

The Grace

Some Reminiscences

Romen Palit

This is not a polemic or an abstraction on the reality of the Divine Grace which the materialist might frown upon or draw the devotee to wax into high-sounding eulogy. What I recount is factual without a grain of fiction. Yet these might seem impossibles. Why? Take for example the capacity for literary or musical creation I am supposed to possess. From where did I imbibe them — from my family ? Good heavens! No. None in our past generations had either been a poet, a critic or a musician. They *were* hard-boiled materialists bent on the utilitarian pastime of earning and producing wealth. And yet I would be all these though I must confess if left to my own I could not turn out a single piece of music or a single line of poetry.

Perhaps I am putting the cart before the horse.

From the very early childhood I have a faint recollection of my parents meditating before some photographs all bedecked with flowers. I was strangely attracted by the perfume of flowers and incense. From that time I learned to associate incense, flowers and photographs with things sacred.

I came to the Ashram as a visitor in November 1929. But I was not allowed either to enter the Ashram or for pranam. But I had darshan of the Mother going out for drive very day at 4 p.m. in the afternoons. Also she went every Thursday to Duraiswami's place on foot, passing in front of our house, when once I offered a box of chocolates to her and rushed back into the house. I felt so shy. That was my first contact with the Mother. This shyness I have never been able to overcome.

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My most significant darshan and the turning point of my life came on the 24th of November. I went with my father and bowed down to the Master and the Mother. I came home in a daze. Later, my father and Barinda asked me how I liked the darshan. It was a casual question, more to humour a child than anything else. How could a child of nine feel the greatness of this stupendous spiritual personality which even to the adults was an enigma ? Yes, neither my mind nor my heart was awakened enough, ready to seize the import. But I felt a great vastness, a height in Sri Aurobindo which to my childish mind seemed as great as the Himalayas.

There and then I made up my mind that I must stay on. What exactly attracted me, I cannot say, for there were no children (incidentally I was the first child admitted), no school, no games; only about a hundred men and women with serious faces moved about, met at pranams, meditations and withdrew to their homes. They were distant and uncommunicative, except for Purani whom I nicknamed the policeman and Barinda.

My father was not prepared for this strange decision, for I was brought here more or less on an experimental basis; for my mother had died three years earlier and I had none to look after me, my father being a touring government official had no fixed establishment. My father had hesitatingly put everything before the Master who replied to say that though children were not admitted in the Ashram he could bring his son. "Let us see what can be done", he added.

Again my father wrote to the Master when I told him my resolve to stay on. Sri Aurobindo advised me to go back for a few months and return after learning some English "so that he could talk to the Mother". Accordingly I left.

I returned in July 1930. My father stayed for a month and half. But he did nothing to arrange for my stay. And what could be done? There were no "homes", no people eager to keep boys. But the Divine Grace intervened in a strange way.

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The wife of one of the first disciples of Sri Aurobindo agreed to look after me, while I stayed in an adjoining room vacated by her husband Bijoy Nag. All this happened almost without the knowledge of my father.

And I stayed on, a favourite of all, almost a spoilt child. Then a change took place in the Ashram. The Mother retired for a while from us. The distribution of evening soup was stopped and so also the morning meditation and pranams.

About six months later the new year came and we had meditation and darshan of the Mother at midnight. It was a memorable experience. The Mother appeared to me like a Queen of Beauty in the semi-darkness of midnight.

Next day, the Mother led me to her little dining room and presented me with sweets and two large books in French, 'Gedeon dans la forêt' and 'Les animaux'. She talked to me in French whenever I met her.

At the beginning of 1931 complained to the Mother about the lady who looked after me, over some trivial personal matter. Sri-Aurobindo wrote to me that though I was growing and progressing, I could not judge people. However, he added, the Mother was making arrangements to change my room. It was a reprimand to a spoilt boy, undisciplined in habit, and erratic in temperament. Even

this reprimand was a gesture of Grace, for the Mother or the Master scolded only those they loved and this was aimed to pin point the limitation and overcome it.

