

My sweet friendship with Guru Nitya – 1974-1999 **by Wendy Oak**

Because of its special place in my life story, I am writing some separate memories of my friendship with Guru Nitya, and my recollections of some of these moments are like stitches in a tapestry.

In one way the stitches are separate and exact, and yet they also make up a whole design.

In the same way although my India visits were special and separate, they influenced the whole of my life, and continue to do so.

I had met Guru Nitya in 1974 in Devon, whilst he was on a European tour. My old friend Sheilah introduced me, as she had known him in Singapore. I was not very keen, but on meeting him I felt at once that I had made a friend.

I had greeted him with ‘I don’t know what to say to a Guru.’ And he laughed, replying ‘You don’t have to say anything, please sit down’

And soon found plenty to talk about.

At that time Nitya had just become Guru, following the death of his teacher, Nataraja Guru. So as he said to me, it was all new to him.

Taking on the mantle of a Guru is a privilege, which has to be earned through following the teaching and example of the current Guru in whose service one is dedicated. There will be many years of learning through service, and of the study of sacred Indian texts, world philosophy and psychology, and bringing the essence of these into everyday life and encounters with others.

It is a life of dedication and devotion. A wholehearted giving of oneself to the world. An orientation away from the smaller ego self to the great self of the spirit.

And over the twenty-five years I knew Guru Nitya, he was always larger than life. He was a natural scholar and teacher and much of his life was given to both these areas. Later he made commentaries of some major sacred works, as well as writing his own too.

After this initial meeting, we corresponded over the next ten years, and I came to value his wise, compassionate replies to my often tormented letters.

Then I first went over to India with Martin, as a social work placement, in 1985, and we joined Guru in Kerala, staying in his mother's house. I recall that he took me to various projects, including a forest co-operative in Tamil Nadu. Everywhere we went, Guru was greeted with love and happiness, and he returned this in full measure, adding his own ingredients of humour, wisdom and compassion.

I know there were other times later, when I travelled with him too, and we went to the village where he grew up, and to the place by the river where Narayana Guru lived as a hermit.

Or down to the Backwaters, where Guru painted, and gave a small class among the palms, beside the water.

There were visits to local hospitals and schools on other occasions, or lunch in some small house, where we all sat on the floor, eating simple delicious food, served on a banana leaf.

Guru accorded the same dignity to all. Nowhere was ever too humble for Guru to visit, and he was just the same, as when we were invited to lunch at Wellington Barracks, and it was all very smart and more formal.

He always met people on their own ground, so they felt valued. This allowed a rapport to develop.

Travelling with Guru Nitya, was a great adventure. There was Jyothi, to care for Guru's needs, and others as well, and we shared a chauffeur driven Ambassador car, so well sprung for the rough Indian roads. We left early in the morning, by 5 am, after a good

filling breakfast. My favourite being Iddlies. These are soft steamed cakes, eaten with chutney, and are delicious. These early morning departures in the darkness were charged with the anticipation of the unknown and yet secure in the knowledge that whatever happened it would be alright.

Once I stayed for a month in Varkala in the state of Kerala, when Guru hosted a conference on homeopathic medicine, bringing together a group of alternative practitioners to share and develop their own styles of healing.

It was held in the majestic East West University building, which belonged to the Narayana Gurukula movement. The main library had many fine books and upheld the values and ethos of Narayana Guru, of one world, one religion which encompassed all religions, and a blending of Eastern and Western cultures. He saw equality for all and his life embraced a holistic vision, based on all aspects of existence and consciousness.

He lived between 1854 and 1928, and so was a spiritual pioneer and philosopher in India, alongside Gandhi. Narayana Guru is now recognized as ‘one of the most important teachers and catalysts for change, in India’s history’.

His disciple, Nataraja Guru succeeded him, and with his blessing, founded the Narayana Gurukula, and his disciple in turn was Guru Nitya, so there is an unbroken chain of Guruship. This has now passed on to Guru Muni Prasad, who was nominated by Nataraja Guru.

Guru Nitya inherited a vast lake of knowledge, which he distilled into commentaries; creating books, which were readily understandable.

Thus bringing ancient wisdom and esoteric knowledge within the reach of many people.

His own depth of understanding and knowledge allowed him to also write books of his own. Each one, a treasure.

Kerala was hot and sunny with many green rice fields and coconut groves. It was a contrast with being up in Fernhill, among the tea slopes, high in the mountains. This was where I really felt at home. Starting from the journey leaving the hot dusty plains behind, then up and up, negotiating the thirty-six hairpin bends, among the lush mountain greenery to the small town, known as either Ootacamund or Udthagamandalam, once called The Queen of the Hill Stations. Here it became cool in the evenings, and the air was finer too. 7,500 ft above sea level.

The route to the Fernhill Gurukula, from Ooty, is etched in my heart forever. Every turn of the roads, the buildings, the landscape, the people and animals, and the final veering away from the dirt road into Manjanacourai village, along the rutted bumpy track, and the arrival in through the wooded gateway. And there it was, my sweet home of Fernhill. Running inside the Gurukula to find Guru Nitya, and be enveloped in a great hug. 'Our fairy is here', he would say, laughing. And soon cups of hot sweet tea arrived, and it was time to bring out the assortment of small gifts and pass them round.

The Gurukula became a bigger complex over the times I visited. There was the original small low building, which was the hub of it all, made up of one big central room, known as the prayer hall, and some small rooms leading off it.

At the end of the prayer hall was a raised dais, on which were placed religious icons. These included my two favourites; a big brass figure of Ganesha and another similar one of a Nandy Bull. There were also deities from the Christian, Buddhist, Chinese and other religions, all intermingling. On the wall behind, hung a big picture of Narayana Guru.

