

The Sage on Mt. Tron : Swami Sri Ananda Acharya: A short biography

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Childhood

Sri Ananda was born early in the morning of Thursday 29th December 1881, by the shores of the Ganges in Hooghly town, Bengal, in the east of India . His full family name was Surendra Nath Baral and he was the eldest son in a family of ten brothers and sisters. His father, Babu Gobardhan Baral, was known for his great generosity and charity. He worked in nearby Calcutta as a consultant managing director at the National Bank of India Ltd. His mother, Srimati Sauravamayee Dasi, was a kind of religious mystic who never visited any temple. She used to say that Divinity lived in the heart and that she worshipped it there. The family was very wealthy and lived in a huge old mansion with many rooms and several floors.

The very first school he went to was connected with Bandel Church , a Catholic church now over 400 years old, one of the oldest Christian churches in India , built by Portuguese settlers. It was at this school that he saw a big world map for the first time, and when the little boy saw the Scandinavian Peninsula it looked to him like a cat, which instantly made him exclaim: “To that tiger I will go when I’m grown up!”

Once in his childhood he had a dreadful experience. One day he saw an Englishman whipping an Indian labourer until he was smeared with blood. Then he felt that life had become unbearable and as in a sudden flash he saw that he would become a sannyasin – a free and holy wanderer who has renounced family, career and his own ambitions in this world, for the sake of helping and enlightening needy fellow human beings. He had always taken an interest in those simple yet impressive wanderers who sometimes came to the family house for food and rest. After this experience he thought constantly about becoming a sannyasin and about three years after this incident Surendranath met such a sannyasin who wished to have him as his disciple. Thus Surendranath actually became a sannyasin in his early youth. He was given the name Swami Anandacharya, or Swami Sri Ananda Acharya, as he himself chose to write it later on.

Youth

When Sri Ananda went to college he came into contact with the prevailing political currents, which at that time pulsated with the great struggle to achieve a national government and freedom from British tyranny. The dominant atmosphere in Bengal at that time was that the English had to leave India at any cost! It was a desperate longing for freedom after more than a hundred years of brutal occupation and suppression. At this time Sri Ananda was one of the leaders of the illegal youth resistance, working for liberation from the British hegemony, and he was pursued by the police during this period. But Sri Ananda was a philosopher and seeker of Truth, even in those stormy days, and he often took pupils under his tuition at that time along with him on trips to North India to practise Yoga.

During his college days he started to undertake long journeys and pilgrimages throughout the Indian subcontinent. He visited famous places and pilgrim centres of various kinds, not least the great

centres of Sanskrit learning in various parts of India , where he studied for shorter or longer periods under prominent men and women teachers, who were all experts in their field. In this way he gained intimate knowledge of all the various philosophical schools and the whole spectrum of India 's spiritual and cultural tradition.

After a while Sri Ananda started to study at the University of Calcutta , where in 1908 he was awarded a Master of Arts degree with honours in Mental and Moral Science. For several years he had already been providing private tuition for young schoolboys and after completing his university studies he also taught for a while at the University of Calcutta .

Professor of philosophy

In 1910 he was appointed professor of philosophy and logic at the Maharaja's College of Burdwan , some miles west of Hooghly , at only 29 years of age. Here he quickly became very popular among the students who called him "father", and he had great success teaching the students, who all passed their exams. The money he earned he gave away to those of his students who were poor and could not pay for books or study fees. To his father's great dismay he never sent any of his wages home, as is the custom and duty of the eldest son as soon as he earns his own money.

During all of his stay in Burdwan he practised Yoga and his mind became more and more introverted. After a while his state of mind became like that of a Yogi when he withdraws into a remote cave for uninterrupted meditation. As time passed it became more and more difficult for him to teach his students, and he realised that he had to give notice to quit his professorship. The parting was dramatic, and as he left Burdwan Railway Station by train, after about two years of service as a professor, more than 500 students and teachers were left at the platform weeping.

Himalayas

After Burdwan, Sri Ananda did not see any other possibility than to go to the Himalayas . Together with two friends he therefore travelled northwards by train to Haridwar. From there they thought of walking on foot to Lake Manasarovar in Tibet . After travelling for three days he experienced a great revelation in a cave by the Ganges at night. He was told that the time had now come for him to travel to Europe , and that he should there proclaim to the people the message of friendship and peace. Therefore, the following day they didn't continue northwards, but instead turned back to travel westwards to Europe.

Travelling to Europe

Early in the morning on the 14th of July 1912 Sri Ananda left Calcutta and embarked on a vessel as a deck passenger heading for Ceylon (Sri Lanka). When they reached Colombo , the capital of Ceylon , he had to change to a French steamboat, which was to take him to Europe . He left Ceylon and Indian soil for good on the 17th of July. After crossing the Indian Ocean the steamer made a short halt in an African country to replenish charcoal. At the end of a voyage of about three weeks, Sri Ananda could finally touch the solid soil of Marseilles in South France . From here he travelled by train across France via Paris to the English Channel , which again was crossed by boat. Penniless, and without friends or acquaintances, he arrived London on August the 15th, after almost exactly one month's continuous journey from India.