1st May I left Boulangerie house; I was given accommodation in a room where the Mother before 1932 used to sit for meditation and pranam.

In the same year I started reading Shakespeare with Nolini and writing small letters to the Mother. These letters were letters of a boy attempting to imitate the older persons who sent letters or notebooks to the Mother every day. Hence most of the letters were sheer trash. Only the Divine could tolerate such foolishness. They contained my first attempts

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at writing Bengali verse, important and unimportant, and happenings of the day. Once it was about my bed infested with bugs. (I was yet to learn of hygiene.) Sri Aurobindo wrote back humourously that a deputation headed by Amrita was being sent to investigate the state of affairs and exterminate the bugs. The Mother wrote to me to say that running in the street in the sun was not the way to cure a cold.

Once I wrote to Sri Aurobindo that at times I had a strange feeling. I seemed to regard myself as an alien and I questioned: "Is this myself?" Sri Aurobindo wrote back: "This is *viveka*."

The changing of one's name had a special attraction to me — Jenny Dobson became Chidanandini, Chadwick became Arjava. There was an old French couple who taught me Mathematics and Geography (Oh, God! how I hated those subjects!)— I forget their French family names— Sri Aurobindo gave them Suchi and Sarala as their names of the spiritual life. Madame Gaebelé the mother of my French teacher was renamed Suvrata.

Being childish and imitative by temperament, I asked for my name to be changed as well. The Master wrote that Rama — Indra — Ramendra was the name of Vishnu. It was a fine name.

Incidentaly, it is the Mother who has changed my name from Ramen to Romen much before I even dreamt of asking for a name.

The Mother gave me a message:

"14.3.32

To Romen,

Always do with pleasure the work you have to do —. *Le travail fait avec joie est un travail bien fait.*"

This was written on my exercise book where I had done a rough sketch of a sunrise on sea, which she had corrected with her own hand.

From time to time I sent to the Mother a picture which was, I must confess, abominable. On one picture she commented thus (this is one of the few letters she wrote to me in English):

"Do you know what you have represented? The Christian Calvary, that is to say, the mountain on the top of which the Christ was put on the cross with the thieves. Is it a copy or the reminiscence of a picture seen ? Or is it from your imagination? I would be interested to know."

Then in 1934, when I was fourteen, I had a definite and exceptional experience of the psychic being coming to forefront in spite of all my unsteady nature, my moods and my constant depressions. This experience became the basis of existence and has been the support and aid in all my trials and tribulations. This was the Mother's extended arm in my consciousness to rouse what was the most true, the most permanent in me. This altered all my life, my vision, and my valuation of things, persons, actions in general and my relation with the Mother in particular.

The Mother wrote to me that she was my mother who gave birth (meaning my spiritual rebirth) to me. On another occasion she wrote "It is better that you do not speak to others what I speak or write to you; because they become jealous and their jealousy creates a bad atmosphere which falls on you and creates difficulties...."

On another occasion: "... I am always with you, you are in my arms which are around you with love and protect you lovingly."

Once she wrote: "If, as you say, one part in you is happy and contented, stick to this happiness to drive out the ugly things. Do not allow these to take possession of you. For that, do exactly what I tell you to do and live a well ordered regular life. I am always with you to help you to carry out this good will and to help you — Love of your mother."

It is apparent these letters were written to one vacillating between depression and happiness, between discipline and erratic *tamas*. This state of affairs continued up to 1946.

The Mother wrote: "You are right to want a new life, and you can be sure I would help you the best I can for this. I am sure that perseverance in study and the acceptance of a discipline in work and in life would powerfully help you to change you."

All my love is with you to help and guide you."

She repeats:

"I always take you in my bosom but what can I do if you fly away from there ? ... You 'must remain quiet in my arms if you want me to help you."

