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Encounter at Mirtola

Mirtola, India
18th Sept. 1978

Dear Seymour Ginsburg:

Thank you for your letter of Sept. 6, 1978. I shall certainly be glad to meet you when you come to India. Just where we shall meet may have to be decided nearer to the time when both our programs are more certain. I am usually here in January, but it sometimes happens that I have to be in Delhi during February. . . .

Before meeting, you might care to read a collection of Sri Krishna Prem's articles, *Initiation into Yoga*. . . . The title article would give you a general idea of his approach to the spiritual path which, of course, I have largely inherited.

Yours sincerely,
Madhava Ashish

There was more, but these were the key lines in the letter. I was delighted. It was late September, the day of my departure by plane for India. Though as a businessman I had traveled extensively throughout the world, this would be my first trip to India and my first trip anywhere as a fledgling seeker on the spiritual path. And that very day—that morning—I had received this letter, unexpectedly, from Sri Madhava Ashish, the guru who lived at the Mirtola ashram, near Almora, in the Himalayan foothills of India.

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A month earlier, I had written to Madhava Ashish praising his books of commentary on Theosophical Society—founder Madame Helena Blavatsky’s masterpiece, *The Secret Doctrine*—a book that I had found extremely difficult to read. But somebody had given me Ashish’s books of commentary, and they had helped me greatly. In my letter, I had asked him if I might meet him at some later date. Now I stuffed his letter into my pocket, thanking my good fortune that it had arrived only a few hours before my scheduled departure for India—just in time for me to receive it.

In fact, I had joined a group of travelers going to southern India to see Sathya Sai Baba, the guru celebrated, even notorious, in the West for his apparent ability to materialize physical objects out of thin air. I hadn’t made any specific plans to visit Madhava Ashish because I hadn’t heard from him. But, with the letter in hand, I thought that somehow, before the trip was over, I would attempt to find him at his ashram in the north. I took the receipt of his letter just before my departure as a fortuitous event that it would be unwise to overlook.

Thirty-six hours later, the journey was over. Soon after landing in New Delhi, we were headed southward to the Taj Mahal and other tourist sites. After that, we were on our way to Bombay, now called Mumbai. From Mumbai, our group proceeded to Bangalore and on to the ashram of Sathya Sai Baba in the small outlying village of Puttaparthi.

My journey in search of Sai Baba was hardly the sort of pilgrimage that, as a youth, or even as a young man, I could have imagined myself making. Even less could I have imagined, in the relatively carefree days of my youth, the chain of life’s circumstances—one of them tragic—that would eventually and, it would seem, inevitably set me upon this strange journey of a spiritual seeker that I had now undertaken.

True, there had been a time when, as a child, I had asked questions like: Who am I? What am I doing here? What happens when we die? What is God? But I had gotten no satisfactory answers from those people who presumed to be my teachers. I was told over and over again by the science teacher at my elementary school, the family rabbi, and the priest who taught one of my good friends that knowledge of God and of life and death

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was a matter of faith. But I had no faith. It hadn't taken my eleven-year-old mind long to figure out that these people knew no more than I did about these matters. My father, to his credit, simply called me a "free thinker" and encouraged me to keep asking the questions that interested me, though he could offer no answers.

What was most discouraging to me was that none of these people seemed to want to delve into these questions and seek the answers. I concluded then that all the stories about God, angels, heaven, and all the rest had simply been made up throughout history by people who were desperately afraid of their own impending deaths. They needed children's fairy tales to comfort them because on such matters they were themselves children—notwithstanding the exalted titles by which they knew one another: teacher, rabbi, priest. And so they made up stories. By age twelve, I was a confirmed atheist.

A career involving ruthless competition in the business world only added to my disenchantment. I graduated in law, then co-founded and ran a large chain of retail stores, a chain that would continue on to become a part of one of the premier retailing organizations in the world. Afterward, I tried my hand at creating an organization in the cutthroat world of commodity trading. But I noticed over the years that competitive accomplishments gave only an evanescent "high" that soon wore off. A new challenge was then required. This left in me a feeling of dissatisfaction and emptiness. The vainglorious strutting by politicians, entertainers, and business people, myself included; the ongoing wars; and the whole litany of ills that plague humanity caused a nagging feeling in me that something was very wrong.

