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THE OUROBORUS

An ancient mythological symbol, the Ouroborus depicts a snake swallowing its own tail and in the process, forming a circle. It devours itself while at the same time regenerating itself. Both the dualities of birth and death are aspects of its existence. Through the aspect of mortality it becomes the symbol of immortality, and through the assimilation of this process it becomes a symbol of the eternal unity of all things – the symbol of One.

What is this mortality and immortality signified by the Ouroborus? Over eons, hundreds of thousands of births and deaths have taken place. Bodies have been born, bodies have died. The physical body is mortal.

In between birth and death is existence itself. Existence, which for the human being means consciousness. Right from the moment of conception till the moment of death, consciousness is the animating force in the body. You are reading this because you are conscious. I wrote it because I am conscious. Without consciousness, neither the reading nor the writing could happen, as we would be two inert bodies.

Because of Consciousness, the world *is*. Because of Consciousness, you *are*. Consciousness is Eternal. No one

or nothing else needs to be venerated or worshipped for Consciousness is all there is. All else is an appearance in Consciousness, including the gods we worship. Isn't it obvious? If we were not conscious, we would not be able to worship any gods. One day a man who thought he was posing a clever question to Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj asked the sage what would he do if Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu came and stood before him. He was flummoxed and quite offended when Maharaj told him that he would ask them to leave immediately. For he was not interested in what came, because it would, sooner or later, leave. He was only interested in the Eternal – That which always *is*. Of course, Maharaj was merely trying to point out to the man that even in order to see Shiva and Vishnu, one needed to be conscious.

This is what the Ouroboros shows us: what we truly are is not the mortal body but the eternal, immortal Consciousness. Consciousness is 'you', 'me', 'he' and 'she'.

In Alchemy, the most coveted goal is the Philosopher's Stone, which is capable of transforming base metal into gold. It is also considered to be the elixir of life that confers immortality. The Ouroboros is an important symbol in Alchemy, signifying that 'the end is the beginning is the end'. The famous drawing of the Ouroboros in the Alchemical text *The Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra* depicts the snake wrapped around some words that translate as: 'One is the All'.

One, which is not the opposite of the number two; One, which simply means 'not two'; One, which is prior to all divisions yet includes all of them – this 'One' is Consciousness. 'There is another world, but it is this one.'

INTRODUCTION

One lazy Sunday morning, over a cup of *chai* (tea) at a restaurant near the Mahalakshmi temple in Mumbai, my friends and I decided to visit the *samadhi* (final resting place) of the guru of the famous sage Nisargadatta Maharaj, as it was only ten minutes away by car. Nisargadatta Maharaj was one of the leading 20th century exponents of the Indian philosophy of Advaita (non-duality). He was largely uneducated and not familiar with the scriptures, yet the world flocked to his little attic in a middle-class district of Mumbai after the publication of *I Am That – Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj* in 1973.

Maharaj was not in favour of having a *samadhi* for himself, as his entire teaching was based on the concept that ‘you are not the body’. So, we thought we could instead visit his guru’s *samadhi*, to pay our respects to the sage whose disciple turned out to be one of the greatest contemporary masters of Advaita to emerge from this land. Without hesitation, off we went in a cab.

As the taxi veered through a narrow street, I felt a sense of measured fear arising gradually within me. It was something like when you’re walking on a lonely street late at night knowing there is no one following you, yet you keep

looking over your shoulder just to make sure. There was a part of me watching the fear, and another part experiencing it. It was strange. Soon, the taxi came to a halt and we got out. I realised that my heart was beating faster for some reason I could not fathom. When we entered the courtyard, my friend Vikram asked me to sit down on the ledge to remove my shoes before stepping into the samadhi area.

That was when the chips began to fall into place. For when I raised my head to look up, my eyes fell on two iron caskets lying about forty feet away to the right, which served as funeral pyres in which the wood was placed to cremate the dead. It was only then that it dawned on me that we were at the Banganga cremation grounds. It was on that very same ledge that, twenty years ago, as a young boy, I sat with my family, watching my father's funeral pyre burn bright in the night.

Suddenly, my friend, oblivious to the feelings swarming through my heart, called out, "Look straight ahead, not to the right." As I looked, not even ten feet away, was Sri Siddharameshwar Maharaj's samadhi.

