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1.1 The body falls but He remains Immortal

On 27th April 1979 at 10.42 PM, Bābā's body breathed its last. With that the scene changed for all times to come. Until then our Bābā had a visible form. We could think of him as the visible as well as the invisible. But from now on he remains the invisible alone.

The event occurred in Dakṣiṅkhaṇḍa at Pūrṇāsrama where Bābā lived all along, ever since I met him decades ago. Mā Chārubālā Devī and others looking after Bābā were giving all the care and attention possible to see that he remained still longer, in spite of the extreme emaciation his body had undergone.

Blessed are they all who had this unique privilege of being by the side of the Mahatma, rendering him constantly their loving service. By this, they have become an object for his special grace and blessings. Personally, I feel a great deal of gratitude to all of them. For, whatever I could not do, they have done on my behalf.

In Bengali, “Bābā” means father. Like the physical father, one who bestows a new birth to our inner personality, is also significantly called “father”. It is thus that I started calling my Gurudev “Bābā”.

1.2 The last meeting

On my way back from Jamshedpur in March 1979, I along with some devotees, went to Dakṣiṅkhaṇḍa to see Bābā – the last visit as it has now proved to be. He greeted me with his characteristic fatherly embrace

and kiss. We had a short talk, during which I felt like asking him, “Do you have anything to say in particular? Any special wish?”

His reply was, “I had a little doubt whether you would fly over me this way and back, but not come here, and I would not be able to see you. Now that you are here, I am happy, and I feel full. Allow me to depart. Let me go. You are there to do my work. You are already doing it better than I could. You will do it even better after I go away. So carry on, and release me. Do not bind me any more.”

Bābā’s condition was one of extreme degeneration of the body, absolute weakness. With no special pain or discomfort, his skeleton-like body was lying on the bed, mostly absorbed in visible silence – his toothless mouth quarter open, taking long deep breaths, his beard and chin moving together in beautiful rhythm.

On seeing us he felt quite happy and inspired as usual. He wanted to talk; but on speaking a few words every time, the breathing got strained. So, I had to prevent him from talking much. Of course, he retorted, “How can you prevent me like this, when all of you have come?”

The usual joyful smile, the strong note of humour, the nimble and precise comments on some of the developments that took place recently or long back – all were richly there as before. But the feeling and need for leaving the world were evident from his specific remarks. At one point, on hearing what Bābā said, my eyes got closed, for the mind to react to the situation and what it meant. I allowed the interaction to be for whatever purpose it was.

1.3 Undaunted life – a great message

The body of Bābā had lived for 85 years. Of these, over the past 27 years I had established him in my heart. Given to no formality, worship or praise, my association with Bābā was always one of closeness and intimacy.

When I first met him, he was already slim and bony, but never weak. Sitting mostly with his sitar or harmonium, singing devotional songs

in his own unique style, he was all along huddled up in his room, rising up from his seat only for answering the calls of nature or feeding his stomach. The fullness bestowed by his loneliness was the singular feature of Bābā's life ever since I knew him. Is there any austerity or Self-expression greater than this, the real seeker would wonder!

We hear a good deal about austerity (tapasyā) associated with sages, saints and ascetics. Generally all that is taken to be relevant to the life in the caves and forests, away from the domestic and social environments. This fact became a tradition, which then started ruling the life of seeking and enlightenment. The enrichment by spiritual life, by the wisdom of the Self, thus got denied to the people living on the plains in their homes, with their relatives, engaged in the activities necessary to promote their family and social living.

But was it the right development, the proper understanding? Even today I find people cherishing the thoughts that spiritual life of seeking cannot become relevant to the householders. That the ascetics alone are fit for it and to become an ascetic one should necessarily leave his home and seek the woods is the confusion prevalent all over India.

Bābā, through his life and living, in the fulfillment he had, was constantly radiating a clear answer to this wrong notion of the people. When I met Bābā first, he was speaking in English, singing in Bengali, quoting Scriptures in Sanskrit, explaining them in modern language and style, behaving with indigenous culture and affections, well dignified in his ways and manners.

What more? He once said, while setting forth a proposition, "If the all-pervading God is our pursuit, we must be able to find Him at home as in the forests. Is He not as much in our living rooms as in the caves of the mountains? Otherwise how can He be the Almighty, the Omnipresent?"

A very great and timely message that has been constantly working in my mind ever since! A message about Bābā himself and about the

supreme Truth! If forest-asceticism alone is the means of getting to the Knowledge of Truth, its realization, then what relevance would it hold for the people who live in their homes, doing their work in their work spots? Simply because we have to take up and pursue a calling in our life, or remain as loyal active citizens of our nation and the world, can we be shut away from the spiritual and religious enrichment of the Soul, a primary need of one and all? This thought is more pregnant for the seekers than for the others.