Then, in 1971, a brutal event intervened, bringing my feelings of disenchantment to a head and reviving the questions about life and death that I had asked as a child. This event was the unexpected death of my young wife. With her death, all my dreams, all that I had striven for in terms of worldly success, suddenly seemed unimportant. I found myself disenchanted with what life had to offer. I wondered if there was anything else. In the years from 1971 to 1978, I largely focused on raising my three children, two of whom had not even been teenagers yet when my wife had

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died. I muddled about for most of those years, going through the motions of being a businessman, but without the enthusiasm that had characterized my earlier years in business.

In 1978, the seeds of a need to pursue these ultimate questions—seeds that had been sown in childhood—suddenly sprouted. Perhaps it was because my children were now more or less grown up and I could think more of myself. Perhaps it was my own continuing fear of death and annihilation, fears exacerbated by the sudden death of my wife, that caused me to renew this inquiry. Or it could simply have been the intuition that there is, after all, something else.

Whatever the reasons, I looked about me with freshly inquiring eyes. On one hand, there were the churches and synagogues all over the city where I lived. Plenty of intelligent people belonged to them and attended, if not regularly, then at least on occasion. This was true not just in my town but throughout the world. Billions, not just millions, of people were involved in these religions. How could I have the hubris to proclaim them all children pretending to believe in fairy tales? On the other hand, countless generations of human beings had lived and died on earth over the millennia, and there was no evidence so far as I knew of another reality, whether it was called “heaven” or by any other name. Or was there some evidence, however minuscule and vague? What about the psychic phenomena that I had read about over the years? What about the miracles that people reported? If there was another reality to which these things were clues, could the veil hiding it be lifted so that I could find the answers to the questions that I had asked as a child and now asked again?

It was at about this time that I stumbled upon Madame Blavatsky.

Perhaps “stumbled” is not quite the right word. I was about to become conscious of a world in which not chance but rather meaningful coincidence and Jungian synchronicity played a significant role. I had set about finding out, in a fairly systematic way, where I could glean current information about psychic phenomena and the like. A local New Age magazine led me to a meeting of the South Florida Theosophical Society taking place not far from Fort Lauderdale where, having no fixed schedule, I now lived while commuting to Chicago for business. At this meeting, I first learned about

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the founder of the society, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, or HPB as she was called by her friends, her disciples, and even her enemies.

Whatever you think about Theosophy or any New Age–related matter, Madame Blavatsky seemed to me a very remarkable woman. Born of a talented minor-nobility family in the Ukraine, she had mastered occult lore at an early age and become fluent in nine languages. She had traveled twice around the world, mastered both the piano and horseback riding, and apparently even fought on horseback alongside Mazzini at the Battle of Mentana in the Italian wars of independence in 1867.

Most importantly, in 1873 HPB had come to New York City where, in 1875, she created the modern theosophical movement. She did this by founding, with fifteen others, the Theosophical Society. The purpose of this organization was to provide a forum for the investigation of spiritual and philosophical ideas that were at that time little known in the West. These included teachings from the eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, along with the investigation of psychic phenomena. In 1879, Blavatsky moved the Society's headquarters to India. There she attracted the attention of British officials who were especially interested in her reputed psychical gifts.

This latter aspect of her character especially interested me. I had learned that HPB was alleged to have extraordinary powers. Several writers had recounted claims that she had materialized rose petals and teacups, that invisible bells sounded in her presence, and that she could telepathically send and receive letters and messages. If this hugely intelligent (if eccentric) woman claimed to possess these gifts, then I thought she might be telling the truth.

HPB had written two one thousand–page tomes supporting various doctrines of the Theosophical Society. The first, *Isis Unveiled*, had appeared in 1877; the second, *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888, was considered to be Madame Blavatsky's masterpiece. Many Theosophists believed that large parts of *The Secret Doctrine* had been channeled—that is, psychically communicated to HPB from higher, purer, less material realms of reality.

I learned that *The Secret Doctrine* purported to be about an extremely ancient, even primordial, text called the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, which Madame

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Blavatsky said she had seen when she was studying with her Masters (discarnate or incarnate I wasn't sure which) in Tibet—or perhaps she had seen this book in her mind's eye, that is, had “channeled” it from higher realms of reality; again, I wasn't quite sure. Blavatsky had spoken in very concrete terms, stating that “An Archaic Manuscript—a collection of palm leaves made impermeable to water, fire, and air, by some specific unknown process—is before the writer's eye.”¹ The *Stanzas of Dzyan* seemed to be the holy book of holy books, a kind of template or archetypal model of all the holy books that had come thereafter—the Bhagavad Gita, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Mayan Popul Vuh, all of them; it was even, somehow, the fount from which all of these books had been watered.

