to India on an open-ended voyage appealed to both of them. In his case it had something to do with readings and coursework in comparative religion during college days, and no doubt with various casual conversations and encounters in the years since, including a brief stay in Haight-Ashbury at the height of fame. That and the conviction, or the hope, that on the Indian subcontinent there yet subsisted something of older civilization resisting contamination by the rationalistic and materialistic forces driving the West in directions that filled him with distaste, foreboding, dismay. Of her motives, impulses, expectations she may decide to speak for herself. One September day we set out, hitchhiking with backpacks laden, from the Porte d'Orleans. Adventurous months lay ahead; enough to mention here how we encountered on the boat from Marseilles to Istanbul the Rainbow Gypsies, a hippie tribe in the best sense, colorful, creative, generous, living each day as a celebration, seekers on the spiritual paths. They had been drawn towards India when they met, at the Solstice Festival at Stonehenge, the boy Guru Maharaj. I came to think then, and I still think now, that traveling for a time with the Gypsies was among the great blessings of the journey, that helped to open my heart.

Leaving Goa in late January I still thought in terms of getting back together later with Ricardo, the dancer from California, with Lothar, Gantussi, Rea, and whomever else may have joined the tribal core, to find them again in North India, and perhaps to make

the return together. At the decisive moment, though, I was moved to make a different choice.

The hot weather drove us up to Ooty. So I recall. The part of our South India jaunt that I remember most distinctly is the week or so we camped among the ruins at Hampi, the ancient Hindu city of Vijayanagar (destroyed by the Muslim victors in 1570s), enjoying swims in the cool river. A chance conversation in a bus station procured an invitation to spend three days in a Kanarese village, Yeslur, as guests at a wedding; I still have those photos. Of the trip down the waterways of Kerala, to Cochin, to Trivandrum I have vaguer memories, jogged by the photos that have survived. But now it was March and the intensity of the heat was increasing. Was it time to think of returning North, then West? At any rate here was the little train that would take us up into cooler altitudes, where we could rest and prepare ourselves at this ashram. I remember that an incident of some kind with an Indian railway official somewhat spoiled the train ride for me, but by the time we stepped out by the race track in Ooty, into a green landscape scented by eucalyptus trees I was feeling restored. At Fernhill we were warmly welcomed by a Dutch woman, Mylle Kooyman. There was a small boy with a ready smile there. Was there anyone else? Or did they only start to show up over the next couple of days? Robert Greenspon. Charming John and Mike. The Guru was due soon, Mylle told us. Do I remember in “three days” because I was soon to be hearing him say that the Gurukula should offer hospitality to anyone without question for three days? My memory of his arrival, and who was with him (Bennington, surely; Mark and Judy already? Patrick?) and how the routine got started is not just now precise. The reason of course is that I was only partly “there”. I was happy enough that things had worked out this way, that our visit to the ashram would include some exposure to its guru, like icing on the cake. But I was already planning in my mind our return north. And then, back to the West. And then what? I don’t even remember if I felt anguish at the continuing uncertainties of my journey. I had discovered that I was good at the

business of getting from point A to point B, and absorption in this task kept the larger questions at bay. Of course we joined in with the routine. At 5:30 Mylle would give the wake up call and soon we were sipping hot coffee. It was still dark as Nataraja Guru began his comments on Saundarya Lahari, and the vagaries of disciples, and the vertical and horizontal axis, and light would begin to peek from behind the peaks, the sky would tinge with changing colors. I paid intermittent attention. At the morning puja I was carried (as I had not been at the Island) into the chanting of the Isa Upanishad, of Narayana Guru's poetry. I enjoyed walking into Ooty, visited the botanical Garden, came back to the tasty pleasure of afternoon tea. At night all you got was this rice water, this kunji. I was getting my fill of this place, a very pleasant place certainly, filling up on the experience, before moving on.

Did the moment described above occur during these first few days? I don't think so. I don't think I was yet ready to hear. Memory, though, is so fuzzy, unreliable. What I can say with certitude is: the day for departure came. We rode on the bus down to Bangalore. We went to stay at the Chamberlains'. Now it was time to go out and make the necessary arrangements. But I didn't. Instead I turned to Christine, tears came into my eyes, I said something like: "Why are we leaving? We came all this way from Europe to learn something about India (or was it something about wisdom? Or just something?) and now we seem to have found something worth listening to. Why are we leaving?" If we talked much at this point with Wynn and Sally, I don't remember. I know that we got back on a bus, rode back to Ooty and were part of that last summer teaching season of Nataraja Guru in his beloved Fernhill home. I just can't ever think about it without the emotions returning.

"Don't be afraid to make your mistakes." Over the years certain phrases have remained fresh, and returned again and again to nourish and provide steadiness at crucial moments. This one struck home in the heart of a young man prone to fear the world and doubt the role that he might play in it. What had I come to

India for anyway? It was not just frustration with wrestling the thesis into a manageable shape; it was also a deeper reluctance to commit myself to the path that completing the thesis would open. At the root, the fear of making a big, BIG mistake. Fear feeds on itself, multiplying inhibitions. Fear can prompt paralysis. Setting the thesis project aside, setting out on an open-ended journey to the East was defiance of paralysis. But it took the Guru's words to change the inner dynamics. They were not words spoken to me particularly. I had not much particular exchange with Nataraja Guru. When we returned to Fernhill, announcing our desire to stay for a spell beyond the classic three days, he spoke to us. My memory is not so clear as to what exactly was said. He asked about our qualifications to study Brahmavidya, philosophy, as I recall. I would have sketched my educational background, for I remember him nodding that it was appropriate. He did ask, funny how I almost forgot this!, about our stay in December at the ashram in Hardwar of the boy Guru Maharaj. I explained that we had followed our friends but decided, after a few days, that this path was not for us. He nodded and said something about the power exercised by the boy's mother. And he approved us as students, thus giving Bennington authority to give us the letter we would need to get our six month tourist visas extended. But I never sought a private talk with him. I would have been wary, even afraid, of one. Morning after morning I sat among the group of "disciples," listening to his words, yes, but also fighting them. Sometimes they seemed to treat matters abstract and hard to follow. Sometimes they became personal and might be quite sharp and biting in regard to some disciple. I remember one day remarks about Bennington made me raise my inner shield; what might he say about me if I betrayed my thoughts? What if he could read my thoughts? My suspicious thoughts, my that-statement-is-outrageous thoughts, or, my No-I-won't-go-along-with-that thoughts. As I got more of a sense of the complex relations among this group of disciples my inner wariness grew greater. Did I really see myself becoming a part of all this? Silently, during those

morning coffee classes, an inner struggle went on as I sought to gain some insight into wisdom yet keep myself apart.

It was during the puja that these conflicts subsided. What I took at first as some stuff to be gone through before I got to the delicious meal soon became the most nourishing moment of the day (at least in retrospect, I'm not sure I would have put it that way then). The chants entered my soul, taking on richer and richer meaning, and though I cannot recall any specific commentary made by the Guru, I remember his words enhancing for me the sense of peace and understanding. Centering is the word that occurs. For the first time in my life I was becoming centered. I could let myself be carried toward a greater understanding. There were no mistakes to fear.