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Gautam Sachdeva  
Mumbai, 2024

## INTRODUCTION

This is not a biography in the conventional sense where events occur in chronological order. Rather, it's a collection of essays on some aspects of my life's journey thus far. The reader will find that the essays largely fall into three categories: the places I happened to visit with spiritual or religious associations, incidents from my life as a spiritual book publisher, and my own spiritual journey.

My spiritual teacher and *Advaita* master, Ramesh Balsekar, would often say, "Life is stranger than fiction." In my case, it couldn't be truer. It was more the norm rather than the exception.

I never had an inclination towards visiting temples and holy places. In fact, I recall that in my teenage years, I was quite averse to it for reasons unknown to me. Perhaps it was my Western upbringing: I went to a Montessori kindergarten and a Jesuit school. But I feel it was more a natural predisposition to not want to visit such places. Yet, I found that the forces of the Universe were guiding me to specific gods, temples, caves, and so on. Not only was I being guided but, also, the path was being made quite easy for me, for such visits. And so, by and by, I opened up to the experience, following the signs that came my way. Many of these signs came to me in the dream state.

According to a reputed *Vedic* astrologer, Sankara Bhagavadpada, the horoscope of a person reveals their potential of getting such insights and intuitions through dreams, and my horoscope was considered favourable for such experiences.

I had no idea I would get into the ‘business’ of publishing spiritual books. It was an accident of fate. I went into it with no experience and didn’t even consider it a business I wanted to get into. Yet, I can see the hand of destiny was at play, as it always was and is. For everyone. On my journey as a publisher, there were encounters with spiritual luminaries which showed me that the spiritual ego was no less than the ordinary ego. In fact, it was, perhaps, much stronger. I have written about these incidents not as criticism but as a takeaway that the reader can benefit from, as I did. There is always something to learn from each encounter or relationship even when one feels there is nothing to learn. That in itself is a learning.

Coming to my spiritual journey, it is one that I had no conscious interest in. Perhaps I was ignorant or arrogant, or both; I don’t know. I was not the typical spiritual seeker in search of a *guru*. Yet, I was most fortunate that destiny brought me to the doors of the man who would be my guiding light, as well as bestowed on me the grace of other masters from different traditions who would play a significant role in my life’s journey.

While my spiritual path was Advaita, as taught by my teacher, there were other influences at play too, supporting the process. I can see how, for me, a balance of *Shiva* and *Shakti* was essential for my journey. The Divine Feminine has always been an active presence in my life. My mother played the role of a mother as well as a father after my dad passed away when I was fourteen. Following her spiritual awakening in 1995 and

the experiences she consequently had, I learnt from her all about the *subtle body*, the *Kundalini Shakti*, *chakras*, *nadis*, and so on. My two sisters have been pillars of support throughout my life. Through my wife Devika, who is a follower of The Mother of Pondicherry, I have been reconnected to The Mother in an intimate way. I have been visiting Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's *samadhi* every year since my first visit there twenty years ago. And I have been guided to shrines connected with Shakti or *Devi* energy throughout my journey.

Yet, there is no getting away from Shiva, the destroyer of illusions. Many of mine were destroyed in my formative years when my father passed away unexpectedly and I had to shoulder a lot of responsibilities. Later, the teaching of Advaita that I received from my spiritual guide validated my life experiences. Then, all the pieces fell into place, like a jigsaw puzzle. For over twenty years, I have been visiting the sacred *Arunachala Hill* in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, considered to be Shiva Himself. On my first trip, after climbing up to the caves, I ran away from Tiru refusing to spend the night there, little knowing I would keep visiting it every year. I feel I have been guided by the invisible hand of the *Shaivite* sect of *Nav Naths* in some way — especially Gorakhnath.

I went on to study and practise the same breathing exercises and techniques that my mother followed, which deal with the Shiva-Shakti energy. For me, it was a parallel journey that began at more or less the same time I met both Eckhart Tolle and Ramesh Balsekar, who would have a profound influence on my life.