The *Stanzas of Dzyan* was apparently a description of nothing less than how the universe had come into being out of “nothingness” and how it would one day sink back into nothingness. (The book seemed to treat this being and unbeing as a continuous process.) I've since learned that a perennial question of philosophers is, Why does the universe exist at all? What is it that obliged and enabled something to come out of nothing in the first place? Or, Why did God, being by definition perfect, have to create the universe at all? How could He, She, or It, being perfect, have that need, which was imperfection?

HPB's *The Secret Doctrine* claimed that the “secret doctrine” in fact comprised the answer to this question and even explained the stages by which existence came about—and that the *Stanzas of Dzyan* contained the secret doctrine in its most pristine form.

I tried to read *The Secret Doctrine*. I found that, to support her thesis, the founder of Theosophy had pulled in every “secret doctrine” and holy book imaginable, from the highest and purest to the lowest and most bogus. If there was brilliance of imagination and intellect everywhere in the book, there was also, it seemed to me, no discrimination whatsoever. I could hardly make head or tail of the book, and I wondered if it was worth my while—or anyone else's—to try to penetrate this monstrous conglomeration of truths, half-truths, quarter-truths, and, I suspected, outright confabulation.

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But Blavatsky's achievements were remarkable. Who was I to dismiss her esoteric masterpiece outright? I asked some Theosophists if there was a book that could help me understand Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*. "Of course," came the answer. I was handed two books that seemed to make up a set. One was called *Man, the Measure of All Things*, and the other, *Man, Son of Man*. The first was by Sri Krishna Prem and Sri Madhava Ashish; the second by Sri Madhava Ashish only.

I looked through the books. Madame Blavatsky had divided *The Secret Doctrine* into two parts, the first called "Cosmogogenesis," describing the creation of the universe, and the second called "Anthropogenesis," taking up the story with the creation of mankind. I saw that *Man, the Measure of All Things* was a commentary on "Cosmogogenesis," and *Man, Son of Man*, a commentary on "Anthropogenesis." I set about reading these two books in detail. I was much taken with the intelligence of the inquiry contained therein and with the light they shed on both *The Secret Doctrine* and the questions I had begun to ask again. I wrote to Sri Madhava Ashish (I found out that Sri Krishna Prem, who had been Ashish's guru, had since passed away) in care of the publisher, wanting to know more about him and what he had found. That letter was sent on to India; for, as I've already said, I had received a reply from Ashish and stuffed it into my pocket just before my flight to India took off.

I had written to Sri Madhava Ashish because I was particularly interested in the claims of HPB's remarkable psychic powers. I thought these claims were nonsensical, but I was curious—and I wondered if a man who had written as intelligently about the matters Blavatsky raised in *The Secret Doctrine* as Sri Madhava Ashish could have been hoodwinked into believing such nonsense. Were there really people who had such powers? If so, what significance could be attributed to the manifestation of those powers? I thought that perhaps the co-author of *Man, the Measure of All Things* and author of *Man, Son of Man* might be able to tell me.

But the primary purpose of my trip to India was nothing so subtle as an investigation into why and how the universe had unfolded. It hadn't taken me long, in the course of my investigation into paranormal phenomena,

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to find out that the most famous living person for whom claims of extraordinary paranormal powers could be made was Sathya Sai Baba. He was perhaps the best known of all the living Indian gurus, with devotees numbering in the millions. Because the vast majority of those millions lived in India, Sathya Sai Baba was relatively unnoticed in the West. But, even in the West, there were groups of Sai Baba devotees who met regularly in cities all over the world.

Although Sathya Sai Baba's teachings were well respected, much of his fame stemmed from his purported ability to manipulate matter. He was apparently able to materialize objects or otherwise alter their shape and location through the use of his paranormal powers. Years earlier, I'd heard about the demonstration of such powers by the Israeli, Uri Geller, but had paid little attention; now I was in India with the goal of actually witnessing the powers of Sathya Sai Baba.

