

BHARATI, A GEHANAVADA
THE LIGHT AT
THE CENTER 1976 Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson
(a Venetian who became a Hindu Tantric monk)

young, pretty college junior without a guitar, who had come for fun and sex. "Nope," she said. "I am an initiate," he said. "So what?" she asked. I was eavesdropping, went over and asked the young man "Initiate into what?" "Don't you know, man," he retorted, "an initiate—the white brotherhood, the sacred spirits of Mount Shasta, Shiva, Shiva—I am an initiate." Now this sounds silly, and it was. But between this sort of proclamation and the erudite writings and musings of a well-read mythologist, the difference is really only one in degree of learning. Neither is a mystic. In the first place, a real mystic has to say he is a mystic, meaning thereby that he is trying to achieve the unshakable numerical union with an absolute which he postulates in some theological framework; secondly, he should seek this union with discipline and enthusiasm in its most literal sense, by generating and utilizing euphoria. But the various kinds of people I have just mentioned do not satisfy these conditions: they may look for union, but they have adopted the puritanical vocabulary of the established churchman, modern Hindu swamis above all; or if they use euphoria, with or without drugs, with or without sex, they do not work toward that theological union but adapt and adopt eclecticism which aids ease and euphoria, avoids discipline, and rejects "numerical union" as it sounds too theological, un-euphoric, and dry.

So far I have tried to outline what the mystic does *not* experience; or better, I have sampled a few experiences which are not mystical, whatever else they are: erudite, mythological, eclectic, euphoric. And I have denied that they were "mystical," because if everything anybody likes at any specific time is called "mystical" because it fits his pious mood, of withdrawal, of dropping out, of fighting the church or the parents or the teachers, then *nothing is*.

Let me now proceed to report what I believe mysticism is, as experience. I shall use my own experience as a control point and as a point of departure. I am a mystic by profession—and as I do not mean this facetiously, this is all I can offer by way of declaring my qualifications. Who will corroborate my claim? Fellow-professionals in mysticism; some swamis, but not many. Let me add that I do not take the problem of legitimation lightly; and if I have to proclaim my qualification as a mystic so very brusquely, Indian readers will not be taken aback; occidentals will, unless, of course, they are familiar with the Indian mystic's traditional process of legitimation. Modern Hindus want a checklist of qualificatory items—in line with the pedantic taxonomies of some Indian traditions. The grassroot

Hindu had no such problem—if a man dons the garb, walks through the villages, says friendly words, talks religion, and goes away, that is his passport.

I was about eight when I got interested in India. There were many Indian medical students at that time in my native Vienna, which had a famous medical school in those days. I taught some of them German, they taught me Indian languages and things in return. Along with it, and perhaps even earlier, I had been engaged in youthful religious activism: an altar boy at St. Charles in Vienna, I planned to become a priest. Very soon, frustration with my Catholic surroundings set in—similar perhaps to those experienced by the youthful Aldous Huxley. By the time I was fifteen, I knew the alternative—it was bowing out of Christianity and opting into Hinduism. Scoffed at and admired by teachers, friends, and adversaries, I must have known more about religious things Indian than any other youngster in Central Europe at that time. I have given a full report about my career in my autobiography,⁵ and will not repeat it even briefly. I must, however, single out the events which began to constitute my career as a mystic according to my definitions. They were not systematically arranged in the *Ochre Robe*.

One night when I was about twelve, it happened for the first time. I was falling asleep, when the whole world turned into one: one entity, one indivisible certainty. No euphoria, no colours, just a deadeningly sure oneness of which I was at the center—and everything else was just this, and nothing else. For a fraction of a minute perhaps, I saw nothing, felt nothing, but was that oneness, empty of content and feeling. Then, for another five minutes or so the wall with the *kitschy* flowers reappeared, and the fire crackled in the large brick stove. But I knew it was One, and I knew that this was the meaning of what I had been reading for a year or so—the Upanisadic dictum of oneness, and the literature around and about it. I did not think in terms of God, *ātman*, *brahman*, nor, strangely enough, in terms of having found some fulfillment—I was just struck by the fact that I had not known this oneness before, and that I had kept reading about it very much as I read about Gaul being divided into three parts, or elementary Sanskrit grammar. Then after some time, no longer than half an hour I would think, things returned to whatever had been normal before—but with a difference. Somehow, perhaps because I had not heard about the dark night of the soul and other yearnings, I did not doubt at all that this was to be my inalienable private knowledge, that it would come back—and I remember quite distinctly that I did

not worry at all, even for a moment, that it might not.