I loved Ganesha best, and have several figures of him. Once, when I was putting on Guru's thick socks for a walk, I told him that he had big feet like Ganesha and he laughed and said they were twin brothers!

Beside the prayer hall was a tiny bedroom for Jyothi, and through a door behind, was Guru's area. A small passage bedroom, a bathroom and kitchen, and his study. His requirements were so simple and yet contained everything he needed.

At the other side, leading off the prayer hall was a small visitor bedroom and a bathroom.

Opposite, was a dormitory building, with tiny single rooms and a bathroom, for the disciples and visitors. Separate again was the old kitchen building, with cow stalls at the end.

The original tiny hut, where Nataraja Guru lived, so many years before, became a meditation space, and behind it was a clearing in the pine trees with a big bronze statue of Narayana Guru, sitting in quiet repose.

Further on was a newer library building, on two levels. The bottom housed most of Guru's books, with tables for reading and writing. Above was a small painting studio with a large colourful mural on one wall, a collective endeavour by Guru Nitya and others, and large windows looking over the valley.

Next to this was a reception room, which had multi-purpose use.

Paths and colorful flowerbeds united all the buildings

In among these a Japanese student, Mieko, built herself the tiniest house, which she lived in when she was in Fernhill.

And latterly a beautiful shrine was built for Guru Nitya, where he wanted it, just beside the pine trees, on the edge of their land.

There were fields too for growing vegetables, and grazing the cow.

My most vivid memories of Guru, are sitting in his little study in Fernhill, writing. Writing and dictating replies, to the many letters he received daily. Each one was given loving thought. None overlooked.

Guru's study was the heart of the Gurukula. We all congregated there, like moths to a candle flame, as did many of his visiting friends.

Many of his books were written here, and processed on the big computer. Nancy stayed often and our visits overlapped. She came from America, and was a great help to Guru, both in setting up the computer, editing his writing and closely sharing his work. Nancy was a devoted disciple and his teachings were to become her life. Establishing a Gurukula herself, on Bainbridge Island, where she also published, edited and contributed to a regular magazine issued three or four times a year.

‘Gurukulam’: published by Narayana Gurukula and the East-West University of Unitive Sciences. Its policy is that enunciated by Narayana Guru, when he convened the Conference of World Religions at Alwaye, South India, in 1924. *‘Our purpose is not to argue and win, but to know and let know.’* This brought many people together and was an ideal link between East and West. The magazine is ongoing.

Nancy held a special place in Guru’s heart. He loved her so dearly, and valued both her capability and her ability to grasp his concepts and take them forward, as well as valuing the many times she spent with him, both travelling, and at Fernhill, engaged in his projects. I was slightly in awe of her, as she was so confident and American. Yet Nancy was friendly in a reserved way. I respected and admired her, both. I remember once her father, Dan, came over for a visit, and we took the train down to Coonor, to the gardens and enjoyed a stroll around the park and coffee together.

Sraddha was also American, and a devoted disciple; our visits sometimes overlapped. She was fun to be with, and would lead me astray into dark smoky tea shops, or we went to town together. She also spent a lot of time writing up Guru’s work on the computer. Guru valued his Western connections, and their loving co-operation enabled books to be written and wisdom shared. There are some examples of this creative East/West relationship. [see end sheet]

There were many visitors from the East and the West who came to share in Guru's wisdom and knowledge.

A strong connection was made with Portland, Oregon in America. Guru had lectured there at the university in his earlier days, and given classes to interested people. This led to the establishment of two Gurukulas, one in Portland and the other on Bainbridge Island. It followed that some people became students of Guru Nitya, and contributed in different ways to the Narayana Gurukula Movement.

This connection is ongoing and continues to develop strong links between West and East, as Guru's books are edited and republished too. And when Nancy travels in South India, giving classes in some Gurukulas, she maintains and develops new links. There is a Gurukula in Fiji too. Guru travelled to Australia and Singapore extensively, often accompanied by Nancy.

Twice a day, morning and evening, we all came together for prayers and classes. Usually the women sat on one side and the men on the other. Guru sat at the front. Often there were extra people who filled up the hall at the back.

The lamp was lit and the conch shell blown, to mark the beginning of prayers. This was done by one of the several disciples, who lived, worked and studied in the Gurukula. They all wore white clothes and the more senior disciples wore orange, and were called Swamis.

I knew many of the disciples in the times I visited. Some moved around to other Gurukulas, some just moved on and others stayed in the service of Guru.

Mostly they were friendly and eager for news from the people who visited, and many interesting discussions ensued.

So many names and images of the disciples I knew, flash by:

Dr. Thampan, now Swami Tanmaya, Giri, now Swami Tyagiswara, Kasmin, Gopidas, Prince, Gopal, Lakshmi, Vinod who is now Swami Vyasa Prasad, Swami Mantra Chaitanya, Sree Kumar, Muni Narayana Prasad from Varkala, who has now

become Guru, and others whose faces I can still see and whose names sadly I cannot recall. Yet who still live in my heart. There were also visits from Swami Charles, who manages the Madras Gurukula, and Swami Vinaya and his wife Margaret, who manage the Somanahalli Gurukula near Bangalore. And that dear fine man, Suresh Babu from Kottayam, who masterminds the Indian book sales.

I can recall some brief moments with some other American disciples: Peter Oppenheimer, in Varkala, Bill Hughes and Nancy Richmond, with Peter Moras who were present at Fernhill for Guru Nitya's Mahasamadhi.

Beautiful Anita Kashyap from Singapore, who also shared my travels with Guru one time. And Padma from Singapore who made the most delicious Pissam!