Our group had arrived at the ashram of Sathya Sai Baba, in the small village of Puttaparthi. We had timed our visit so as to be present during the holiday of Dusshera. In past years Sathya Sai Baba had been known to demonstrate some of his most dramatic materializations during this important Hindu holiday. And here, at Puttaparthi, we did indeed see demonstrations by Sathya Sai Baba of psychic phenomena manifested through powers apparently at his command. They proceeded along two lines. The first was the seeming materialization in the palm of his hand of *vibuthi*, a gray ash alleged to have healing powers, which he passed out to the throngs of people who had come to see him. The second and more dramatic demonstration was the apparent materialization of two objects. At this demonstration, I witnessed the materialization by Sathya Sai Baba of both a metal necklace of silver color and an oblong stone.

The history of Sathya Sai Baba recalled an earlier guru of similar name, Sai Baba of Shirdi, who had lived in India in the mid-nineteenth century. He had lived a simple life mostly in the courtyard of a Hindu temple and had become known as a healer. People came from all over to see him, and in numerous instances he was able to heal their afflictions. He would rub ash from a fire he tended in the temple courtyard on them. Hence, the

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tradition of the giving of vibuthi by Sathya Sai Baba, who was thought by some to be the reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi.

During his demonstration, Sathya Sai Baba wheeled in a metal bust of Sai Baba of Shirdi, over which he stood. Then, waving his hands, he produced a metal necklace, which he then draped over the bust. Immediately afterwards, Sathya Sai Baba extended his fingers down his throat and extracted what appeared to be a stone about five inches in length. The stone was presumably a representation of the male phallus, the *lingam*; this is an important symbol in the Hindu tradition, representing the male generative force.

During each of these instances, the crowd of onlookers went wild, shouting, cheering, and in some cases sobbing in gratitude for being present at so awesome a demonstration of power. To understand the effect of what I witnessed that day, you have to appreciate the setting in which it took place. As I have said, the occasion was Dusshera, one of the most important Hindu festivals. The auditorium in which the demonstrations took place—open-sided but covered with a roof—was crowded with perhaps ten thousand devotees, most of whom sat cross-legged on the concrete floor. People had come from all over India expecting to witness such feats, and they were not to be disappointed.

The ceremonies of the day had begun some three hours earlier, with prayers and the chanting and singing of Hindu spiritual songs, or *bhajans*. Our group, consisting of eight people from the South Florida area, had been seated at the front of the auditorium, along with perhaps another hundred Westerners who had traveled to Puttaparthi for the occasion. In front of us was a row of obviously sick people, some in wheelchairs, others on stretchers, who had come for the occasion and to receive Sathya Sai Baba's blessing and perhaps his healing. Our viewing site was excellent—about as good as could be expected in a crowd of that size. While watching the demonstration, I was amazed by what I witnessed, and such was the reaction of my equally awed fellow travelers and the thousands of shouting and crying Indians. We had just witnessed a miracle.

It was only afterward, away from the frenzy of the crowd, that I began to reflect on what I had seen. In a different setting, a Las Vegas nightclub

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for instance, such a demonstration would not have been perceived as a miracle. The assumption in that setting is that one is witness to the talents of a competent illusionist. But now, in India, I wanted to believe in the miraculous; and, caught up in a crowd of thousands of worshippers who like me wanted to believe, I believed, for a few moments at least, that I had witnessed a miracle.

This is not to say that what I saw Sathya Sai Baba do was anything other than what it appeared to be. I simply do not know, and since that time I have experienced other instances of paranormal phenomena. These have not been as dramatic as the demonstration of phenomena described above and mostly fall into the category of synchronicities, the word coined by Carl Jung to describe an order of causality not within the realm of currently known scientific principles. I remained skeptical about the reality of what I had seen at Sathya Sai Baba's ashram. After a few days, I left our group of travelers, who remained at the ashram, apparently more captivated than I with the experience of Sathya Sai Baba.

I passed through the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, near Madras (today called Chennai) and chatted with a visiting scholar in residence there, Dr. Charles S. J. White, who had made a study of the Sai Baba movement. Dr. White seemed to have some plausible explanations for what I had seen Sai Baba do, but I was still bewildered by the apparent mastery of paranormal power that Sathya Sai Baba seemed to have at his command. I still wasn't completely convinced that what I had witnessed had been in any way fraudulent.

Although I witnessed, and was amazed at, the apparent powers at Sathya Sai Baba's command, my visit had hardly satisfied my craving for knowledge of what this was all about; in fact, it had merely intensified it. I flew north to New Delhi, determined to meet Sri Madhava Ashish. I thought that the man who had shed light on the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, however dim that light might still be to my eyes, must surely be able to shed some light on what I had recently witnessed and on my inquiry in general. Once in Delhi, I arranged transportation with a taxi company, and the driver and I set off for the foothills of the Himalayas, in search of the Mirtola ashram and Madhava Ashish.