I was amazed that I had been brought back to this same spot, after a gap of twenty years, by a teaching that taught the exact opposite of what I thought when I was a boy of fourteen. I had thought that death was the end of everything – story over! *The damning physical evidence of a dead body right there staring straight into one's eyes.*

As a child, fear would arise on the numerous occasions when I would see, on the Mumbai roads, a small group of men dressed in white, carrying a bier – a body wrapped in a white shroud with flowers strewn over it. My hair would stand on end. What a finality those scenes had – death

as the end of it all. The thought would arise... ‘I don’t want to die’. This thought would promptly be followed by the next thought: ‘You may not want to, but you will die one day’. I used to wonder, ‘What will happen to me when I’m dead?’

A thought, similar to that, was expressed by a friend of mine recently. She said that she could still remember the dread she would feel as a child, when she would open the newspaper and look at the obituaries. She was told that all those pictures she saw were of people who were ‘dead’. The natural deduction was that one day, her photo would be on that page as well, and this would leave her very sad and confused.

In my childhood, I remember hearing a Hindi song whose chorus was: “*Tum jiyo hazaar saal...*” which translates as “May you live a thousand years...” This song would often be played at birthday parties. Whenever I heard it, sadness would arise. Instead of making me happy it would make me sad, simply because it would ironically remind me of the short lifespan of my loved ones who were marching towards their deaths, me included! So, while it was being played at birthdays, and I would see others joyously sing along, it sent bells of doom ringing in my ears. And, even though the sentiment it aroused was heartwarming – may you live a thousand years – I thought it was quite absurd to hear someone sing some words that they knew deep down to be untrue. After all, who lives a thousand years? I wished we did, but knew that we don’t.

I used to wonder: *What is the point of living if we are going to die one day? What is the point of enjoying pleasures if they are going to be snatched from us when we die? How could*

anyone be happy in such a scenario with the Grim Reaper or Yama, the God of Death, constantly looking over one's shoulder?

Another vivid childhood memory I have is of a statue of Joan of Arc, which my mother had purchased from an antique shop in the hill town of Mussoorie. It was made of beautiful, white porcelain. However, I just couldn't figure out why she was tied to a stake, standing on a heap of wooden logs, and clasping a cross to her chest. What was going to happen to her? My mother explained that she was going to be burnt at the stake as they considered her a witch, even though she was a saint. I was horrified at that thought – that someone could be burnt alive! Years later, I read a theory that people at the stake didn't really suffer much, as the rising flames caused the blood to boil first and burst open the heart in no time – some consolation indeed! It was such an irony... a young, angelic-looking being propped up for this fate and frozen in eternity in the statue I used to look at every day. I remember reading an account that mentioned Joan's heart did not burn and was swiftly taken away to be thrown into the river lest it become a relic for worship. But, more of this later, as an essay emerged on St. Joan, which you will find later in this book.

A critical aspect of losing my father at a young age was that I clammed up. I tried to stop loving others simply because I knew I would eventually get hurt for they would die sooner or later. So, in order to prevent myself from getting hurt, the short cut was to stop loving others. This was actually a self-defeating proposition because it proved exactly the opposite – that it was in one's nature to love others, and to hold that love back required effort –

holding back the love only hurt ‘me’! The situation became ironic: I had started building a wall to prevent others from hurting me, or rather, something happening to them from hurting me. However, this was going against my inherent human nature – to love others – and this wall was actually hurting me!

Through my formative years, fear, love and death were my inner companions, playing games with me in the playground of my mind. They were the three pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of life, and for the life of me, I just couldn’t figure out how these pieces fitted together.

I often thought: ‘We all grow up with this knowledge that we will die one day, yet it seems a distant reality.’ It will indeed – simply because we do not know what it is to die – for we haven’t died before in this life that we are living. So while we know what it feels like to lose a loved one, while the full knowledge of the inevitable end looms large for all our life, deep down we don’t *feel* that we are going to die. Isn’t this strange?

It was many years later when the understanding dawned that deep down, we don’t feel we are going to die simply because... we don’t. Deep down, we feel we will live forever simply because... we do. If we don’t die, then *who* or *what* dies? And what lives forever? These questions, and more, were gradually answered during the years when I attended the talks of Ramesh Balsekar.

It was my good fortune that when I turned thirty, I came across a sage whose teaching was a validation of my life’s experiences right from the time I could remember. I have herein referred to Ramesh as my guru, master, teacher – whatever term came spontaneously as the essays in

this book emerged. These words are just labels for what can't really be given a name. He was my guru (which literally translates as 'one who dispels the darkness of ignorance'). He dispelled it by shining the spotlight of non-duality on my experiences. Just like a wild hare becomes immobile as its eyes get 'locked-in' when a searchlight is shone on it, likewise the teaching left me with no option but to view my life in the light of its clarity. Ramesh used to ask me to write as someone who has 'practised the teaching' in daily living. In these ways he became my teacher, but he was also my friend, philosopher, and guide.