Our lives touched so fleetingly and yet our bond with Guru linked us closely, at the time.

On several occasions I shared a few days with my Irish friend, Sheilah Johns who first introduced me to Guru Nitya. Always an unexpected treat to meet together in India.

There was Jyothi's family too who visited. Her parents and her sisters, with their children. These were happy, jovial times shared by all.

A special and on-going friend is Sister Josephine Dharmaswamy. She attended many of the Gurukula functions at Fernhill, and met me from Coimbatore Airport when I flew over for Guru's Mahasamadhi, which we attended together. Sister Josephine is a Catholic Sister and lives in Francis Convent in Coimbatore. One primary area of her work is with women's issues in the villages of the Nilgiris mountains.

Sister Josephine, or Josie, as I knew her, had a deep love and respect for Guru Nitya and for the selfless way in which he lived his life.

One of my daily tasks was to take part in scribing the Gurukula talks, which Guru gave, in both English and Malayalam, following prayers. I sat with my notebook, writing as fast as I could, to keep up with him. This meant writing what was previously said, whilst remembering the present text. It was a skill I took to readily, once I had adjusted to Guru's pronunciation, and most times I managed to achieve a complete, accurate talk in the English version.

This was a useful function and afterwards Guru liked me to read it back to him, for any corrections.

Then he would slightly move his head from side to side, and say 'okay.'

Certain disciples would record the Malayalam version too and sometimes we compared notes.

I loved prayer times. The moment when we all gathered together quietly, with our shawls wrapped around, felt a time of peace, even if things were chaotic. Then dearest Guru came in and sat in his chair with his fingers clasped, and in his warm quiet voice, started the daily chanting. We all followed. Sometimes the cat came in and was chased away, often sneaking back in again.

Guru gave a class talk, or some discussion on an aspect of daily Gurukula life. There was always plenty to talk about in this lively place.

We were all included. After some time, we ended with a short chant and all disbanded for our various duties.

There was a long ongoing evening class on 'the symphony of values' which was very interesting and covered aspects of architecture, art and music, from an esoteric viewpoint.

These talks and classes taught me a lot, but overall the greatest learning came through Guru's quiet example. The many ways in which he included others; being in the present moment, giving his undivided attention to the person or task he was engaged with. His compassion and kindness were gentle but firm and always opened the way to new possibilities. I was especially taken by Guru's

ability to follow a routine and yet be spontaneous as well. He was a master in the art of living.

And his example gave me the opportunity to examine my own life and how I lived it.

After returning to England, this continued through letters, which were read and re-read many times.

There were never definitive closed answers, maybe some direction, and always food for thought, which required me to make my own choices.

In essence Guru said that in our transactional life, if we give the best we can, from who we are at the time, with love and kindness, that is good enough.

In the spiritual sense, we are always growing up from our smaller ego selves to the recognition of our wider place of eternal belonging.

We need to be mindful of these two selves, operating on different levels, and not muddle up the two. Even though they co-exist.

Now so many years later in 2005, I am part of a small international class studying 'The One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction'. A commentary by Guru Nitya. We connect via the computer and Nancy is our guide and facilitator. [see end sheet for details]

After the morning prayers and classes, it was time to eat and delicious smells of cooking wafted through.

The meals were wonderful and I was always hungry. They were cooked in Guru's little kitchen by Jyothi and Parvati and were divine. They made many different curries with thick Indian rice and sometimes with crispy papadams. Using only simple vegetables, curry leaves and spices, they created such tasty meals. A few times Guru would cook, and one of his best things was his brownies. Small potatoes fried whole in their skins. We all ate them straightaway, hot from the stove. Jyothi made chapattis, shaping them with her hands into flat rounds and cooking them for supper.

These meals were cooked separately for Guru, and his guests were invited to partake of them with him.

The disciples cooked in the big kitchen building, making pots of very fierce curry, called sambar. I tried it a few times, but it upset my tummy with its hot spices. I enjoyed the aromatic cumin drink they brewed up which was often in a pot on the stove.

Most mornings I walked down the small path, over the railway to the Santosh Bakery for fresh bread to bring back to share in the big kitchen, and a crumbly warm cake to eat on the way back. When I went into town, I bought local Bargees from the market, some for Guru and plenty to share with the disciples.

In the early mornings I chopped vegetables at the long wooden table in the dark kitchen with them, and shared stories and songs together. Food brought everyone together, as it always does.

Potatoes were grown in one of the Gurukula fields and harvested, helped by some workers from the village, and I remember helping gather them up in big baskets, and they filled eighteen sacks. Guru took his camera out and photographed the harvest, while Jyothi and Parro made potato cakes for the workers. Guru bought a new Vina with the proceeds.

Their cow gave us milk, and once when I was there, it calved too. There were initial birthing difficulties and Guru and Rajan stayed with the cow, calming her, until the calf arrived. There were several cows over the years I visited.

When I first stayed, there was no running water supply; it was all kept in big tanks beside the kitchen. Later a pipe was brought up to the Gurukula, which made a great difference, especially with the bathing arrangements.

I recall the big silvery pots of water boiling on the stove for our morning ablutions. Carrying it through to the dark bathroom and washing in a bucket. Being so careful to wash my hair first, then

jug wash myself, and lastly wash my clothes, all in the same water! But it was okay and was a ritual I enjoyed.

There was a lavatory in the corner with a BIG spider, hiding behind it.

