

Mellow Dramas in Paradise – Ann Faraday

(This is the greater part of a review which Ann wrote for Consciousness magazine in 1996. It is relevant to our recent discussions about Gangaji and some other current Dialogue matters. It also provides a link with John David who will be at our February (or some future) Greville Street meeting and who spent time at Lucknow with Papaji. Ed.)

The central character is an 86-year-old grandfather living in Lucknow, North India. Largely unknown and unsung until the early 1990s, this “teacher of Enlightenment” and erstwhile disciple of Ramana Maharshi found himself propelled onto the international spiritual scene after the 1989 publication of Andrew Cohen's book *My Master is Myself*. It tells the story of Andrew's meeting with H.W.L. Poonjaji and their subsequent extraordinary relationship.

Poonjaji's simple message is grounded in the ancient Hindu philosophy of Advaita (non-duality) which, in a nutshell, teaches that there is no God, no you, no me, but ONLY Impersonal Consciousness masquerading as you, me and everyone through our unique individual body-minds. This Consciousness is and always has been closer than our jugular veins, and we can never be separated from it - hence the well-known Hindu saying I AM THAT. Ignorance of our true identity gives rise to an illusory sense of separate selfhood, and liberation from this ignorance is Enlightenment.

According to Andrew, then a young American seeker, it was love at first sitting. As Poonjaji spoke of the possibility of instant Enlightenment irrespective of prior effort or merit, Andrew experienced a deep Awakening in which he realized he had always been Free and that any notion of bondage was completely illusory. He soon became Poonjaji's star pupil, and was sent home, with the mantle of Ramana over his shoulders, to spread the teaching in the West.

The result was a steady trickle of pilgrims to Poonjaji's modest home in Lucknow. Many were “divorcees and widows” of Rajneesh and Muktananda (as the mischievous anti-guru U.G. Krishnamurti likes to call them), others long-term Vipassana meditators hoping for a quicker fix. Some were Andrew's own students, in particular a glamorous Texan acupuncturist named Antoinette Varner - none other than the silver-haired one who smiles at me from the covers of the two books on my desk. Apparently her meeting and subsequent relationship with the Master was as dramatic as Andrew's. In a small, dilapidated shelter on the banks of the Ganges, she too experienced a deep Awakening after being assured that she was already Enlightened and simply needed confirmation. Poonjaji later named her Ganga after the goddess of the river, sending her home to teach, saying “The Ganga must also flow in the West”.

Andrew's second book, *Autobiography of an Awakening*, tells the story of betrayal by his beloved Master. Not only was Poonjaji regularly appointing new teachers, giving them Indian names and pronouncing them “finished” - he was also criticizing Andrew behind his back for “corrupting the Dharma.” The crux of his disapproval seemed to be Andrew's expectation that any true Enlightenment experience should, at the very least, result in non-exploitative and honest behaviour, since the “do-er” is no longer the illusory ego but Consciousness It-Self. Not so, said Poonjaji, explaining to students that liberation from Ignorance means freedom from all human restrictions, including ethical social codes imposed by Religion. But when Andrew approached him directly, he denied any misunderstanding and reassured his beloved Son of his continuing support.

Andrew spells out his concerns in his latest book, *An Unconditional Relationship to Life*, and explores the whole issue further in his aptly-named journal *What is Enlightenment?* with contributions from many other spiritual leaders. Time and again in his teaching work, he came up against people misusing Advaita for their own egotistical ends, either as an excuse for apathy (“Nothing matters because it's all the Self anyway”) or for downright bad behaviour (“It's not real; it's just my illusory personality”.) Communication and discussion dried up, with difficulties quickly “Advaited” away with quips like “Who is asking the question?” or “Who is unhappy?” Andrew calls this “The Advaita shuffle” and sees it as a strategy for avoiding the uncomfortable dualistic facts of practical human life.

Most seekers, he concludes, tend to get lost in the Absolute view, and seem to need a teaching that not only emphasizes the inherent unity of all life, but also encourages them to explore the mind's infinite capacity for creating new false notions of self. As for most teachers, he was reluctantly forced to accept that only those who were pure-in-heart before Realization would be pure in-conduct afterwards. As the Western scholar Agehananda Bharati was so fond of pointing out, "If you're a stinker before Enlightenment, you'll be an Enlightened stinker afterwards!"

So what are we to make of Poonjaji? (Who is asking the question?) Many of our friends who visited him in Lucknow describe him as a kindly old grandpa who enjoys talking about himself. One assured us that he is "the full quid" - spiritually, of course! None returned "Enlightened." His two volumes of tape-recorded Satsang (sittings with a guru), entitled *Wake Up and Roar*, are entertaining illustrations of the way he teaches, with frequent use of the "Advaita Shuffle." His message is quite clear - True Freedom is possible right here and now, no postponement or practice necessary! His humour comes across as always kindly. ("Master, I have been with you for four days now and I'm still not enlightened" Poonjaji, laughing: "Yes, I'm surprised, a smart boy like you".) And the value of meditation? No value - other than discovering that the mind, like a dog's curly tail pulled out straight, snaps right back to crookedness when you let it go! Could he be teasing Andrew, do you think?

Indeed, Gangaji (as she is respectfully known) still refers to her teacher as "Absolute Love," and continues to spread his (Lazy Man's?) version of Advaita far and wide. She is visiting Australia for the first time in October/November (1996), holding public Satsang in Byron Bay and Melbourne, and we hope to drop in to at least one of them. When I suggested to Andrew that she might be avoiding Sydney on account of his newly formed community there, he was quick to point out that the drama had mellowed considerably over the years and that animosity was now a thing of the past!

From her audio-tapes and books, Gangaji comes over as a nice lady, her teaching intended to lead you to the space of Absolute Silence below all the comings and goings of life - a space where you do not find peace, but know your-Self to be that Peace in which every-thing rises. In her two volumes entitled *You Are That! Satsang with Gangaji*, she urges us not to explore anything else - not thoughts, emotions, sensations or circumstances, which have already received too much attention - but only "That which is before, during and after all objects of awareness. THAT!" Her tapes of Satsang recorded live from boats on the Ganges, temple courtyards and gardens, along with all the natural sounds of surrounding life - birds, bells, chanting, children playing - communicate this sense of Samsara in Nirvana. What more can be said?

Quite a lot more, actually, if you peruse the long list of books on Consciousness by Ramesh Balsekar, a retired bank president and former disciple and translator of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj of Bombay. Considered by many to be the most erudite and authentic mouthpiece for Advaita teachings today, he doesn't merely parrot his teacher's words, but interprets them according to his own deep intuitive understanding "Don't worry about what Maharaj said", he tells a pernickety student, "I'll tell you what he meant!"

While his early books, written before Maharaj's death in the early 1980s, are attempts to present the teachings directly, Balsekar's later books such as *Consciousness Speaks; Conversations with Ramesh S. Balsekar* take the form of transcripts from his own more informal question-and-answer seminars. He comes over in both books and tapes as a kindly, generous and humorous person with a great gift for sensing hidden needs and agendas. When asked if he himself was Enlightened, his reply was: "For your purposes, yes." Highly recommend.

Ann Faraday