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Getting to Mirtola for the first time was quite an experience. Westerners who have traveled in India know just how different it is there and how much more difficult it is to travel about in India than in the West, even when you stick to the established tourist routes. Mirtola is *not* on any ordinary tourist route, and the best I could do in Delhi was to find a taxi driver who knew how to get to Almora. This was the city, locatable on a map and eleven hours by car from Delhi, that had been mentioned by Ashish in his letter.

The roadside scene for a traveler in India, especially when you are off the tourist routes, is incredible. On that first trip to Mirtola I saw, as I would on every subsequent trip, every sort of conveyance imaginable, from pushcarts to bicycles to elephants, along with thousands of people simply walking along the roadside. Not the least of a driver's challenges is to avoid hitting someone or something, and on that trip we did hit a pushcart and knocked out one of our taxi's headlights in addition to damaging the car. Subsequent trips involved many more roadside incidents, the most serious being once when the driver of our taxi, attempting to avoid an oncoming vehicle driving on the wrong side of the road, had to swerve, causing us to roll over. The car did one-and-a-half flips and landed on its roof. Luckily (or were we charmed?) the four of us crawled out the windows with no serious injuries. Getting to Mirtola was often an adventure.

We arrived at Almora, a town of scattered bungalows facing the Himalayan peaks far off on the horizon. To the west stood Badrinath and Nilkanth, and on the eastern horizon, the distant mountains of Nepal. In the center, Trisul and Nanda Devi—the latter a peak of twenty-four thousand feet—rose above the foothills. Mirtola was still eighteen miles away, on the other side of a deep valley, along a poorly graded gravel road. Peering at the horizon, we could just make out the ashram, a white spot high up on the wooded hills. My driver asked directions. Soon we were bumpily descending the nine miles down into the valley and then ascending the nine miles up the other, steeper, side. Around us, through the pine trees that changed to oak as we drew closer to Mirtola, we caught glimpses of plunging valleys and soaring mountains. The final half mile of the journey was up a very steep dirt road with lots of switchbacks; then, suddenly, we were in an ocean of flowering marigolds and cosmos that

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had been allowed to run wild and stood taller than a man. There rose up in front of us, out of this yellow undulating sea of flowers, the gray dome of a temple framed by a background of green trees. The dome was in the distance; in front of us, a mundane cowshed marked the entrance to Mirtola.

I will never forget my first sight of Madhava Ashish striding down the hillside path at the entrance to the ashram. Having seen the taxi approaching from his position above, he had come to see what stranger had arrived. I knew from his books that Madhava Ashish was British by birth, but I was not prepared for the six-foot-two-inch tall, gangling *sadhu* of so fair a complexion, attired in the ochre robe of a monk, who in a moment stood before me.

Ashish was perhaps as surprised to meet me as I was to see him. Although he had received my September letter and replied to it, we had made no specific arrangements to meet. While many people, I learned, came to the Mirtola ashram during the course of a year to meet and to visit with the guru, the vast majority were Indians. In that respect a Western visitor was unusual, although by no means unique. To just drop in as I did, without prior invitation, was even more unusual. I recall my attempt at a joke:

“Well, I was just in the neighborhood passing by [this after an eleven-hour car ride] and thought I would stop in and say hello.”

We both chuckled. His bright blue eyes seemed to peer right through me. We chatted. I detected in his voice the faintest whisper of a Scottish brogue. Ashish explained to me that it was a policy of the ashram to provide hospitality for up to two nights to any visitor. I was more than shown that hospitality: I was housed in a small stone cabin known as “Moti’s cottage,” named after its first resident, Moti Rani, the daughter of the ashram’s first guru, Sri Yashod Mai. The taxi driver stayed in an annex to the cabin.

Ashish made me welcome, and over the next two days answered many of the questions I had begun to formulate about my “inner search.” I noticed that the other residents of the ashram called him “Ashishda,” and he suggested that I might like to call him that also.

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“*Da*,” he explained, “means ‘big brother.’ It is a way for my pupils to name me without becoming overly absorbed in the niceties of addressing a Hindu holy man, which is what I seem to have become.”

He told me that witnessing the Sai Baba phenomena would not satisfy me because I was not a devotional type. Certainly he was right about that. I then asked him what he knew about G. I. Gurdjieff, the mystic whose name I’d heard for the first time from a fellow passenger on my flight to India. Hearing this, Ashish proceeded to tell me, in tones of the greatest certainty, of the importance of Gurdjieff to my spiritual search.