My teacher emphasised harmonious relationships as the way to peace of mind in daily living. In the context of *I Am That* (his guru Nisargadatta Maharaj's spiritual classic), he would

comment that it's one thing to say 'I am THAT,' but it is the realisation that THAT is you, me, he, and she which translates into peace and equanimity. This, to me, was a wonderful amalgamation of *Nirguna Brahman* (formless *Consciousness*) and *Saguna Brahman* (*Consciousness with form*). He would say that the manifestation is a reflection of the Source within Itself and not apart from It. "Consciousness is all there is," was his *mantra*. His teaching was thus a synthesis of Shiva and Shakti.

We think we are living our lives, but rather, the truth is that we are *being lived*. That is what my spiritual teacher said and what has indeed been my experience. This 'being lived' happens when we allow it to, rather than trying to force outcomes in life. When we go with the flow. As Rameshji would say, it is far easier to swim with the current than against it. This is the lesson I learnt early on, and this is what I hope to share through these stories. Not only are we being lived but more so, others too. Especially the ones we don't like!

I would like to add that the experiences I have written about are not shared out of a sense of ego gratification (that would be fooling myself, for I have met many people who have had far more spectacular experiences than I have). They are shared in the spirit of showing that someone with an urban, western-education upbringing is also able to come under the overarching reach of masters, seen and unseen (especially the Nav Naths), who constantly guide individuals on their spiritual journey.

Regarding the Nav Naths, *Kriya Yoga* master Yogiraj Gurunath expresses it very poetically:

Their consciousness is of such an advanced state that it is extremely difficult to comprehend their spiritual stature.



. . . These Sages of the Fire Mist are great beyond man's reckoning. . . . The stupendous magnitude of their work is incomprehensible.<sup>1</sup>

Gorakhnath laid out thousands of paths to attain Liberation, for the benefit of humankind. This includes the highest teachings of Advaita, the stream that quenched my spiritual thirst. My spiritual guide's master, Nisargadatta Maharaj, was connected to the *Inchageri Sampradaya* that traced its origin to the Nav Nath Revannath.

I am grateful to all the masters I have met, living as well as those who have dropped their mortal coil, who have helped me navigate my boat through the waters in this living dream of life. My most ordinary life has been enriched and made extraordinary, thanks to Grace, which shines bright on everyone like the sun. All it asks for is the awareness of this Higher Power.



*Ubi enim est thesaurus tuus,  
ibi est et cor tuum.*

For where your treasure is,  
there will your heart also be.

— Matthew 6:21



## LORD OF MY DREAMS, LORD OF MY LIFE

When I was born, my mother had a dream about *Ganapati*. I, therefore, have a very special place in my heart for Him. Here is my mother's narration of the dream, from her first book, *Conscious Flight into the Empyrean* (now titled *Kundalini: A Gentle Force*):

In 1970, I was expecting my third child, my son. This time I dreamt that I was at Chowpatty Beach. I saw marble stairs leading into the void. There was festivity in the air. As I was looking upwards at the sky, I saw a child's cradle made from rough-hewn branches come down and land by my side. Then I saw the beautiful life-size form of Ganapati coming down the stairs, swaying from side to side. He was white as marble, dressed in all the usually depicted finery, with a crown on His head. As He reached the last two-three steps, I bowed down to touch His feet. The tips of my fingers scraped against His toenails. Simultaneously, I got the tingling sensation of His hands on my scalp. That strange sensation lasted for many days.<sup>1</sup>

Talking about dreams, whenever I recall a dream that seems significant, I write it down. In March 2019, I had three short dreams connected with Ganapati, but they were not as spectacular as the one my mother had — something I had always wished for. Nevertheless, here are the entries from my diary:

First dream: Standing in a queue for Ganapati *darshan*. Crowded line. Suddenly find myself in front of an orange statue, seems to be Ganapati standing, and the crowd forces my head down to touch the feet. I see one eye of the statue, very clearly. It looks like a human eye looking at me.

Second dream: I am ambling in and around the Ramana Maharshi *ashram* in Tiruvannamalai. (Ramana Maharshi [1879–1950] was a great twentieth century South Indian sage known to a global community of spiritual seekers.) There is a lot of construction activity going on everywhere around. Then I find myself heading for *aarti* at Ramana Maharshi's samadhi, but it turns out to be some kind of Ganapati *aarti* instead.