Years went by, and many things happened. By the time I was nineteen, I knew several Indian languages. Sanskrit was my referential center and India had become the cynosure. Between the *Anschluss* in March 1938 and my conscription into the *Wehrmacht*, I did what no one then did, though thousands of young and not so young people are doing it today in the western world: I practiced *yoga*. I read Vivekananda and everything else; gobbled it up. The fact that I now reproach people for doing the same does not confute the principle at all: I deliberately ignored these initial inspirations at about 20, proceeding to bigger and better things in the spirit. But the neoyogis here and elsewhere do not leave off their pamphleteering, not even when they are past fifty when they should know better. That annoys me. Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, many gurus with the many similar words—they should be outgrown in good time, say, before one has reached the age of 25; for by that time, one must either have made it or one must have found better guides.

I practiced yoga by the book, and nothing happened. Being one of about four German male citizens under 60 who knew Hindustani, the *Wehrmacht* moved me (partly on my request) to the Free India Legion, a regiment of Indian soldiers who had been fighting in General Alexander's Fourth Division in North Africa, and had been captured by Rommel, brought to German P.O.W. camps, and spoken to by Subhas Chandra Bose (who had mysteriously vanished from house arrest in Calcutta). They had joined the Free India Legion to fight the British and be out of the P.O.W. camps. I was an interpreter, and I antagonized the German officers, not by doing anything to annoy them, but just by being there. One night, near Bordeaux where the Legion was stationed, I had a row with an officer and was shoved off into a cellar to cool down; there would be no action against me, because the officer was in the wrong and I had witnesses. But there I lay on my back in that small cell, and then the second coming occurred: very similar to the one I had experienced many years earlier, during my Vienna childhood. When it set in now, I immediately recalled that early night, but postponed comparisons so as not to come down. I was One, with all in me, but this time there was euphoria—not of the erotic, ecstatic kind I was to experience during my later tantric phase in India nor similar to my more recent experience here in America, reinforced by LSD-25. It was euphoria that was unsensuous. The certainty of oneness was there again, but the certainty was not important—what was important at that moment was that

it corroborated the canonical text which rang in my ears, quite loudly, as though I had said it to myself, but from outside—*aham brahmāsmi*, I am the *brahman*. When I reflect upon that experience now, over thirty years later, I often wonder why I did not think something amounting to "at long last" or "lo, here is the confirmation"—but then, I shouldn't wonder. The certainty of a mystical consummation entailed for me that the *scripture* was right, that it corroborated my experience.

When the Sikh sergeant let me out with a sympathetic grunt the next morning, I took a long walk along the Biscayan beach. I did not feel humble—that I seldom was so far as I recall—but I thought that I was really doing the opposite of what Christ had done. Whatever happened to him, he had to find some scriptural indicator to predict the action or passion; but when I was oneness that night, I felt that I had authorized the scriptural statement, *aham brahmāsmi*, I am *brahman*, and the other dicta which imply the same; that in an irreverently anachronistic fashion, I had authenticated the *Upaniṣad*. Many thoughts then crossed my mind, and not taking account of my strong linguistic penchant, I reveled in the thought that I was now a true Anti-Christ, as I had done the opposite of what the Nazarene had accomplished: the Scripture had authorized him, and I had authorized the scripture. For a day or two, I went about my military chores—guard duty, teleprinter duty—like an automaton; not better and not worse than usual, which was bad enough. Then the whole experience retreated into my own, well-remembered, well-recorded history.

In 1948, after the war, after captivity, and after some concluding work in Indology and ethnology at the University of Vienna, I moved to India to become a Hindu monk. All this went by an unwritten blueprint. I have reported it at length in *The Ochre Robe*; but I did not report in that book what I now regard as three genuine mystical experiences during my eight years of Indian sojourn. What I did report was the miraculous, as it were; some encounters with mythology, projected out of myself or injected into me from without. These were stunning, lovely, gently frightening, and euphoric in a very peculiar sense. They gave me evidence of my having "emically" entered the realm of Hindu *mythology*, but this is not mysticism at all, for so long as the gods and the goddesses of your cherished pantheon face you, meet you, make love to you, talk to you, give you advice, you have consummated your mythology, but you have not become a mystic unless you become these gods.