1.4 An aggressive seeker of excellence

I have not somehow cared to know all about Bābā's birth, parentage, earlier growth, his special interests and specific way in which he blossomed as a Spiritual Knower, a Preceptor of lofty unique dimension. Bābā in his conversations with me or the other sannyāsin disciples of his, had on rare occasions mentioned some instances and details of his earlier days. May be I shall speak to you about some of them in these pages, now that these will be the only source for you to think of him and what he represented, still represents, in the field of spiritual seeking, wisdom and fulfillment.

During his professional life in the Cossipore Gun and Shell Factory near Kolkata, he had picked up interest in magic. True to his perfectionist nature, he soon began to show fantastic tricks during special functions inside the factory.

That was the time of British Raj and the departmental heads and higher officers were all British nationals. Once Bābā's British boss brought a cigarette lighter, made in England. Showing it to his assistant the officer remarked, "See this, look at the precision and finish with which the instrument is made. Can you Indians ever make one like this?"

Bābā's integrity on one hand, the national love and pride on the other, bit his mind hard. Hearing his superior in all official decorum, but responding back only with a thoughtful silence, Bābā went back to his seat. Six days passed after the caustic remark. On the seventh day Bābā was at the officer's door.

He went to his boss's seat to present him in all humility, nevertheless with an implied pride, a lighter as beautiful and efficient as the one shown to him just six days before. The officer took it in his hand. His looks of inspection defied his mind's expectation. He faced a sudden reality, which baffled his engineering expertise and also questioned his undue national pride. Nevertheless, he was happy to see that his able assistant could show such rare excellence.

From then on, the officer was guarded in his talks and dealings with Bābā, although greatly pleased with him.

1.5 The magician & the Great Magic

Bābā had always cherished the thought of excellence and independence in whichever pursuit he took up. May be there was an unusual ambition working in his young mind, which found expression in his magical interests. However, the magic of his proved very singular both in the magical distinction it brought to the Master and the spiritual inauguration it effected at a time most propitious and consequential.

Kshitish Chandra Dev, younger in many years, was living very close to Bābā, in Dakṣiṅkhaṇḍa village itself. An amiable schoolteacher by profession, he and his exceptionally graceful wife made a coveted couple of the whole village.

Kshitish Chandra was strong-willed and persistent. His life in the household did not pose any conflict to his innate spiritual yearning – as is perhaps usual with Bengalis and their tradition. Very early in life, Kshitish found his way to Paramahansa Narayana Tirtha, who had his Ashram (Jñāna-sādhanā Maṭh) in Faridpur, now in Bangladesh. The story was known to our Bābā.

Pursuing teaching during the day, Kshitish Chandra would spend long hours afterwards in intense meditation, a vital part of Brahmavidyā sādhanā. Bābā had once told me that this young Guru of his lived for a period on puffed rice and milk so that he could keep awake during nights and sit Self-embraced.

It is this lonely sitting and absorption that constitutes the essence of spiritual pursuit for a serious seeker. Naturally Kshitish Chandra's mind got highly elevated. He looked exceptionally bright and graceful. Very soon, all the knowledge and keenness necessary in the spiritual path for deriving fulfillment became his.

By the way, our Bābā, by birth, was a Vaishnavite. Those days, the Vaishnavite tradition in Bengal was very strong, especially after the social regeneration movement of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. But any such sweeping movement will not have a lasting influence on the society to take the seekers into the inner realm of Self or God-realization, as mostly the thinking becomes partial and clouded in such a background.

In Śreemad Bhāgavatam, there are many discussions and events that clearly point out how a devotee becomes a seeker with the progress of his devotion, and how the experience of the Self within, its direct realization, alone tends to fulfill such a devotee. The Self and God are the same, it says repeatedly. In spite of it, seeking and sādhanā remain very rare among fervent devotees. Of course, it is so with the other categories of religious people also.

I say this because Bābā and Kshitish Chandra used to feel that their path of meditative seeking and realization was exceptional, alien to the Vaishnavite thinking, and would not therefore be understood properly by the orthodox people around. For a Vaishnavite to take to the path of the Upanishadic seeking would generally be revolting.

Now, for whatever basic interests Bābā had, Kshitish Chandra developed a brotherly fondness. Now and then, during their sittings together, Kshitish Chandra used to speak of the inner life, its growth, the bounties it can offer. For a while Bābā would hear, and then go away to his own calling. Nevertheless Kshitish Chandra felt close to Bābā and persisted in his friendship.

Bābā's magic, its unique success and the recognition it brought for him both in his factory and outside – were known to Kshitish Chandra. But

Kshitish Bhai had his own reading of his Dādā's life and budding greatness. (In Bengali, Bhai means younger brother, and Dādā means elder brother).

Once Bābā was called to perform his magic at a gathering nearby. The news created a lot of stir amongst the people. The show began. A large number of spectators were watching and got thrilled by the stunning performance of a modern factory engineer, a youngster of their village.

As the last item of the day's programme, the magician tried his feat of "thought-reading". Feeling the wrist of one or two among the spectators, he read the workings of their minds. The subjects confirmed what he said, to everyone's surprise. The magician felt elated that from the material domain his magic had risen now to the mind's level!