Third dream: We are in the open. I look up in the sky and see a huge elephant. Coming down from above, where He is, are leaves and shrubs of some kind. I ask others if they saw the elephant, but they say “No,” though they saw the leaves falling from the sky. I feel very grateful that I saw Ganapati, Gajanan.



The elephant-headed god is most popular across the length and breadth of India. He is the Absolute, the Lord of Auspicious Beginnings, as well as the Remover of Obstacles.

Around fifteen years ago, my mother and her very close friend Meena, were driving back from Goa to Mumbai when their car broke down near the town of Ganpatipule. This town is famous for the *swayambhu* Ganapati that was discovered on the shores of the beach. Subsequently, a temple was built around it.

The two of them decided to spend the night there as it was getting dark. While the driver got busy with the car's repair, my mother and Meena went to visit the famous Ganpatipule Temple. After the darshan, they took a walk on the beach. It was there that it suddenly struck her that this was the same place she had seen in her dream when she had the vision of Ganapati when I was born. And that meant that earlier, she had erroneously identified the place in her dream as Chowpatty Beach in Mumbai.

Ever since I heard of this unplanned stopover at Ganpatipule and what unfolded thereafter on their trip, I nurtured the desire to visit it with my mother and Meena. I am grateful it got fulfilled when we made a trip in February 2014. We drove down from Mumbai via Chiplun and spent the night in a hotel near the temple. We had a wonderful darshan and then spent some time on the beach before heading back to the hotel. It was, for me, most fulfilling.



During one of his satsangs, my spiritual guide, Ramesh Balsekar, mentioned that he had once had his Nadi reading<sup>2</sup> done. It was very accurate. The Nadi reader mentioned that, at his birth, his mother named him *Ganesh*, which she later changed to Ramesh. This was a fact confirmed by his mother.

I thought it was quite an uncanny story. Ganapati showed up this way once again for me, that too in no less a role than that of a spiritual mentor.



Around 2002, I visited the Arulmigu Manakula Vinayagar Temple near the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. What was fascinating about it was that an elephant was stationed outside the temple, blessing everyone who placed some coins in its trunk, with a gentle thump on their heads. At aarti time, its mahout took it into the temple, and the elephant did aarti with the *thali*, which had a *diya* in it, in front of the *murti* of Ganapati. It was quite a touching site to see — an elephant worshipping the elephant-headed God. After the temple was renovated, this practice was stopped.

Just about an hour and a half away from Pondicherry is the famous Chidambaram Temple in Tamil Nadu. When I went there for the first time, I saw a huge statue of Ganapati within its precincts. Thereafter, because of the temple's relative proximity to Pondicherry, on my annual visits to South India, I would sometimes include Chidambaram in the itinerary. It has an ancient feel to it; as one walks its corridors, one is transported back centuries earlier. The complex is vast and sprawling, spread over forty acres.

The Chidambaram Temple is dedicated to Nataraja, the form of Shiva as the Lord of Dance. There are five major temples in India dedicated to Shiva that represent the five primordial elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Chidambaram Temple represents the ether element.

'Chidambaram,' the name of the city as well as the temple,



literally means ‘atmosphere of wisdom’ or ‘clothed in thought.’ Built in the tenth century, it is one of the oldest surviving active temple complexes in South India.

The shrine within the temple where I saw the grand and imposing Ganapati is known as the Mukkuruni Vinayagar Temple. I knew a few friends who had performed the Ganapati Homam there. It is a very elaborate ritual spread over two or three hours, conducted by half a dozen priests chanting hymns in praise of the Lord and making offerings to the sacred fire. Their fervour is quite something to see.

On my birthday, I often visit the Siddhivinayak Temple (perhaps the most popular Ganapati temple in Mumbai) for an early morning darshan, before the crowds swell up. The thought arose that on my fiftieth birthday, I too would like to perform a Ganapati Homam at Chidambaram, to express my gratitude to, and to honour, Lord *Ganesha*. This was not meant to be due to Covid restrictions in 2020, but I am grateful the opportunity presented itself in January 2022, when this wish of mine was finally fulfilled.

Incidentally, Chidambaram has a shrine dedicated to Baby Ganapati, or Bala Ganapati. It is known as the Shakti Bala Naramuga Vinayakar. What is unique about it is that the deity in this shrine is Ganesha with a human face instead of the elephant-faced murti in most temples. It is very cute indeed.