Luckily it was so dark, I often didn't see it, but I knew it was there. The last time I visited the bathroom was tiled with a proper shower and taps, the lavatory flushed and the spider's home was gone. But eventually I am told that another smaller spider took up residence! Once Guru told us about the big spider in his bathroom, and how one morning it was on the back of the lavatory seat. He knew he could flush it down the toilet, and even though he would have preferred the spider to be gone, he viewed it with compassion and said, 'There is room for us both.' And let it be. I felt the same too. I did not feel the same though, about a big spider inside my suitcase while I was packing to return home, and made poor Jyothi find and remove it instantly!

I have vivid memories of all the washing hung on the lines to dry, blowing in the wind, and ironing at the table in the prayer hall, where there was usually a basket full to be done. It was a pleasure to sometimes iron Guru's peach garments and leave them neatly folded on the table. Sometimes there were power cuts; these seemed to be a part of life in this remote mountain town. There were often little jobs to be done and it was a matter of quietly noticing and doing them.

The rains came in the autumn when I was staying, and in the early days the bedroom ceiling leaked, after a flood of rain, and dripped into the room, so we had buckets at the ready. There were rats too outside, pattering over the flat roof at night. The pig man chanted up in the field, and I lay in my cosy sleeping bag, hearing all the different sounds, which included the roaring of the wind through the pine trees, and felt myself sheltered in a womb of peaceful safe contentment.

Waking up was special too, as Guru started his day very early and usually had music playing, which filtered through into my waking consciousness. It was never the same. Some days it was Western classical music, other times Indian ragas; Guru had a big collection of tapes and CD's, mostly brought by guests, being light and easy to pack.

Another familiar morning sound was the daily reveille from the boarding school, which wafted across the valley. There were several good quality boarding schools in and around Ooty, continuing from the old days.

Margaret and Vinaya's daughter Hypatia, attended a boarding school across the valley and some Sundays she visited Guru. I recall one happy evening, walking her back to the school along the railway and through winding forest paths. Returning by bus, as it was a long way.

The other morning sound I loved was the arrival of the sturdy mountain train on its five-hour journey up the Nilgiris from the plains below. As it passed under the bridge nearby, its whistle blew and clouds of smoke billowed up. I was fortunate enough to travel four times on this train, either arriving or returning from Ooty, and each time was a magical experience.

I recall one afternoon Guru, Indu Mala and I had tea in his study listening to 'Under Milk Wood' by Dylan Thomas, which I had brought as a present. Guru chuckled as the tale unfolded of a day in the lives of those who lived in the remote Welsh seaside village, under the hill.

Somehow it was an intimate moment, when he was left undisturbed and could enjoy this quiet time of gentle relaxation. We three sat near the window, sipping the hot sweet tea, as the tale unfolded. And were not disturbed for the whole hour or so it lasted.

There were many videos too, which we watched in the evening, after prayers and supper. Or sometimes Guru would unlock his big metal cupboard and bring out some photograph albums to share with us. These were always a treat, especially to see him as a young man, with long flowing hair, and to be taken on so many of these travels around the world.

Some evenings we all congregated in the study, sitting in every available space, even on the steps, and enjoyed varied conversations, which were both thought provoking and fun too. All tempered with Guru's special blend of wisdom, light heartedness, and humour.

Then suddenly the evening was over and we all melted away, so he could enjoy a hot drink before bed.

The heavy wooden shutters in place, over the study window.

Mostly Guru was almost constantly on duty. People came all day for so many reasons, either visitors called, those needing his help, others to pay their respects. The disciples brought the huge bundle of post and went through it with him. There were hours of dictation and writing, evident in the piles of envelopes to be posted. The daily management of the Gurukula was overseen, and meetings, ceremonies and a variety of programmes arranged. The wider Gurukula community needed Guru's guidance. And he also found time to read, study and prepare books. There were also the twice daily prayer times and classes too which he fitted in to the day.

It was a heavy and unrelenting schedule, and yet Guru sailed through it like a well balanced ship, riding the waves as they came, always full of enthusiasm. There were morning and evening walks, often along the dirt road alongside the Gurukula land, to the old gnarled prayer tree. Guru in his warm jacket and wooly hat with his stick, wearing thick socks and sandals. Several of us joined him and there were often philosophical discussions along the way. Or children on their way to and from school would pause for a smile, before skipping off again.

The road ran above a series of tea slopes, full of the green tipped bushes. In the daytime women would be picking these tips and filling baskets. Tea plantations were all around Ooty, every hillside neatly planted in terraces. The conditions were favorable and the Nilgiri tea was very well liked. It travelled far and wide.

I recall how we stopped by the old prayer tree once, and Guru gazed across the wide vista, and said. 'For me, this is the most beautiful place on earth.' It was spoken with such heartfelt conviction. I felt that even with his heavy schedule, that Fernhill gave him some sanctuary from the pressures of the world, as he loved his study, filled with the clutter of books and painting materials, and could live here in relative comfort and simplicity, in this special place so high up in the Blue Mountains.

Sometimes Indu Mala came in to tidy the books in his study, to arrange and catalogue them for him. Every wall was filled with book shelves, lots of different subjects, art, music, architecture, poetry, famous writers, philosophy, volumes of collected works and rare editions. The categories were endless, and they got muddled up over time, as a book was taken and not returned to its rightful place.

Indu Mala really got down to it with great fervour, but I felt that Guru was glad when it was finished, and she left, and he could start some new piles on his desk again!

Indu Mala was the widow of a tea planter, and lived nearby in a lovely old house. It looked lovely from the outside, but inside it was rather musty and damp. She was a smart, well-groomed lady, and I liked her old fashioned manners, and her way of talking. Sounding like a pigeon cooing. She always attended the Gurukula functions and blended in so effortlessly, with dignity and style.