“Gurdjieff’s teaching is the way for you because it is a Western way,” he affably declared. “It is no accident that you came across the name of Gurdjieff on your visit to see me. These things are, in some way that we do not understand, planned and connected. Jung would have called them ‘synchronicities.’ If you want to pursue in a Western way the path that we follow here at Mirtola, you need to study and work with the Gurdjieffian teaching. That is why Gurdjieff was sent in—to bring the teaching to the West.”

I was astonished that, having just met me, he should make such an emphatic pronouncement about who my spiritual teacher should be.

But then I had noticed that he seemed to be the shrewdest of men, quite capable of penetrating into the truth of a person’s character in a very short time. I was even more confounded by his statement that Gurdjieff had been “sent in.” Whatever, I asked, did he mean? Were people sometimes returned from the dead for a particular mission?

Ashish replied by alluding briefly to the Buddhist doctrine of the bodhisattva. These were the great beings who are said to have attained to all that can be attained through earthly experience, but who reject the quiet rest of nirvana and take incarnation again in order to help their fellow human beings. Ashish spoke in glowing terms of Gurdjieff, comparing him with beings such as the Buddha and Jesus. Ashish asked one of his pupils to fetch him a particular book on Gurdjieff. It arrived; entitled *The Gurdjieff Work*, it listed many of the Gurdjieff groups and umbrella organizations around the world.

“Find one of these groups,” Ashish instructed me. “Work with them. It is what Gurdjieff called ‘the Fourth Way.’”

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I found his eclecticism remarkable. It was not that Ashish held a particular brief for Gurdjieff. He seemed to have a comprehensive understanding of just about every spiritual teacher who had ever lived, with differences between individual spiritual traditions seeming to be of little importance to him. I was certain that, for a different seeker, he could have just as knowledgeably brought forth a different name.

I mentioned this to him. “Truth,” replied Ashih, “is what is important. Look for the truth and look inward to find it. You will never find it outside yourself hunting for a guru or following an external spiritual tradition. These things can only serve as guideposts for you in your own search. No one can do that search for you. Each of us must tread that path for himself. Remember that the path is inward, always inward.”

I asked him how I should begin my search, irrespective of whether my guru was Gurdjieff or not.

“Your dreams are important,” he told me. “Begin to pay attention to them. Your dreams will tell you things about yourself that you have buried too deeply to uncover directly. It’s another way to ‘know thyself,’ that famous injunction of the Delphic oracle about which Gurdjieff speaks.”

I enjoyed my two days at the ashram. We were seven thousand feet above sea level. The air on those richly green slopes was cool and thin, filled with the sounds of silence. The small two-story Hindu temple, with its gray concrete dome, was the ashram’s center and had been so since the founding of Mirtola in 1930. In its inner sanctum, small figurines of Krishna and his consort Radha, representing the male and female aspects of the deity, stood side by side on a marble altar with fresh flowers lying at their feet. At the evening service, this inner shrine was lit up like a glowing cave, while the sound of gongs, bells, and a kettledrum reverberated through the ashram.

The sides of the temple had been extended to make space for cubicles providing the residents with the simplest of accommodations. Three huge stone slabs, hunkered down in a corner of the garden, served as seats in moments of relaxation. A small separate building, called the library, stood in as a guesthouse, and, a short distance away, there stood the rose-covered cabin that had served as the residence of Moti Rani.

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Mirtola was far larger than this small temple-ashram compound suggested. It comprised sixty acres in all, a quarter of which consisted of hillsides on which terraced farming was done. The rest was wooded. The improvement of the ashram's land had been undertaken by a young Australian disciple, Dev Ashish—who later became Mirtola's head. Dev, with the aid of Ashish's Western knowledge, raised high-yielding dairy cattle (in contrast to that area's norm, water buffalo and inferior breeds of cows) that produced superior milk, butter, and *ghee* much prized by the local inhabitants, thereby transforming the farm into an example of how improved management can make degraded land useful again. I learned that Ashish, an engineer by training, was better known among Indians for his efforts to improve the ecology than for his spiritual status. He had written articles on land reform and was actively involved with the Indian government in implementing those reforms. It would not be until my next visit to Mirtola, seven months later, that I would find out very much about this, or even become fully aware of the extent of the ashram's land and its accomplishments; and so I will leave further discussion of that until a later chapter.