It was then that his Kshitish Bhai, who had his own purpose in choosing a seat among the spectators, suggested to the magician on the stage to read his thoughts too. Walking up to the magician on the stage, he extended his hand and stood near the proud master. Having succeeded to the delight and approbation of all in the two cases he attempted, the magician did not feel hesitant to try Kshitish Chandra's hand also.

Holding warmly the subject's hand, standing in his grand masterly pose, the magician closed his eyes in absorption. Seconds passed. "What's this?" thought the experimenter, "The pulse appears to be very gentle and slow, and nothing seems to be coming to my mind as a clue or hint!" The magician got tense, perplexed. But he prevailed with added keenness. A few more seconds passed, a full minute, and yet another. If it was a covetable success earlier, now it was a stunning and demeaning failure. It surprised the audience, and depressed the master magician standing dumfounded before them!

With a blushed face, the magician left Kshitish Chandra's hand and withdrew unwillingly. The show was over. Although the audience did

clap their hands in appreciation and joy, the magician felt bad and uncomfortable. He had been defeated in his own hands – nay by the hand of his Kshitish Bhai. He, whom our magician had slighted several times, now had silently put the great magician to defeat in the hands of his own acclaimed magical feat!

The spectators dispersed. The stage with the magician and his assistants on it alone remained. The assistants bundled up their master's implements and left for their homes.

Young Kshitish was still seated on a distant spot, as if waiting for someone. Bābā went to him with burning looks. The two, not strangers, were now face to face again. The magician asked, "Why did I fail in your case? Did you put me to defeat deliberately?"

Kshitish Chandra's reply was, "I had told you several times that I would show you the much greater and most delighting magic – the magic of the universe, the Master Magic of the Creator! ... Think of the tiny Banyan seed, and look at the huge tree (pointing to the one in front) that has come out from it. Is this not the most perplexing magic before us? Should it not be the right challenge to your skill and ability? This is the magic I wanted you to learn and master. I am still waiting for you to start the mission...."

On one hand the magician was humbled before his younger friend, and now on the other, he felt tickled by the challenge. The magic of the hands to give place to the magic of Nature – the new challenge was distinct in its tone. When Kshitish Chandra was about to go away, Bābā caught hold of his hand by force, and demanded: "I won't let you go. Teach me that magic right now. No more talk. I will not wait any more."

Bābā already knew about Kshitish's regular sitting in his closed room to enjoy the embrace of the Soul, his losing himself in the inner rapture. He also knew that this was the glorious fruition of a worthy human life, discussed and revealed unmistakably by the Scriptures as well as the sayings of Mahatmas of our land.

True, Bābā had all along ignored Kshitish Bhai, not heeding to what he said and exhorted. But in the core of his heart, he also had enough of esteem for what the young sādḥaka was doing as *tapasyā* and what it had gained for him. The neglect could not therefore mean any more than a postponement, a passage of time during which the proud engineer's inner being was trying to win over his ego.

The deepest urge of his heart naturally became pronounced that day, pushing aside all the resistance and indulgences of his mind. The development was sudden. No doubt his decision was full and final. As for Bābā's determination, he was always steadfast whenever his mind got set on anything specifically.

The magical touch of the magic show, the progressive maturity which had by then accrued to his personality, the deliberate thoughts nurtured warmly by the school-teacher friend, above all, the subtle working of the powerful Hands of Providence – all got arrayed in a wonderful collaboration to make the keen engineer discover the concealed mission and purpose of his earthly life. It was clear that the Almighty had chosen him to be the rare one who would personify in the modern life the impersonal voice of the ancient Upanishads, to fulfil in an exemplary measure the great exhortation of all the Wise People of the Land, thereby to show the discerning humans around, the way out of their mind's problems and torments.

Perhaps the development was too much for the young Kshitish to accept and act upon. He was making his elderly friend riper and mellower no doubt. But such a sudden demand, full and exclusive, was something he did not expect at the time. However his reluctance was of no avail. The magic seeker stood quite relentless.

In all earnestness, Kshitish told him: "O Dādā (elder brother), am I not your bhai (younger brother)? How can you seek initiation from me? Nor am I qualified to give you what you ask for. Wait, I shall take you to Faridpur where lives my Gurudev, Paramahansa Narayana Tirtha. Telling him my feelings and love for you, I shall ask him to accept you

as his disciple and give you initiation into Brahmavidyā. I am sure he will not reject my words. That will be the right course for you and me. So, please wait. Do not be so insistent.”

The Dādā heard his words, but did not accept them at all. The suggestion either to substitute his selection or agree to a postponement sounded meaningless and futile. He was doubtless in his choice of the person as well as the time: “My heart should be kindled by you alone. It will catch fire only from the flames blazing in your soul,” was his reply.

Did not the mere touch of Kshitish’s hand arrest unawares the working of his mind just a few minutes back? Was it not the best clue to what would happen if his heart were to be touched by the soul of his Kshitish Bhai?

* * *