Ramesh was a householder guru, which meant no orange robes or an ashram. He was a body builder in his younger days, a banker for thirty-seven years, a husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. He was someone who was very accessible, who gave talks in his living room in South Mumbai to which seekers from all over the world flocked.

It was on being exposed to his teaching and that of his guru, Nisargadatta Maharaj, that the jigsaw pieces started to fit into place to eventually reveal one grand image. When I began reading books on talks with Maharaj, much of the content didn't make sense and yet the sentences hit home and had a deep impact. Some of his teaching went over my head but at the same time, it went under – straight to the heart. The reader will find a generous helping of references to both Ramesh's and Maharaj's teachings in this book. To avoid them would have required effort, as they 'came up' wherever and whenever they were meant to.

When I had just completed the manuscript of my most recent book on his teaching, Ramesh asked me to also include a piece about the terrorist attacks in Mumbai (26th November 2008) in light of the teaching of Advaita. I told him that it was too late as the book was already at the printers. Ramesh passed away in September 2009. After his passing, I found myself reading some of his earlier books that I had not read before. It's just as well that I hadn't because I would not have been able to comprehend a lot of the teaching at that time. It was during the months after he passed away that spontaneous essays started to emerge. These were based on many influences in my life – some significant and others seemingly insignificant – with the spotlight of the teaching now shining on them. Ramesh was interested in how the teaching impacted one's daily living, and not just the theoretical understanding of it. He referred to this as 'deliverance' – the understanding functioning in daily living. He would often say, "What use is any teaching if it does not impact one's daily living?"

There was no intention to bring these essays together in a book. However, as Ramesh had asked me to bring out the essay on the terrorist attack in my last book, it occurred to me that these essays could be brought together in a new book as they all focus one way or another on some aspect of the teaching of non-duality.

My publishing firm had helped organise events in Mumbai for the Synchronicity Foundation, USA. All of the members of the Synchronicity group were put up at one of the hotels where the attacks took place. They lost two beautiful beings – Alan and his young daughter Naomi – in the attacks. I had given Ramesh a detailed account of

what transpired over those two days and nights during the attacks, as we were constantly in touch with Master Charles Cannon – Founder of Synchronicity – while he was confined in his room, just like many of the other members and hotel guests. We had gotten to know Alan well, as he had been coordinating all the event details with us over the preceding months. While there were six members of the group at the dining table (and all were shot at), it was Alan and his daughter who were destined to die that fateful night. The next few days were spent in hospital visits to inquire on the well-being of the other four members.

Ramesh perhaps thought that an intense experience like that would bring out aspects of the teaching that might be worth reflecting upon. He used to say, “Of what use is any teaching unless it can be tested in the fire of one’s personal experience?” The indomitable Vimalananda expressed the same point differently when he said, rather brusquely, “What sort of educational system do we have nowadays? They announce their examinations in advance so that any idiot can mug up a bunch of notes in preparation. The key to testing someone is to test them when they least expect it and are least prepared for it. Then you have an accurate idea of how much they really know.”* In any case, Ramesh had asked me to write about it and that is what came to pass – although almost two years later.

The writing here is simple. In fact, my first book *Pointers from Ramesh Balsekar* was nothing but a few paragraphs that covered the essence of the teaching, which took me all of two hours to put down. At the time,

* *Aghora – At the Left Hand of God*, Robert E. Svoboda, Rupa & Co.

I thought he might be quite disappointed when I had handed over the manuscript for him to read. When he returned it I said that I hoped he didn't mind that it was so short. He said, "Always remember... beauty in simplicity. That's the way it went in, so that's the way it came out."

There is no real sequence to the essays. You could read them in any order or you could read only some of them. If something you read here is meant to shine a light on some aspect of your life, then that is what would happen regardless of what you read or did not read. Some of the essays might just reflect a similar understanding when you view your life's events and situations through the prism of this teaching. This reminds me of a joke:

With a pile of three hundred résumés on his desk and a need to pick someone quickly, the boss told his assistant to make calls to the bottom fifty and toss out the rest. "Throw away two hundred and fifty résumés?" the assistant asked, shocked. "What if the best candidates are in there?" "You have a point," he said. "But then again, I don't need people with bad luck here."

If there is something you read in this book that moves you, so be it. For, that is what is meant to *be*.

Gautam Sachdeva
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