There is also, surprisingly, a grand and majestic reclining Lord *Vishnu* shrine, a rarity to find in a Shiva temple. Another favourite stop of mine within the precincts is the shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva as Dakshinamurthy (Shiva as the silent teacher).



It had been on my mind for quite a few years to do a road trip across Maharashtra for the Ashtavinayak (*'ashta'* means 'eight' and *'Vinayak'* is another name for Lord Ganapati) pilgrimage. It is a pilgrimage to eight Ganapati temples that are located in this state. This pilgrimage is very popular among Ganapati *bhakts* because all the murtis are swayambhu or self-manifested, that is, they are not sculpted but found formed by nature.

The temples, in the order to visit according to tradition, are Moreshwar Temple at Morgaon, Siddhivinayak Temple at Siddhatek, Ballaleshwar Temple at Pali, Varadvinayak Temple at Mahad, Chintamani Temple at Theur, Girijatmaj Temple at Lenyadri, Vighneshwar Temple at Ozar, and Mahaganapati Temple at Ranjangaon. The pilgrimage is traditionally concluded with a second visit to Moreshwar Temple.

My desire to undertake the Ashtavinayak pilgrimage finally fructified in April 2022. The pandemic changed my lifestyle quite dramatically. Formerly, I could not dream of leaving the office before 6.30 p.m. After the pandemic, I could not get myself to stay in the office after 1.30 p.m., the reason being that I had been working from home for many months. I would then come home, have lunch, and work from home. I was now no longer a slave to my office routine, which I was, for about twenty-five years, and that is how I started travelling a lot within India since 2020.

I started looking up tour companies on the internet. But to our (Devika and me) good fortune, a wonderful couple that we know, Eknath and Sangeetha, offered to take us in their brand new car for the pilgrimage. It was an offer we couldn't refuse. The road trip turned out to be easy-peasy as everything fell into place. We had to spend two nights in Pune as it is centrally

located vis-à-vis the eight temple sites. The darshans were quite effortless since there were no swarming crowds, thankfully.



A place I have visited often in recent years is the Morya Gosavi Temple in Chinchwad, which comes just before Pune. A friend of mine who was a disciple of *Baba* Muktananda of Ganeshpuri had mentioned to me about this temple and how Baba would visit it often as he considered it to be very powerful. Morya Gosavi's story is a fascinating one. His father was a devotee of Ganesha and did some hard penance for over forty-eight years to get a son. Finally, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said He Himself would be born as his son. And thus, Morya was born. Later, Ganesha also came to Morya in a vision and said He would be born as his son and that this phenomenon would continue for seven generations in the family! Morya lived a very long life, and at the age of 186, took *sanjeevan samadhi*.

I feel very peaceful when I visit the Morya Gosavi Temple, right from the time I alight from the car. I suppose what has always drawn me to such places is the quality of peace they emanate. That was my benchmark, so to speak. My guru placed peace of mind on the highest pedestal, higher than any spiritual experience. Any doubts I had about the import and sanctity of peace of mind were laid to rest one day when I read these words in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*: "The state of equanimity is the state of bliss."<sup>3</sup> This, for me, was the final confirmation.

The state of Maharashtra is truly a blessed land. In addition to being home to temples of repute, it has also been graced

with the presence of so many sages and masters, such as Shirdi Sai Baba, Meher Baba, Dyaneshwar, Nivruttinath, Sopan Dev, Muktabai, Tukaram, Namdeo, Akkalkot *Swami*, Baba Nityananda — the list goes on. There are also many locations connected with the Nav Naths. It has been a joy to discover all the places associated with these great beings.



When we began work on *The Sacred India Tarot* deck, our magnum opus as publishers, I was delighted when Rohit, my friend and the author, suggested we begin the deck with the first card being the ‘Blessings of Ganesha’ card. It was the most obvious and natural thing to do, considering it was a deck on Indian mythology and Indian epics. Rohit wrote a wonderfully succinct description of Ganesha for the deck.<sup>4</sup>

There were, and are, many challenges in producing this kind of deck in India, which doesn’t have much of a market for wisdom decks, oracle decks, tarot decks, and so on, unlike in the West, where they are in great demand. We only have playing card manufacturers here, who produce decks in the thousands. They do not print small runs. Besides, printing playing cards is a different ball game. Unfortunately, the few printers we have worked with are not as quality-conscious as we are. This results in tremendous wastage and rejections due to inconsistencies in printing, cutting, the order of the cards, and so on, which we as publishers have to bear. We lose about thirty per cent of what we print when we undertake our quality control on the stock received from the printer, which results in quite a loss for us as publishers. Yet, thanks to the grace of

Ganapati, the deck has sold well ever since its inception, and it has found its place in the tarot pantheon.