London

The long journey to Europe as a deck passenger had been hard, but his stay in London for the next two or more years would in no way prove to be any easier. Often he was without food and even shelter, and he had to endure many insults, racism, intrigues, exploitation and other unworthy behaviour from people he met. There were, of course, several bright spots, and he met some sincere, good friends. Nevertheless, this period of his life was mainly filled with hardships and the struggle for physical survival. In spite of all these difficulties he was very productive while in London . During all this time he gave an enormous number of lectures at various spiritual societies and organisations which flourished in England at that time. He also studied and worked regularly at the British Library where he found many invaluable treasures which the British had stolen from India through the centuries, in the form of age-old Sanskrit texts written on birch bark and palm leaves. These he used in his work with the three first books he published, which all were English translations of ancient Indian works from original Sanskrit texts.

In the summer of 1914 the First World War broke out and on August the 4th that year, England also became involved in the war. As time went by and the war became increasingly extensive, it became clear to Sri Ananda that he had to leave England . Late in the autumn, or in the beginning of winter, he got an invitation from one of his friends in London , who was an aristocrat and very rich, to come with her to her house in Norway and give lectures at the University of Kristiania (Oslo). And since he did not wish to return to India , but considered Europe his future field of work, he accepted the invitation.

Norway

The journey went by ship from Newcastle and became unusually long due to the war danger, but after many hours Sri Ananda could eventually put his feet on Norwegian soil for the first time, on a dark December night in 1914. At the beginning of 1915 he started his series of lectures at the old assembly hall of the University of Kristiania , which continued throughout winter and spring. As always, his lectures were delivered ex tempore, i.e. without manuscript, and notes were written down by a friend during the lectures. These notes were then compiled into a book called “Brahmadarsanam or Intuition of the Absolute” and published in England and distributed, not only in Great Britain , but also in India , USA and Canada . The book immediately received lots of unusually good reviews in all the countries in which it was published. For the first time in the Western World, those interested in philosophy were provided with a systematic presentation of Indian Philosophy by an Indian philosopher, who was, in addition, a sannyasin, and thus in direct spiritual lineage with the originators of these philosophies. The book was also published in Norwegian. During the very first lecture in this series at the university, Sri Ananda met an English professor’s daughter, Miss Amy L. Edwards, together with the Norwegian engineer Einar Beer. They soon became his very close friends, and as time passed they became two of his three closest friends.

After spending the summer in Tuddal in Telemark, Miss Edwards got him over to Stockholm in Sweden in January 1916 to give a longer series of lectures at the university there during spring. Miss Edwards was three years older than Sri Ananda and came from Bath in England . She was a genius at languages, who studied all the Indo-European languages, and at that time she had mastered at least French, German, Russian and Greek, and probably also Latin and some other languages. She noted

down all the Stockholm lectures, which were later compiled and published both in English and Swedish.

Sri Ananda liked the Norwegian mountains very much and spent the summer of 1916 in Gudbrandsdalen, while the summer of 1917 was spent at Tyin in Jotunheimen. At this time he told Einar Beer that he had become tired of city life and wanted to settle down permanently somewhere in the Norwegian mountains. He then asked Beer if he could find such a place for him in the mountains. Beer answered affirmatively, but asked in return as to where he should search. Sri Ananda then turned towards north-east, straightened his arm in front of himself and only said that he should search in that direction – towards north-east.

Tronsvangen

With a north-eastern direction to guide him, Einar Beer started from Kristiania and travelled by train up Gudbrandsdalen, over Dovre to Hjerkin and from there by car down Folldalen towards Nord-Østerdalen – all the time with a suitable place for Sri Ananda in mind. Coming down Folldalen they had a puncture and while the driver was changing the wheel, a motorcyclist with a sidecar stopped by and offered to help. It then turned out that the motorcyclist was an old friend of Mr. Beer who now practised as a vet in the district. Mr. Beer then told him his errand, and the friend immediately informed him about a 'seter' (mountain farm) on Tronsvangen in Lille Elvedal (later Alvdal) which was for sale. Einar Beer then entered the sidecar and together they drove to Lille Elvedal. The same evening they walked up the hillside to Tronsvangen, beneath Mt. Tron, and met the owner of the two-storied boarding house 'Ingridsæter'. The old lady received them gladly and at once agreed to sell the draughty old log house. The purchase was settled shortly afterwards, when Sri Ananda arrived at the mountain farm.