The daily management of the Gurukula was largely done by Gurusharan Jyothi, his devoted carer. She had come to the Gurukula as a young woman, and her life was given to his service. Jyothi was capable, assertive and versatile, with good

organizational skills. She attended to the practical tasks, delegating jobs to the disciples. Sometimes there was friction, but it got sorted out by Guru. She had excellent social skills too, and made guests welcome, but also protected Guru, fiercely. Each day after lunch, Guru retired to his bed for an hour, and the door was closed. He was never to be disturbed.

Jyothi loved him so deeply and he loved her too. He bathed in the radiance of her sunny smile, and her volatile personality meant she was never boring or over compliant. Guru enjoyed her good looks and how she dressed in an attractive way. She was his constant and loving companion.

I loved Jyothi too, and we shared many things together. Later after Guru died, she came over to stay with us in England, while she was picking up the pieces of her shattered life. It was a hard transition for her to move into a life without her beloved Guru to care for. The sun went out of her eyes and she dwelt in a long period of darkness.

Her healing came through writing a book on her life with Guru Nitya. After this, Jyothi became stronger and her sun shone once more, though never quite as brightly as before.

I always saw Jyothi and Nancy as being like two pillars in Guru's life. Each giving him the support he needed, both practically and intellectually. Both united in their love and devotion. In return he shared so much of his life with them, giving them spiritual sustenance, for them to share with the world. Always it was an ever-widening spiral of consciousness.

For me it was a joy and a privilege to be just a small part of it all.

Parvati and Rajan come into my mind, as I write. This couple both worked in the Gurukula. They lived in a small house close by, with their two children, Sheeba and Karthik.

Parro, as she was known, had a pretty and kindly presence. She cooked and cleaned and made endless cups of chai for us all, including the many visitors who needed sustenance. She was

untiring in her helpfulness and it seemed good for Jyothi to have some female companionship, in this mostly male Gurukula world. They laughed a lot together and on the whole seemed well matched.

Her mother came in and helped as well, and the children often came by before and after school.

Rajan did much of the outside work, keeping the gardens and paths neat, and helping wherever he was needed, with a variety of jobs. Both of them were devoted to Guru Nitya, and were part of his extended family.

It was all hands to the deck when there was a special celebration held at Fernhill, such as a conference or a Guru Puja.

The way it all came together was amazing, like a tide flowing strongly over the mudflats.

Everyone had a job to do. I recall Rajan cleaning Ganesha and Nandy Bull and polishing them until they shone. And all the prayer hall was swept and dusted. It used to have coconut matting throughout which gathered the dust, until it was replaced with creamy white tiles.

Outside was all swept and tidied too. Beautiful coloured patterns were made on the ground in front of the door, as welcoming mandalas.

The atmosphere of anticipation grew daily. A big shopping trip was arranged, and Guru came to choose the food. Sacks of rice and curry spices and vegetables were bought for the feast. The pile grew and was loaded into an Ambassador and brought to the Gurukula.

As time drew nearer, people started to arrive, first one or two, then a stream of eager faces gathered. Cars and auto rickshaws, in and out of the gates like angry bees.

The night before, a big fire would be lit outside the kitchen building, and the rice cooked in huge pots. Steam rising up into the night sky. Vegetables were chopped and spices prepared. It had

been done so many times before and yet each time was as fresh as the food itself and somehow among all the apparent chaos, it came together, like a miracle.

There were big preparations too, as a marquee was erected on the open ground above the library. Lorries came with neatly stacked metal chairs to be arranged in rows, for the series of talks to take place. Men scrambled round putting up temporary lighting, and cables lay everywhere, like spaghetti.

The final touches of flowers and pictures were added by the women. I especially recall the ropes of freshly plaited Jasmine flowers, hung like garlands and smelling so sweetly.

Sleeping arrangements were sorted out; piles of blankets hired and many bodies lay on the floor of the prayer hall for the night. One time I went to sleep and woke in the morning to find five women sleeping in my room, three in one bed and two on the floor! I never heard them come in. They slept so neatly, like parcels.

Bath times were done in succession, one following another, and out of what seemed chaos, women appeared with glossy hair and colourful floating saris to greet the day. Adorned with fresh flowers and looking so fine; for me it was always amazing.

I was dressed in my sari, the many yards of material, deftly folded and tucked in, by capable Indian hands, to become like one of these beautiful woman for a day. It was both a delight and a privilege, and I felt like a queen as the brilliant turquoise silk cloth moved against my skin.

I was told that I wore the sari well, as if I was Indian, and I am sure that I had a previous Indian incarnation, as I felt so at home here.

The celebration days began with prayers and a sacred fire ceremony followed by many talks, hosted by Guru. Some of the talks went on and on. Many of them were interesting, especially those given by Guru. But I was always amazed at the stamina of Indian participants who sat still for hours without a break.

Then came the feast, as plates were piled high with food. As well as all the guests, the local village people all came to be fed. This was a long held annual tradition, and warm clothing was given out to the children.

With full tummies, in the hot sunshine, people socialized, meeting old faces, sharing news and memories. There were many happy faces and greetings. Music played and there might be a dancer, entertaining those in the shade of the marquee.

The day went on through the evening, when after supper, a music and dance programme was arranged in the prayer hall, where we all gathered.

The performers were always so lovely to watch, as they danced and sang, each movement so sinuous, each note sublime. There was often an epic story told. I found these events like being caught up in an ancient culture and felt myself to be a part of it all, for this magical moment in time.

Guru was a patron of the arts and loved them. He encouraged young people and hosted small festivals throughout the year, here at Fernhill; they were always well attended. Sometimes poetry and literature were included, or there may be a painting seminar.