It was not that the Mother was lavish with her love and help only inwardly. She was most generous even in her external bounty, e.g.

"Whenever you want anything, you can always ask me and if it is possible for me to give, I would give it to you."

"My force is always with you. But in order to receive and utilise it, one must open to it with tranquility and confidence."

This is repeated in another letter:

"I want nothing more than you become my instrument, my true little child. But for that the first thing necessary is to be obedient. And so that you can become that, my help is always with you."

Between all these movements of divine aid and human retarding depression which was a recoil to the lower nature, my creative effort continued. The Mother graciously listened to my music once a fortnight or three weeks. She saw my crude paintings, commented and corrected them.

On one occasion she saw a vision while I was playing to her. As a rule, Mother opened her eyes after I had finished playing and smiled, giving her encouraging comment. This time she remained with eyes closed, a gentle smile outlining her lips. After a while she opened her eyes, smiled and said: "Do you know, child, what I saw? On the bank of a river, there was a

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platform and seated there, you were playing some instrument. So you see you are not a musician in this birth alone." I had a feeling that perhaps it was in ancient Egypt, who knows ?

"Once she saw a huge bird which, I reckon, must have been Garuda who stood behind me with outstretched wings in a gesture of protection. This was divine protection which had been with me unfailingly in the worst of trials or disasters all through.

I played different *rāgas* both on the Sitar and Surbahar. I played along with Sahana, Ardhendu and Lalita (now Mrs. DaulatPanday). Mother presented me to notable persons who came to see her and asked me to play before them. Once a few Europeans had come, before whom the Mother asked me to play in Pavitra's

room. The Mother herself was not present. But later on I learnt she stood behind the door and listened to my playing, a typical gesture of a mother.

She liked my music, especially my extempore compositions which were strictly neither Western nor Indian.

I had a flair for drawing which she encouraged, so much so that she saw my pitiful attempts and lavished her praise. Even she arranged for a small exhibition of the works of Ashram artists and I had a place there. It was in 1937. A small house was there on the north-east corner of Golconde (Golconde was yet to be built; this small building and other huts were later demolished to become the site for Golconde). Here the paintings of Krishnalal, Anil Kumar, Sanjiban, Nishikanto and mine were exhibited. Some of my snow-pictures evoked good appreciation due to my young age and the unusualness of the motif.

Sri Aurobindo encouraged my writings of poetry from the very beginning. My first poems worth the name were written in 1935. *There* was a period when I sent up one poem everyday to the Master. I was not sure of the quality for by then I was developing a little sense of self-examination. So I asked A. to correct and send up these juvenile attempts. That was in 1937. There was a poem which was entitled by

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Sri Aurobindo 'O Night, great Night'. A. had sent two versions to the Master; one, as I had written it; two, as he had corrected it. The Master in his own hand wrote out the whole poem making only slight changes for the sake of metre. This is what he wrote as comment: "It seems to me that with less alteration a few slight touches almost, it could be made into a very fine poem", and at the end of the poem he wrote again: "The repetition of song and beauty is here intentional. The whole may be regarded as an invocation of the Night with all that is in it and behind it, the Mystic Fire, the invisible Beauty above which the stars flame, the 'earthward Peace' — I find the phrase very good ... I find the last four lines remarkably fine even as they stand. I have altered only slightly for the sake of metre."

On another poem he commented: "As usual the last lines are very fine. The whole has the substance of poetry, and once put into metrical form, succeeds by a very telling suggestion of atmosphere." A few days later this was his comment on another of my poems: "A larger vocabulary, a freer choice of words will bring the necessary change, but even as it is, it is remarkable. The lines marked are superb — others are fine, but these would do credit to any poet."

Like this I continued to write, the Master correcting my lines, even scanning them, showering his benedictions on me incessantly just as the Mother had done.