I was soon to discover, though, that this tiny Mirtola ashram had a remarkably rich history. Madhava Ashish had come to India because of World War II. He had been born Alexander Phipps, in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1920. His father had been a lieutenant colonel of artillery and at one time aide-de-camp to Lord Kitchener in the Sudan. His mother had been the daughter of a Ceylon tea planter and the granddaughter of a Scottish laird. Phipps had gone to the Chelsea College of Aeronautical Engineering in London. This had equipped him to work, when war broke out, first on the repair of Wellington bombers in England, and then, from 1942 onward, on the overhaul of Rolls Royce engines for Spitfires on a military base near Calcutta.

In 1944, the young Phipps, by now much taken by Indian culture and especially its spiritual aspect, took advantage of some leave time to visit Madras State (Tamil Nadu) and, at Tiruvannamalai, the ashram of the renowned guru Ramana Maharshi. The experience of Ramana's presence had a transformative effect on him. At the end of the War, Phipps embarked

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on a spiritual search, ending up almost by accident at the little town of Almora in the rustic setting of the Kumaon Hills. Here he met Sri Krishna Prem, then Mirtola's guru, and traveled to the ashram a week later to visit with Krishna Prem at length. The visit became a lifelong stay. Phipps soon took the holy orders of a Vaishnav monk and, now known as Madhava Ashish, became a disciple of Sri Krishna Prem.

This was the life he had been meant to live. In 1957, when a disciple commented on Madhava Ashish's glowing presence, Krishna Prem replied: "Yes, what took me twenty years, Ashish has done in ten."

Life at Mirtola was not without its austerities. Ashramites bathed in cold water summer and winter, and at seven thousand feet winter meant snow. Neither meat nor fish were allowed; meditation was the staple. Here, the Scots Madhava Ashish flourished. Gradually, he took over many of the ashram's functions, performing the temple *pūja*, developing the farm, and introducing basic amenities like latrines and water storage tanks. At Krishna Prem's death in 1965, Madhava Ashish assumed the role of guru to the new disciples. He began to write. Soon, he had expanded and rewritten an unpublished work of Sri Krishna Prem that would become *Man, the Measure of All Things*. In due course, he completed *Man, Son of Man*. The completion of these works marked the end of an initial phase in Madhava Ashish's life. Starting in the early 1970s, he became more and more involved in public affairs. He traveled more and began to write on subjects other than the strictly spiritual; in particular, he wrote about ecology. It wasn't long after this new interest had begun that I first met Madhava Ashish at Mirtola.

If World War II had successfully brought Ashish, née Phipps, to India, World War I had come within an ace of killing Krishna Prem. Like Ashish, Sri Krishna Prem had been a Briton. Born Ronald Nixon in Cheltenham, England, in 1898, the future guru of Mirtola had been a brilliant student of philosophy and literature at Cambridge. Developing a fascination for Eastern religion and India, he had sought and obtained upon graduation a teaching post as lecturer in English at the University of Lucknow.

Nixon had not gone straight from public school to Cambridge. World War I had intervened, and he had been a fighter pilot over France and

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Germany in 1917. This had led to a narrow escape from death, which the young Englishman, telling the story afterward, would never hesitate to call a miracle.

“One day,” he would tell his friends, “as I was reconnoitering, I was about to steer to the right, where half-a-dozen fighter planes whirred and zoomed, thinking that they were ours—that is, R.A.F. planes. Just then some mighty force caught hold of my wrist and made me veer . . . to the left. I was quite bewildered, the more so as the force was too incredible to be doubted. In a few minutes I returned to our base and was told that I had done well to come back so promptly as a number of enemy planes had just come into action. It was then I realized, with a shock of thankful delight, that I had just had a miraculous escape. I am as certain as certain can be that the miracle had been wrought by a power beyond our ken.”²

The brilliant and personable young Nixon, hugely successful as a lecturer at the University of Lucknow, had fallen in love with India, her people, her philosophy, and her way of life. The founder and vice-chancellor of the university, Dr. Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, observing Nixon’s growing predilection for all things Indian and his growing uneasiness with his fellow Englishmen, had invited Nixon to stay with him and his family in the adjoining guesthouse. Very soon, Nixon had become almost an adopted son to the Chakravartis.