The Gurukula was a catalyst for likeminded souls to come together and explore so many riches with Guru to inspire and encourage them.

His presence filled these large and small ceremonies with grace. He received the devotion of so many followers of the Narayana Gurukula Movement, with a quiet acceptance. Acknowledging his role as spiritual leader with dignity, responding appropriately to the varied demands made on him.

But he could also be firm. I recall an American photographer, Sumner, coming to stay. He was in a sad depression and was constantly miserable. We all got fed up with him and Guru declared that 'he had a dark fate', and after some time, Guru sent him away for three weeks to photograph the smiles of India.

Sumner journeyed up to the Himalayas and returned smiling, with many photos to share with us.

Always Guru focused on the positive side of life, of choosing gratitude rather than complaining.

Later when he suffered a stroke, Guru called it 'his stroke of good luck' because so much kindness was showered on him!

This attitude brought out the best in people and helped them to move from self-doubt to self-belief, and reach out to others.

The other occasions I recall were wedding ceremonies. Guru was often asked to marry couples, and a few times I went with him, wearing my turquoise silk sari, to officiate with some small task. Once it was pouring water from a conch shell over the couple's clasped hands, while Guru blessed them both.

It felt a great honour to be assisting Guru and I was invited to share in the wedding feast.

Once after we attended a wedding in Ooty, I walked home afterwards with some of the disciples, along the mountain railway line, which was common practice. But this time, just as we approached the long tunnel a train appeared and we flung ourselves into the bushes, with me all tangled up in my sari! How we laughed.

Some days I walked down the railway line to the post office, hidden on a bend under some trees. It was a small stone building with just one room, and I went inside and sat on a chair, waiting to be served. The two postmasters were always polite and friendly, and they sat behind a mahogany counter covered in piles of papers and stamps. Sometimes they offered me a cup of sweet tea and liked to hear about life in England. Other times they were very busy filling post sacks and our exchanges were brief.

I felt it was a remnant of times past, of the old hill station, when many English army families had homes up here, away from the searing summer heat of the plains below. Bungalows with 'Robin's

Nest' or 'Journey's End' were still on the garden gates, in a tangle of roses.

There were red cast iron Victorian letter boxes set into the walls, with the initials, *VR* inscribed on them. And a few paces down the road, a stone Indian Deity, smiled from the same wall. A reminder of the uneasy alliance of east and west in those colonial times, maybe.

And what a joy it was to receive letters from England, as it must have been then. I carried them back and sat on my bed reading about life so far away. Of storms and dark winter days, and news from my family and friends. And I wrote long letters in reply as if hoping to send them all some warmth and light through the post!

Sometimes I went off on my own to explore Ooty and to shop. Usually going on the little sturdy bus from the village, crowded like sardines in a tin.

I got to know the small straggling town where thin bony cows roamed the dusty streets. It may have been lovely once, but now it was dirty and somewhat neglected. Yet I grew to love it all. The big colourful market filled with stalls of every kind, arrangements of fruit and vegetables and fresh herbs and aromatic curry leaves. Grocery stores to buy eggs and Champion porridge oats in yellow tins, and bakery stalls to buy cakes and biscuits. Canopied stalls selling bright clothing, bed sheets, cosmetics and cheap jewelry. Stationary and book stalls; flowers and incense stalls to delight the senses. It was all here in a vibrant cacophony of sounds and people.

I might stop at the main post office and buy stamps, gluing them to the envelopes from the sticky pots. Posting them in the tin box. Walking on past many cafes, not to be visited, and shops selling shawls and warm jerseys for cold nights, to the Stores, for green Chandra Aruevedic soap and hair shampoo.

I found one small shop, which sold Sandalwood oil to bring home, and Geranium oil too. The shop smelt strongly of Eucalyptus oil, which they sold, being one of the main products of Ooty.

Further on was the Big Shop, a more recent addition to the town, selling carvings and antiques, expensive jewelry too, especially gold, which was so highly favoured.

Their CD's were good value, and a chance to bring home some good Indian music.

They also changed money, which was convenient and saved walking up the hill to the State Bank, and spending most of a morning there.

Yet I was glad that I did this ritual [going to State Bank] in the early days, as it was a very Indian bureaucratic experience, not to be missed. Even walking down the wide path between neat flower beds to the attractive white building was a reminder of elegant times.

The long town street wound on and reached two wonderful shops before it ended at Charring Cross, where several roads converged. One on the left was a very old bookshop, Higginbothams, which sold a wide range of books, magazines and some postcards too. It was a shop to browse in and savour.

The other, almost opposite, was a large general store, Chellerhams, where a man sold wild strawberries, from a basket, on the steps. Inside it was spacious with fans whirring from the ceiling. It was built as a colonial shop, long and narrow, with heavy mahogany polished counters and sold most household goods, some cosmetics and clothing, and shoes down one end; and groceries the other end, and in between were rugs and carpets.

I bought bars of plain dark chocolate, which were delicious.

They sold many pretty embroidered cloths and haberdashery and also handkerchiefs too. It was a lovely old shop, and easy to imagine it full of colonial ladies with baskets. I once met two very old ladies in here, with white hair who must have never left to

return to the modern world beyond. Living their lives out in the faded security of Ooty.

Up above, near the State Bank were a few more shops, selling antiques and another good quality clothing and hardware shop. Below opposite the Charring Cross junction was a Todas centre. They were indigenous mountain people who still lived a tribal lifestyle in the Nilgiris, and made most striking embroidered cloth, mainly in cream with scarlet and dark blue woven patterns. I bought a large cover from Sumner, who visited the tribe, and decided he hadn't room to take it home. I love it dearly. The Todas were struggling to survive, and I hope they are still there.