One day I had gone up to the Mother and was talking to her at random. The Mother was busy writing something and from moment to moment she looked up at me. I felt curious. After a few minutes she showed me the sketch she had made of me. It was done to show me the technique of light and shadow on a human face; she told me there was no line in nature — all lines were the result of light and shadow — this was of course the traditional European concept as opposed to the linear treatment by the Indian and the Japanese.

The Mother loved Japanese painting and the love of the Japanese for things beautiful. She told me how the Japanese

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built their homes which became harmonious parts of the surrounding landscape. Once she addressed others along with me about creating a tradition (in painting). To follow a tradition was easy but something was lost. But if, on the other hand, one needed to create a line of one's own, it meant great work and patience. It was not easy.

Now I shall describe three important occasions of Ashram life.

Daily in the evening after the Mother had finished her talk with a few persons in the central Prosperity hall, she would come down and sit in the reception hall (near the gate). In front of her would be a pot of scalding soup. She would meditate for some time, then stretch out her hands and bless the soup. Then the pot would be shifted to her left. People sitting all around her in the hall would come one by one bow down to her, receive the soup in a vessel, rise and go. Then she would rise herself when everyone had finished and pass the courtyard and the narrow passage near the Samadhi (this has been demolished since) and go upstairs. On two sides of her passage people would stand with flowers in their hands and offer them when the Mother passed them. I too formed this irregular queue. Once I remember she gave me a moon-flower. This was the last darshan, after that all retired to their rooms.

The darshan-days were then three times a year. I felt a great excitement as a boy which is but natural. But this joy had no external background. Why I felt so unspeakably happy, I cannot analyse or say. The previous night I could not sleep well. I often crept downstairs (when I was in Boulangerie house) where J. and others were busy bedecking the ornate canopy of wood covered with beads, flowers and other ornaments. Under these the Mother and the Master were to sit for giving darshan to people. Early morning I would reach the meditation hall, now all

covered with mats for people to sit on; a board with typed sheets stood at one corner. Here the names of persons going up for darshan was

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put up. And each followed his turn in the order mentioned in the list. There was no bustle, no crowding, no talk. It was an atmosphere of silence, aspiration and expectation and expectation.

The doors of upstairs were opened at 8 o'clock. And one by one we would go, offer garlands and flowers to our Master and the Mother. After bowing to each in turn some of us bowed at the throne, between them when both of them would put their palms on our heads in benediction. The Mother was all in smiles, queenly and indescribably sweet and we could feel that she was *the Mother* of whom the Master has spoken in his hook. The Master was grand, Shiva and Krishna in one, the supreme Purusha of whom the Mother has acclaimed as the Lord whose presence would transform our Night into Day.

In the afternoon, the Mother would distribute garlands (which we had offered to her in the morning). Sometimes she distributed messages as well. When I went for this garland distribution on my first visit, the Mother was distributing Sri Aurobindo's message: "The sadhak has no personal hopes...." When I went up to her, she handed me a garland and, waving her index finger, said with a smile, "No message for you".

The birthday was a very special occasion. Each one of us individually went to her in the same room where the three darshans took place. There she would sit on a divan, while we sat on the carpet below. She would talk to us, meditate. Sometimes she would play on the organ, even sing — which was a special privilege — this music was a message to the person concerned.

Once she told me that if I had moods that would make me more unhappy, people would shun me. On another occasion she expressed that even if I wanted to take up ordinary life I must-not, on any account, marry. That was the worst possible slavery. Then she asked me if I knew what people did when people married. I nodded. I had only a faint

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inkling of the thing men call sex. But psychologically I was not mature enough to assess the full import of the problem.

I would narrate something which may surprise. At that period physical education was a thing unknown. In 1932 a tract of land lay vacant which is now Lakshmibai house and garden. I conceived the brilliant idea of having a badminton

court. But the place was full of weeds and thorns. So I wrote to the Mother that I needed a servant urgently. The next day was the first day of the month and the Mother came down to pay the domestic servants. Suddenly the Mother turned to me and said "you will get your 'urgent' servant". The place was cleaned and the few boys that were there plus one or two visiting boys gathered there to play. We had even an athletic competition where S. came first in high jump receiving an earthen dog which the Mother had sent as a prize for the event.