Ronald Nixon had become involved with a Hindu family of great spiritual distinction. Dr. G. N. Chakravarti practiced what Ashish would characterize in later years as “Theosophicalized Hinduism.” Throughout his life, the vice-chancellor, wherever he was staying, rose at three in the morning and meditated until six. He had met Madame Blavatsky, joined the Theosophical Society, and become Secretary General of the Indian branch. Dr. Chakravarti had been born in 1875; his wife, a Bengali woman named Monica Devi, born in 1882, was every bit his equal, if not more. A salon hostess and fashion leader in her early years, this finely bred aristocrat of a woman possessed a passionate, explosive temperament; it was, avowed the vice-chancellor, the equal of Madame Blavatsky’s. The dark, big-eyed Mrs. Chakravarti had had four children and adopted forty more. Her powerful maternal streak extended to once suckling a litter of abandoned puppies.

CHAPTER ONE

Through Dr. Chakravarti, Monica met and traveled with world-renowned spiritual figures, including Blavatsky's successor, Annie Besant, but beneath the glittering surface, a spiritual pursuit all her own was catching fire within the vice-chancellor's wife. Traveling in Europe with her husband, Monica was mobbed by a crowd at St. Peter's in Rome; she was wearing a blue sari embroidered with silver stars, and the people had mistaken her for the Virgin Mary. At the Paris Exhibition of 1902, dressed in all her finery, she was mistaken for the Queen of Madagascar. Queen Victoria, seeing Monica from a distance at Windsor Castle, summoned her to the palace.

This once-so-worldly woman was fast becoming a visionary and a mystic. (During the several years that he lived with the Chakravartis, so was Ronald Nixon.) Monica began to have personal experiences of Krishna and of other gods and goddesses. In 1925, she had an overwhelming experience of the unitive vision. She sought her husband's permission to become a wandering mendicant monk. As his wife's guru, Dr. Chakravarti invested Monica with the robes of the Vaishnava order of Vairagis. She shaved her head and took the name Sri Yashoda Mai. Nixon had become increasingly enraptured of the deep spirituality of Dr. Chakravarti's wife. At his request, he became her disciple; Sri Yashoda Mai in turn inducted the young Englishman into the Vaishnava order, giving him the name of Sri Krishna Prem.

Few scenes can be more typical of the rich cultural fibers that make up India and yet more startling than that of this couple—the young English disciple and his female guru, old enough to be his mother—both with heads shaved, penniless and begging from door to door as is required by the Vaishnava order, setting off as they now did for the foothills of the Himalayas. Their goal was to found a temple to Krishna; Monica's health had begun to fail and, unable to tolerate the heat of the Indian plains, she had no choice but to pursue her spiritual mission in the friendlier climate of the Indian hill country. Eventually, the two settled on the site near Almora that would become the Mirtola ashram. By 1930 they had built and consecrated, to Sri Krishna and his consort Radha, the gray-domed temple that is still the center of Mirtola.

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Yashoda Mai's health began to fail so badly that she eventually spent much of her time in bed. Such was Krishna Prem's devotion that he spent the nights curled up on a mat on the floor by the foot of the bed, ready to help her whenever she needed help. This was the path the brilliant young English intellectual had chosen to attain the unitive vision: utterly selfless devotion to the guru.

Sri Yashoda Mai died in 1944; she had lived a dozen years longer than the doctors had predicted. Now her youngest daughter—the rotund, joyful, irreverent Moti Rani—took orders and became the disciple of Krishna Prem. Moti died in 1951, at age 35; it was in the same rose-covered cabin in which she had lived that I stayed during my first visit to Mirtola.

It was into this rich and intense, if tightly focused, atmosphere that Alexander Phipps, soon to be Madhava Ashish, first came in 1946. Within a week, he had seen in Krishna Prem a power that he could hardly have named at the time but that he would one day recognize as that guru's establishment in the unitive vision. Ashish would write many years later, in his introduction to Sri Krishna Prem's *Initiation into Yoga*, that at the end of that first week he had suddenly seen—having gotten beyond Krishna Prem's outer, intellectual, armor—the man behind. It was the sort of man I had never seen before: simple, in the sense of uncomplicated, clean, soft and sunlike. I was torn between embarrassment at my intrusion, and desire to feast my soul on such rare beauty. For the next few days I felt like the country bumpkin of legend who stumbled into fairyland.”³

Here Ashish would stay until his death in 1997. It was into this atmosphere, pregnant with the power of the unitive vision, that I, an American businessman who had no business being there at all, would in 1978, by the grace of whatever unknown force, have the great good fortune to stumble.