Sri Ananda received the message about this while he was at Tyin, and travelled directly from there to Lille Elvedal, together with Miss Edwards. He arrived at Tronsvangen, at the mountain farm which was to be his residence for the rest of his life, on the 28th of September 1917, as a young man of nearly 36 years. Sri Ananda liked Tronsvangen very much. With its views towards Storsølen and Rondane, it reminded him of the Himalayas. Half a year later he renamed "Ingridsæter" "Gaurisankar Seter", after one of the highest peaks of the Himalayas. Later, about 1920, Miss Jewson, commonly known as Samvida, came over from England. She had come to know Sri Ananda during his time in London. Miss Edwards, Miss Jewson and Mr. Beer also lived on Tronsvangen with Sri Ananda and became the most central people in the rest of his life. The local people were quick to name him "Baral" or "Professor Baral" as they found his sannyasin name too hard to pronounce, and by that name he is remembered everywhere in the region to this day.

The "father" of the University of Peace

When Sri Ananda came to Tronsvangen for the first time, and especially when, shortly after that, he walked up to the "Peace Plateau" on Mt. Tron, memories of a great childhood vision of a University of Peace came back to him: "From my earliest childhood this great idea used to come to my head of how to lead all the nations together and bring Peace permanently to this Earth, by establishing the great University of Peace. Wandering alone I used to think out every detail of this great plan. In England I never thought of it and in London and elsewhere I often thought that I had forgotten something but could never find out what it was. It is only here on this great mountain that the plan

again revealed itself to my brain” (from Einar Beer's notes). When Sri Ananda saw the “Peace Plateau” it was clear to him that the first future University of Peace had to be there.

In two of his books published in 1921 – “Karlina Rani” and “Kalkaram” – he presents the main contents of the idea, which in short is to establish a series of Universities of Peace in the mountains of many countries around the world. One student from each country shall live together with their teachers in each of the universities. Study will last for 21 years and every year the students will move to another university in another country, until they have studied all over the world and have come to know, and become friends with, all the races, cultures and nations of the world. After finishing their studies the students will go out in the world and teach people the Wisdom of Peace tie together with bonds of friendship the people and nations of North and South, East and West. Only in this way, in Sri Ananda's opinion, could peace be brought permanently to this war-ridden planet. At one occasion, around 1920, he said that the University of Peace would come “in a hundred years' time”.

Life on Tronsvangen

Sri Ananda provided an incredibly exotic element to village life in Norway at that time. No one had ever seen or heard of anything like him in these latitudes. The famous Norwegian humorist and great son of Alvdal, Kjell Aukrust (who was a small boy at the time), once said in a radio interview that “to see Baral riding on his white horse down from Mt. Tron to the centre of Alvdal, with his turban, long hair and beard, and flowing orange silk robes, yes, that was really the fairytale itself for the boys of Alvdal!” Contemporary journalists wrote that to see Sri Ananda on Tronsvangen was like seeing “a lotus on snow” or like seeing “a hummingbird on a birch branch”. The words were obviously missing but the contrast of the pictures was clearly showing all the same!

In the first ten years on Tronsvangen Sri Ananda was enormously productive, even from day one. He wrote and published as many as 21 books during this period – allegories, collections of poems, philosophical messages, collections of songs, dramas, a textbook in ecological farming, a cookery book, translations from Sanskrit, – the list goes on – first with big international and Scandinavian publishing houses and later on through his own publishing group: Brahmakul. Several of his books were published in two languages, English and Norwegian or Swedish. From 1928 all Sri Ananda's book writing and outwardly visible work stopped, and he appeared to withdraw more and more

But during all the years up to the outbreak of the 2nd World War Sri Ananda received innumerable guests and visitors, who all usually got a warm meal, a long lecture about any theme between heaven and earth, and a gift at the time of departure. Whole school classes, parties and clubs could direct their tour to Tronsvangen to pay Sri Ananda a visit, and he would then usually sit on his big, homemade chair with wheels – where he could sit cross legged like in his homeland – in his study surrounded by his many books. On the meadow outside, his two horses were grazing, the billy goat was tethered to a long rope and a pole, the pig moved freely in and out of his cave in the earth, the ducks and the goose were bathing in the pond, the roosters strutting in the yard and the pigeons flew in the sky, while the big black ox was tethered to his stall in the cowshed. Sri Ananda was presented many old domestic animals from village people who refrained from taking their lives, and he thus held a kind of old home for tired domestic animals in Alvdal. On Gaurisankar Seter they were allowed to live and to die a natural death. His white horse Bolkari was 20 years old when he got her and she lived for another 19 years before she died. Perhaps she was the oldest horse ever to live in Norway ?