From my childhood I had poor health. I had fits of headaches. The Mother made arrangements for special food to be given to me: butter, eggs, ovaltine. But I was too lazy to take this. So she asked S. then Dr. N. to see that I partook of three eatables. And every day after people had finished pranam, the Mother would meet me at the staircase and ask "How was the food?" Then she would make me flex my arms; "You must become strong, my child", she would say.

But all these, after all, did not have any lasting effect. The headaches continued. So the Mother sent me to Madras with D. I was there for a week. The Mother wrote to me very affectionate letters, encouraging me. I felt terribly lonely; I had been so much in tune with the Mother and her presence that I felt like a fish out of water.

In 1937 I was restless and in November the Mother asked me to 'go out and see the ordinary life'. She wanted me to make a free and independent choice of life. She said that she did not want me to be like D. This person whom the Mother mentioned had begun to go out of the Ashram from

1936 and ended by leaving the Ashram altogether in 1953.

I went out. I was in Chittagong, then in Maharashtra, where the Mother sent me letters; sometimes the address too was written in her own hand. I returned two months later. The Mother enquired as to how I liked all these people and places. She had got my room freshly painted and distempered in my absence. She told me that she had got my room all cleaned and tidy. She was all smiles. I think she expected me to turn over a new leaf. But the lure of the external world was pulling. And my father, in spite of being an old associate, added to this unnatural thirst, by tempting me with prospects of sending me to England to become a member of the Indian Civil Service. I could not gauge the full import, but it was a fascination indeed.

In the meantime I left my studies and started working under Chandulal in the newly begun construction of Golconde, where I gave a good account of myself as a worker. The Mother was exceedingly pleased.

But this was not to last. The old depression, moods, the attraction of the external world returned and I succumbed to them. On the first occasion, it was almost the Mother who sent me out. The second time I myself decided to go; that was in October 1938. The Mother was not at all pleased. It was but natural. She told me that perhaps I thought that I would be happy with my father. No, that was not true. She added that I could go but I must return with the determination not to go back to ordinary life.

It was to be a brief visit. But it proved to be a long one.

Before I go into the next phase of my life, I would like to digress. The Mother gave her categorical views on people, specially those with whom I could associate freely without any harm. Some like A. who taught me Bengali metre and had declared that 'Many are called but a few are chosen — I was to be one of the few chosen ones' — well, about associating with him, the Mother was non-committal. But with another person, X, the Mother definitely forbade me to have

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any touch. That one she declared was a vampire. And it was true, for a few moments of association with this person used to make me feel dejected and tired. But there were people with whom the Mother encouraged me to mix with. Dr. N., S. etc.

The Mother was also very definite about books and journals. I remember she forbade me from reading 'Life' magazine which was, she said, definitely ugly.

Once she examined cursorily my palm. She said that I had a very good heart. Also a strong determination; once I decided to do a thing, nothing could prevent me from doing it. Lastly she prophesied that from my twentyfifth year, there would be change for the better, which would continue. How true and accurate! Yet those associated with me had the impression that I was a truant and erratic chap, especially when I was so restless. Some even thought that I would take up ordinary life and forget all about spirituality.

In the ordinary life, which needs no mention, I passed through a bitter experience of what life consists of. The Mother, however, continued to write to me regularly up to 1939 when I was outside. She told me that she could not make up my mind for me and that it was I who had to do it. About the April Darshan which began in 1939 she wrote that it was not a darshan (in the old sense) and I could

certainly come. I revisited the Ashram in 1943 and the Mother was the same affectionate mother though I had altered due to my long association with the outside world.