Ooty had several recreational options, from the Colonial times; there was a racecourse on the edge of town, still used. A large boating lake with small boats to hire, often to be seen rowing among the water lilies. And a fine Botanical Garden, which had some big conservatories, filled with flowers. I visited the gardens a few times, enjoying the open spaces and lush greenery and could imagine them with ladies promenading under their sunshades. I preferred to walk in the forest, near Manjanacourai, where black monkeys swung from the dark trees. There was a paved pathway through the forest, with verses on plaques, and the views from the top were superb.

I wasn't allowed inside the snooty Ooty Clubhouse, which I had been curious to visit, but in the foyer were some black and white photos of racehorses and tiger shoots with the Maharaja, so I could imagine the rest. Probably tiger head rugs and other poor animals hung on the walls.

But I did visit the fine old library, up near the State Bank. I was taken there by one of its custodians, Dr. Krishnaraj. And there were many interesting books, photos and paintings. It seemed

rather forlorn and musty now, when once it would have been a hive of activity.

One of my favourite old places was Fernhill Palace, which had been a hotel for many years now. It stood in its own grounds, with its faded elegance; the white wrought iron seats looking over the mown lawns.

The rooms inside were spacious, with a vast balconied ballroom, and the heavy faded brocade curtains spoke of quality. A grand piano stood, its keys open, on a dais. Standing on the balcony and looking down, it was easy to see it all transformed, and watch the couples waltzing the night away, in their finery.

Once I was taken through two of the grand suites, with faded sumptuous furnishings and fine carved furniture. The large bathrooms had deep Victorian baths with brass taps, now surrounded by cracked white china tiles. It was all falling into disrepair.

I had lunch here one day, an omelet with buttered toast and fresh coffee served on good china, by a waiter in a white jacket. I sat and wrote postcards and felt like a lady from times past.

Later the palace was refurbished and modernized, and it lost so much of its original elegance, but honeymoon couples love to stay up here and so it has survived.

I have viewed Ooty's past through rose coloured spectacles; Indian people suffered so much under pompous English attitudes, as I am reminded in the film 'Passage to India', some of which was filmed up in the Nilgiris. The contrasts were so great between the two cultures, and it was interesting to realize them from this point in time.

Thus my times in Ooty passed so happily. Most of the days were spent close to dearest Guru Nitya in Fernhill, with occasional explorations over to the Botanical Gurukula in the rainforest of north Kerala, usually alone. Changing from my western clothes

and wearing the loose cotton Punjabi suits gave me a new identity. I felt different too, freer and lighter.

I have given priority to this personal time in these last memories, as I have written about the shared times quite fully in my life story. Shared visits with my daughter Juliette and Samora, my grandson; with my son Myron, with my partner Karel, and with my friend Kay. Each one special with its own set of memories, which I wrote about in my 'Wendy Oak' life story.

I have written about my adventures with Wolfgang and the beautiful times in the rainforest in my 'Wendy Clay' life story. But these times on my own at Fernhill were different, and I wanted to share some of the essence of them. I wanted too, to keep them to my times with Guru and the others who shared the Gurukula life. Not forgetting the strong faces of village women I shared smiles with, and the many children too.

But now I am nearing the end of this journey through my recollections of the sweet times with Guru Nitya. For a while they were illuminated with a fresh present brightness but now they must fade back again, as the river of life flows on and takes them with it. But before this, I am realizing that I first met Guru at the very beginning of his life as Guru, and that I was last with him near to the end of his life.

When I received news of his stroke, in March 1999, I rang at once and spoke to him, asking if I should come over. 'Yes' he said, 'please come'. So I did, bringing with me, my friend Kay, a masseur/nurse, who asked to accompany me.

We travelled to join Guru at The Retreat, where he was resting on his return journey to Fernhill from Kerala. With him were Jyothi, Nancy and Sraddha, as well as certain loving disciples to care for his needs.

It was dark when we arrived in the evening and we joined their prayer time, outside in the dimly lit courtyard. Guru asked about

my life and said that I had become a strong Oak. He was pleased with my progress, which was a great blessing to me.

When we went inside the house after prayers, I saw that he was paralyzed down one side. It was a shock to see him, like a great tree struck by lightning.

The next morning Guru was up early and sitting outside in a wheelchair, with his watercolours, painting the looming slopes of the Nilgiris, across from The Retreat. He seemed so serene and accepting of his fate, as a challenge. Calling his stroke, *'one of good luck, as it was helping him to know the wonder of God.'* Guru wrote a beautiful article on facing disease, which I have quoted from.

Guru had been travelling intensively in Kerala when the stroke happened, in late November 1998. He was staying in Jyothi's family house at the time. When he was able, Guru moved to Kanakamala Gurukula, followed by a ten-day stay at his Ayurvedic physician's clinic, then to The Retreat, where Kay and I found him. Nancy and Sraddha had joined him as soon as they were able, flying over from America to be with him. They stayed close by, doing all they could to make Guru comfortable on the journey home. Now he was resting for in this peaceful place, before the last short journey to Fernhill.

Kay was able to give him some gentle massage and ease his stiffness.

I recall sitting close by with Nancy and Kay, as Sraddha read to him, outside, in his chair. It was the story of the Dalai Lama's life and Guru listened intently, gazing around at the beauty of nature, surrounding us. Still always interested in other lives and their unfoldment.

It was a magical few days.

The return to Fernhill was busier. Guru was back at the helm once more. Even though he was protected, many visitors came, and he welcomed them in his usual kindly, interested way.

He managed a few steps with some support, but was mostly in his wheelchair.