Sri Ananda was very well liked and highly respected among his neighbours on Tronsvengen and among the village people of Alvdal and in the district in general. He had many good friends, both lay and learned, among Norwegians, the Sami people and foreigners. He was popular among visiting children and throughout the years he sent a great number of letters, poems and greetings to all those who he had come to know in Alvdal. During the 2nd World War he defied a German order to black out all windows, and let an oil lamp burn incessantly in the window on the first floor of Gaurisankar Seter during the whole occupation. The light showed clearly far down in the village on the dark winter nights, and the people of Alvdal only called it "The Baral Star". As a British citizen (India was part of the British Empire at the time) it was especially dangerous for Sri Ananda during the German occupation, but two men from the village had made, on their own accord, solemn vows to protect him with their own lives if necessary. Luckily it never became necessary.

Was Sri Ananda a Buddhist?

It is a common understanding among village people that Sri Ananda was a Buddhist, but this is a misunderstanding, as his many books clearly show. He was not Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Muslim or anything else, even if religious persons from various backgrounds whom he met often thought that he represented just their religion and faith. Men like Sri Ananda never belong to any religion and never preach any particular teaching – they are deeply rooted in their own spiritual experience and realization. For them all religions are like a "kindergarten of spirituality", which only represents a starting point for the quest. For them the spiritual is universal and the same for all – it does not depend on dogmas, doctrines, ceremonies, rituals or any other thing, but only on the purely human or humane. The sincere and conscientious quest, which starts outside oneself with the reading of holy scriptures and visits to churches, temples, mosques and pagodas, will always end up with the naked contemplation of ones own Self. It is this Self-Realization (also called "God-Realization"), which characterizes men like Sri Ananda. The human being has everything and is itself the key to the very mystery of Life, it only needs a little help to get rid of its own illusions and ignorance, which it also carries in abundance. In India men like Sri Ananda are mentioned with the designation of respect, Rishi, which means a "seer" or "sage". He was also a yogi – one who practises yoga – which is a physical, mental and spiritual science about how one harmonizes and unites the individual with the universal. The science of yoga is independent of any religion or doctrine and can be practised by every sincere seeker of truth.

The tomb on Mt. Tron

On the Day of Armistice, the 8th of May 1945, Sri Ananda went into a state, which in India is called Samadhi – a state of the highest consciousness and harmony – just as he had foretold in a poem 25 years earlier. He remained fixed in this state for over a month, without eating or drinking and without visible breathing. Those closest to him had been used to seeing him like this for days at a stretch over the years, but this time weeks went by. His skin was fresh, and his hair and nails were growing. But one morning they found that his skin had changed colour and they understood that he had left his body. He was declared dead on the 13th of June, after which his body was embalmed.

Some years earlier Sri Ananda had asked Mr. Beer to find a grave-site for him on Mt. Tron, which was found by Mr. Beer after a whole week's thorough searching. After Sri Ananda was declared dead, preparations were made for his burial on the chosen place on Mt. Tron. But this took time as the two English ladies had written an urgent letter to the King for permission and had to wait for the answer,

which, according to their own notes, was given positively and orally through one of the King's ministers. Finally, just as the sunrays shimmered over the mountains at four o'clock in the morning on 1st July 1945, the coffin was lowered into the grave, 1400 metres below the peak of Mt. Tron, with views towards Rondane, Snøhetta and Savalen, during a simple ceremony, with many local people present and with a speech by the mayor of Alvdal.

The poet, philosopher and mystic

Sri Ananda had the typical mind of a poet, and at the same time he was also a typical philosopher who could ask questions about all things and analyze to the bottom all conditions. And the combination of these two characteristics made the mystic Sri Ananda who sought the very essence of Life to find “the True, the Good and the Beautiful” of existence. One of the two English ladies who lived together with him, Sister Samvida, gives us a glimpse of Sri Ananda's nature and his life on Tronsvangen in one of her notes: “As summer waned on Mt. Tron, every evening after saying goodnight to the horses, Sri Ananda walked round the flower beds talking to them: ‘It will be all right, some warm weather is coming.’ Then he visited the potato patch. ‘All life needs reassuring’, he said, and he sat and looked and looked at the stars. ‘Even the stars need it. I say to them, ‘It will be all right’. You see, the universe is so small and the Soul so vast!’”

The very last Sri Ananda wrote was a poem about silence written on the 27th of April 1945, only a few days before he went into his last samadhi and left this world:

In silence the moon sends her smiles to the snowy mountains –

In silence the stars move in the still ether ocean –

In silence the rose spreads her fragrance in the new-born dawn-air –

In silence the lily wakes in the mountain lake –

In silence Spring plays on her flute to call the cuckoo –

In silence babies sleep, protected by Christ watching beside their pillow –

In silence the poet receives his inspiration from God –

In silence the heart of mankind prays for emancipation from life –

In silence the heart in charity gives –

In silence the heart accepts with warm silent thankfulness.