In the year 2020, we published a book called *Ganesha the Ultimate*. It is interesting how the book came our way. There was an author by the name of Deepa Kodikal (1940–2013), who had earlier published a couple of books based on her mystical experiences. Her first book, *A Journey Within the Self*, was a diary in which she has described her *yogic* and occult experiences. The other books were quite fascinating too. Deepa was a multifaceted personality and had varied interests such as playing the sitar, performing Indian dance and music, flying gliders, and directing plays.

For her next book, Deepa approached us to publish it. She came over with her husband to my place, to discuss the publishing of the book over a cup of tea. We were very happy to publish her work, but unfortunately, we did not go ahead as her husband was not agreeable to the terms mentioned in our contract and our lawyers were not prepared to modify the entire contract for one author.

Deepa passed away in 2013. It was in 2019 that we were approached by Pari Jaitly, a student of Deepa's, with an unfinished and unpublished manuscript written by Deepa. Pari was searching for a publisher. It was quite uncanny that the opportunity to work together on a book by Deepa came up again. The subject was Ganesha, and considering we had not published any book on Him, I readily agreed. That is how *Ganesha the Ultimate* came into being. About the book, Deepa had explained, "What I have written here is the result of guidance received through inspiration. This is a chronicle of Ganesha as He revealed Himself to me, and this book is a testimony of that revelation."

I suppose Deepa and I were destined to work together, albeit posthumously.



It was the year 2000. I was to make a trip to Vancouver, Canada, with my sister Nikki and her friends. We were all going to meet Eckhart Tolle — the spiritual teacher well-known for his book *The Power of Now* (which we published in India) — and attend his retreat at Hollyhock, on Cortes Island. I had to fly to Delhi to apply for my Canadian visa. At that time, it was not so easy for single, unmarried males to get a visa to Canada. Perhaps there was a suspicion that they might never return from there. I went with all my documents in place and had an interview with an officer. I thought it went well but was despondent to find out later in the evening that my application had been rejected.

Back in Mumbai, I spoke about this to our family friend Kaity Cama,<sup>5</sup> who made quite an outlandish suggestion. She asked me to find an elephant and feed it, and then apply for the visa again. The good thing was that one could reapply for it immediately. It is rare to find elephants wandering on the roads with their mahouts, especially in an urban city like Mumbai. I took a chance and went to the Byculla Zoo. I found the enclosure of elephants, and to my pleasant surprise, I saw the caretaker feeding an elephant some grass. I called out to him and requested him to feed the elephant on my behalf, pulling out some money and handing it over to him in the hope that he would agree to my request. He asked me to come into the enclosure and guided me to the elephant so I could feed it myself! Needless to say, I was delighted.

Kaitiy was right. Ganapati got my visa reapplication passed — the Remover of Obstacles indeed! Ever since then, I used to stop and feed an elephant that would always be posted at an intersection near my home in Goa, whenever I would pass by.



During my mother's spiritual awakening, she had a vision in her morning meditation followed by an understanding of the significance of Ganesha's trunk: All gods are truly within us. Ganesha's trunk represents an active Ajna Chakra (the third eye or the eye of wisdom) and an active Manipur Chakra (the seat of emotions and the way we live our life) working together in harmony. Ganapati's big belly represents an efficiently functioning, fully expanded Manipur Chakra. Therefore, Ganapati represents this state.

A detailed account is given in an entry in my mother's diary, which was published in her book *Kundalini Awakening*.<sup>6</sup>

It is quite astonishing to see the compassion the great sages had for the people. They gave form to the subtlest levels of vibration so that we could associate with and worship this form, in turn activating the centres within our body-mind complex. What an incredible feat!