Kay continued with the massage to his numbed limbs, I recall sitting beside him, stroking his arm. All energies were focused on improving his mobility in as many ways as possible.

Jyothi, Nancy and Sraddha were constantly at his side. The Indian disciples were always at hand.

After ten days, Kay and I returned to England. I took one photo of Guru sitting at his desk, dressed in white, his dear face smiling at me.

I did not know then, it was the last time I was to see him alive.

Then in May, I received news that Guru had passed on. It was a quiet departure, as he wanted it to be. He was covered in silk, in a shroud and buried at once, with paper and a pen to record his journey. Later there would be formal celebrations and a shrine built.

I received the news by telephone, early in the morning. It was such a shock; I had thought he would last forever. I took the day off work and walked down the lane to the sea.

Standing on the cliff edge, with tufts of sea pinks growing, the waves rolling in below, I felt Guru's presence in the water and the wind. He felt close, and yet physically he was gone, forever. No more blue aerogrammes arriving through the letterbox. No more news to share.

My dear old friend Wiggy appeared, walking with her little dog.

'Hello darling', she said. 'Are you alright?'

'Guru's gone', I said, and she put her arms around me. And I cried and cried.

Guru had written a wonderful article on facing death. In the last paragraph, he said:

'We should revise the idea of death to the point where it is natural to refer to the beautiful fragrance of death, the beautiful song of

death, the spiritual voice of death. When you spiritualize it; then the morbid gross thing is gone, and the essence spreads out. Death is not an event here. It is the vast arena into which we slowly dissipate, merge and become one with that. The very idea gives you a sense of liberation. What is rewarding and helpful is this 'vasting' of you, this melting of you. You become like an invisible light, the light of all lights.'

*Life comes like the rising sun
from the unknown.
It has shades of
the twelve hours of the day.*

*Death does not come,
Only we merge into it.
It is miniature-return home
to the nearest garden of the
eternal garden of the soul.*

My last visit alone to Fernhill was for his Maha Samadhi, in July 1999.

A thousand and one tiny candle lights were lit in the brilliant sunset, just as darkness fell. I sat in the cool night wrapped in my thoughts, as the lights died away or blew out.

As I left, Jyothi gave me a big colour photograph of Guru Nitya, sitting in front of the prayer tree in his warm coat and woolly hat, with the tea slopes and silver oaks, behind.

His most beautiful place on earth.

Brixham. June 2005.

Some creative references in Western partnership, on commentaries by Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati.

‘Meditations on the Self.’

A record of the dialogues by Nitya and Peter Oppenheimer on their Indian journey together in 1972. At that time Nataraja was the Guru for them both.

During their travels ‘Nitya discovered the pattern of The One Hundred Verses [Atmopadesa Satakam] running through his thoughts as if by a mysterious act of providence. In a series of thought provoking meditations, he explores the first fifty, demonstrating how they apply to our daily life.’

This is a very readable book, re-edited by Scott Teitsworth. First published in 1974 and recently re-published in 2005.

‘Neither This nor That but Aum.’

A short version of The Atmopadesa Satakam. This is a record of the One Hundred Verses of Self Instruction, given by Guru Nitya, in daily classes on consecutive days, in Portland, Oregon, in 1977. This book came about through the co-operation of Edda Walker, an Australian disciple, who attended the classes and was determined that a record should be made. Thus ensuring that the group endeavour would be available to others. Published in 1982.

‘That Alone, The Core of Wisdom’, is a much fuller version of the same work. It was transcribed from tapes, by Nancy Yeilding, in conjunction with Guru Nitya, and edited by Scott Teitsworth. This is a comprehensive study guide, readily applicable to daily life.

Published in 2003.

The original work came from the pen of Narayana Guru in Malayalam, and a translation and commentary made by Nataraja Guru in 1969 is still available. This new translation and commentary by Guru Nitya brings the teachings into a more accessible work.

‘Atmopadesa Satakam’ CD. Guru Nitya chanting each of the One Hundred Verses in both English and Malayalam, lovingly and creatively put together by Sraddha Durand.

It is a joy to chant along with, in conjunction with ‘Neither This nor That.’ Or just to absorb in meditation.

All the three books and the CD make up a great study package. Highly recommended.

For the complete experience, the original Atmopadesa Satakam, by Narayana Guru, translated with a commentary by Nataraja Guru, is to be found in part 2 of ‘Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru’.

A most worthwhile read.

Revised publication 1990.

The study of ‘the One Hundred Verses of Self- Instruction’ can also be augmented by participating in one of the small internet study groups, offered by Nancy.

Contact her at: Yeilding Nancy islandaranya@123mail.org

Sraddha continues to transfer talks and recitations of Guru’s, from tapes to CD’s, and a series of Bhagavad Gita classes is available on video.

Andy Larkin has designed the beautiful covers for the book jackets.

‘Love and Blessings’ is the autobiography of Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati.

Peter Oppenheimer worked on this book for fifteen years, with Guru’s active involvement and with the collaboration of many friends and disciples from both East and West.

The book is presented in three parts. Part One is the recollections and reflections – 1924-1971.

Part two is Portland Gurukula diary – 1971.

Part three contains letters – 1970-1999, submitted for inclusion by people from around the world, just as Guru would have wished.

One world of letters.

It is a very moving book.

The Indian edition was published in 2000.

The American edition published in 2003, with some additions by Scott Teitsworth.

The preparation and writing of these books by Guru Nitya, have all involved many friends and disciples from both India and America.

His letters extend even wider.

The circle of influence continues to spiral as more people are introduced to these ancient wisdom teachings.

A more complete list of Guru’s English books, including re-issues, is available on the website: narayanagurukula.org.