I was ordained a monk in the Sannyasi Order in 1951; and

in 1953, I underwent tantric training and obtained tantric initiation in Assam. It was during one of the concluding initiatory rites that I had my third genuine mystical experience. I cannot disclose the exact circumstances, since tantrism practised literally is anathema and criminal in India, and such disclosure would jeopardize the functions and the existence of one of the very few remaining centers of serious tantric practice. But that experience occurred as the sun rose over the hills, and after the practicants had disengaged themselves from their female partners in the ritual. As I went to retire in the *ashram*, I suddenly felt as though I was walking without making any effort, very much as in a dream, with the orectic lines between the will and the body disconnected as it were. I first ascribed this to the fatigue of the night's initiatory phase, but then within a few minutes something totally different happened. I did not walk, but I was the universe moving in itself. I saw my legs and all, but these were just two rather unimportant instruments among millions of unseen instruments that made the universe move; but I was the mover. Briefly, I recalled the night in the stockade near Bordeaux, a decade earlier. Also, this was the longest experience in duration—for that specific set of instruments now called Agehananda somehow got to the *ashram*, lay down on the cot, relaxed for at least an hour, and then helped itself to a large glass of milk—it was then only that the state came to a somewhat abrupt end, of the snap-out type (I have always been suspicious of milk). This was it again, with no real addition in value to the previous two, although with a somewhat greater intensity than either, I think. By that time, I knew that the state was achievable, that there could be no doubt about its absoluteness; and as I was a fair philosopher by that time in the technical sense, I was not involved in ontological pretense, for then, as now, I believed there are no ontological implications.

In 1958, during my first American year, as a Research Associate of the Far Eastern Institute of the University of Washington in Seattle in the marvelous Pacific Northwest, I was one of the first people to experiment with that exquisite product of Messrs. Sandoz of Basle, Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, LSD-25. I believe Leary and Alpert had just barely heard about it at that time. I have reason to believe that I obtained material from the first batch Sandoz produced, and quite officially transmitted to some medical and biochemical research centers in this country. I had read the *Doors of Perception*; I found some of Huxley's speculations about the mystical quite delightful, but not too significant—and I was

under the impression that he did not really try to establish his mescaline experience as a mystical one, but as strongly heroic.

LSD and other psychotomimetic drugs go badly, very badly, with set-up "clinical," laboratory-test conditions. They have to be taken with warm people, friends, and very preferably in the company of a person with whom the taker has a profound sexual involvement, not as yet curtailed by duration and routine. During my third take I was with a very beautiful woman. She was a nominal Buddhist, but not really concerned with religious matters. We took the drug around 8 p.m., listened to Bach and Purcell (whose *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day* with the Deller consort and the Ambrosian singers, on a Vanguard recording, is the most powerful psychedelic music I have known), and it was a highly pleasant, lovely experience, with incense, friendly people, no psychiatrists, and the proper paraphernalia around. The drug wore off on schedule, at around 4 a.m., and we went to sleep. As the sun rose, I woke up and looked through the window. I was clearly "down," with no optical distortions remaining, except that the green-coloured city bus which ran past the Lake below the window seemed to look more like a snake than like a bus. I turned to see if she was awake, as I wanted to tell her about the bus-snake or the snake-bus; but she was already sitting up in bed, looking out of the window. I began to make love to her, and as I kissed her body, I had a marvelous vision: her whole womb took on a bright golden hue, it looked, and this thought struck me immediately, like the *brahmāṇḍa*, the Golden Egg of the Indian cosmogony; and inside it, millions of entities, looking like so many fish, were copulating in fast, perfectly rhythmical motion.

Now, of course, this was simply a comeback of the drug, and I would not call it a mystical experience at all, a religious experience, a cosmological euphoria, or any such thing. But when this spectacle subsided and I withdrew from her, I was again all *that*, with nothing whatever excluded. The late Zaehner would have called this another "praeternatural" experience, an instance of "nature mysticism"—but again, that is his problem. There was no god to speak of, except myself. For a second or a fraction of a second, I feared that Matsuko was being left out, but as I tried to communicate this to her I noticed I couldn't, for she was *not* left out—she was me, or better, I was she, too. I did not recall Assam, nor the army cell near Bordeaux, nor the chintzy flower-paintings on my Vienna childhood wall; I did not recall India, nor any other history or geography. I was it—not *again*, but always.