The Mother knew that a great change would come in my life and a blow fall. Therefore prior to my going away in 1938, she confided to me that she wept at all the troubles that visited me, my unstable condition vis-à-vis the spiritual potentiality I had. Of course these were not physical tears, nor had the grief any human origin. She wanted me to be her true child, the child of Light; but conditions barred it. Her love for me had a much deeper origin than my growing, unsteady, adolescent mind could even conceive. The fact,

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however, came back to me with great impact that she was not only the divine mother, she was my physical mother as well. There was a blending of the human and the divine, which far transcended the human relation of a mother for her offspring or a spiritual relation of a guru with the disciple.

A black curtain was drawn over my spiritual life for several years. But even in that total change the Mother's aid was there, her hand of succour saved me from complete disaster and ruin. The last letter she wrote to me was in 1942.

I returned in 1946, apparently a crushed individual but with an inner urge to rise. Here again the Force of the Mother was at work.

When I went up to her (1st April 1946) and bowed down to her, the Mother exclaimed "At Last!" She gave me a carnation which signified "Obedience".

A new life opened for me. The ordinary life now had no lure, whereas this life held infinite possibilities. .

Once I wrote to her that I felt tired while doing the work. The Mother wrote that it should not be so and that I must learn to take rest even while doing the work.

I met my companion and persons around began writing signed and anonymous letters to the Mother complaining of this new development. The Mother showed to me one such letter and asked "Is this true?" I replied negatively. The Mother tore away the letter and said "I have trust in you."

I felt distressed nevertheless; I wrote to her of my conviction that everything would be well. The Mother sent back my letter with her answer on the margin. She had underlined my word and wrote that it was the voice of Truth and that I must cling to it.

Once she told me that it was not that any particular work was important. The importance was to do some work. -: This implied that it is not what we do that is of moment but how we do it, is of capital importance.

She had been to my room three times, each time is a new

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location. In 1947 I lived at the Press where she came. On entering the room she spotted the sketch of me done by her a decade earlier. Turning to Chinmoyee she remarked, "This sketch I did when Romen was a child."

Next, she came to *Remplacent* House (now renamed by her as *Ashish*) on my birthday where she tasted the sweets we had prepared for her. She also heard my music. That was in 1949.

In 1954 she came to my room in the band quarters on the Sports Ground.

After the Master left his body I had a unique experience which opened a new way of literary expression. I was promised aid in my poetical venture. I read out some parts of the poem to the Mother. She remarked: "I have a very strong impression that Sri Aurobindo himself is behind this."

Some friends had remarked that the Mother did not like poetry like Sri Aurobindo. But I had my doubts. So I asked the Mother about it. She remained quiet for a while, then replied: "After all that Sri Aurobindo has done for Poetry, how can I not like it?" Forthwith, she sent some poems which I had sent to her and got them published almost without my knowledge. Had I any intention of publication I would have edited the work.

Once, on my birthday, she wrote to me: "Remember Sri Aurobindo's promise, 'One who chooses the Divine, has been chosen by the Divine'". When I had written to the Mother once about her serious expression at the time of pranam, she replied that perhaps it was the Mahakali aspect of her.

She pointed out about my habitual frivolousness and remarked that I must be serious and not light as I had been during the 'Marching' for example.

She always encouraged my study, and, in spite of my being not of an age when people normally study, she permitted me to complete the higher course, once in 1955 taking English Literature, and again in 1959 taking Sri Aurobindo's subjects. Though the students laughed behind my back, I knew I had

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the Mother's blessings. I did not, and even now do not, consider myself to be old as the horizon of my mind, life and body are still expanding. This youth is the soul of

the Mother in me urging me to move forward. That is why the Mother said with a smile to me on my fiftieth birthday, "Hello! you are not growing old!"

(Note: The letters quoted here were written in French and are translated by me. Perhaps a better translation could be made of the 200/300 letters received by me. I have quoted only from the most important and in most cases given a gist in my own words for brevity. It is possible some words or expressions are not absolutely accurate for which I may be pardoned.)