



MOTH & THE FLAME
HEART OF LIGHT

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After a short unhappy spell of separation, my parents realized the great love they always had for each other and reunited (remaining together for the rest of their lives), but I felt damaged. Even if Hope had plucked me from watery oblivion, I was unable to forgive, nor pry loose depression's shadowy fingers. The stark poem of Vladimir Mayakovsky haunted me:

*...Do you note, behind protruding nostalgia,
the shadowy billow of laughter's surf?
I am as lonely as the only eye of a man
on his way to the blind.*

In a Venice Beach coffeehouse, another burnt-out comrade described a monastic retreat, not far away. 'The Fountain of the World' sits near the top of Chatsworth Mountain,' he explained, eyes bright with hope: 'It's free, and we'd be welcome, as long as we follow the rules and do some work. The folks there practice brotherly love and walk barefoot!' 'Brotherly love? Walk barefoot?' I asked, incredulous. 'It has to do with their vows of personal poverty and non-injury to living things,' he explained. 'Some of their buildings are built around trees, rather than having them cut down. We can stay as long we like. It's worth checking out!' We packed our few belongings and headed for the hills. Like a wounded dog, I craved a quiet glade to rest and heal beneath.

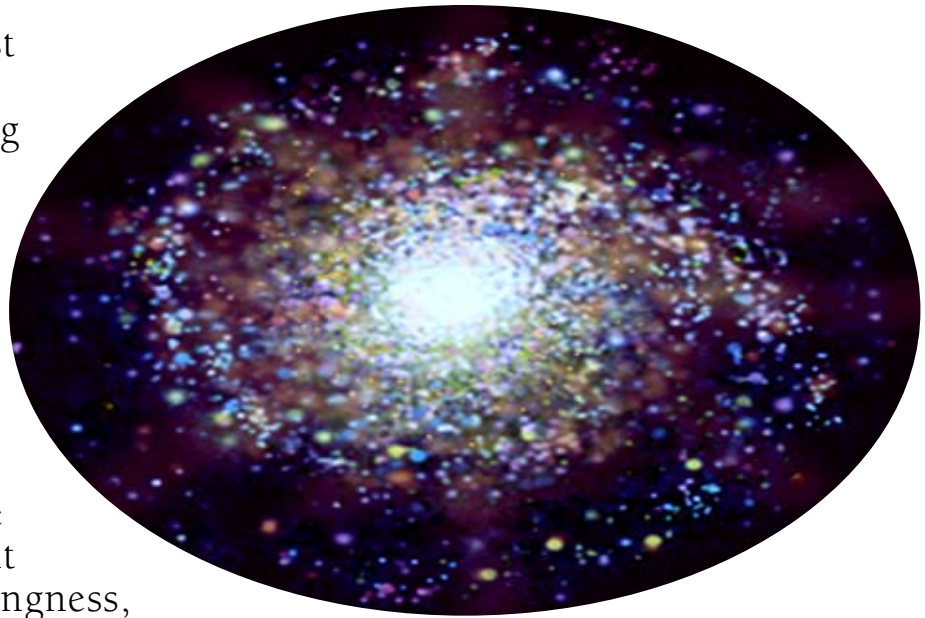
The Fountain of the World was high above the smoggy Los Angeles basin, surrounded by tall eucalyptus, poplar and pine, house-size boulders and dry sunbleached hills. Almost from the minute we left the car, soft zephyr-like breezes started sweeping away the cobwebs from my mind. Obligatory group sessions called "Concentrations" were held in the main hall each evening, where thirty or so monastics would stand in circles with closed eyes, hands upturned, chanting such affirmations as 'Love One, Love One...' or, 'Be positive, be positive...' over and over, from very slow and low to very fast and high-pitched. Despite initial feelings of embarrassment and weirdness, I eventually settled into the routine. One week after arrival, I had an experience that profoundly changed the course of my life.

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During an evening Concentration I became quite detached from the outer surroundings and entered a condition of heart-flow prayer—a sort of unceasing entreaty to the Unknown. While gazing with closed eyes into the dark void, I became cognizant of a comet-like light speeding from the distance straight toward the center of my head, growing brighter and brighter with every moment. A wave of circular, evanescent, golden whiteness burst upon my vision. Then came another bright comet, and another, unceasing rhythmic, and mysterious. It was as though I had entered the living heartbeat of the Cosmos. In that heart of Light I experienced intoxicating waves of Unconditional Love. For all I knew, the body and the world simply ceased to exist. All that remained was boundless, scintillating radiance and awesome energy, proceeding simultaneously in all directions. After what seemed an eternity—perhaps only a few minutes—this reality/vision subsided, intruded upon by the activities of monastic life.

This was my first taste of a state of Reality—something beyond the senses, beyond intoxication; perhaps something I had always been blindly groping and hoping for.

Accompanying the experience of Light came an all-knowingness, a love freed of egoism. Once separated from that blissful, numinous state, numerous questions and doubts quickly assailed me. The head of the monastery was a kindly woman in her seventies known as Elder Nikona. If anyone could explain what happened, I thought it would be she, and so, not without trepidation, I knocked upon the door of her cottage, and was invited inside. With mixed emotions I asked about my mysterious experience. Elder Nikona admitted, 'I do not know what this Light is that you have experienced, my son. But I do know that by it you have experienced a blessing of a very high order.' She smiled and patted my hand. I thanked her and excused myself to walk alone in the night, lost in thought, questioning, wondering:



To whom can I turn for help? What is this Light? Am I chosen for a higher calling, or have I lost my mind? Who am I? What is my destiny?

Over the next few days I sought from others but drew blank and unsatisfactory responses, as well as questioning looks. I seriously questioned my sanity.

A few nights after my first encounter with the Inner Light, I was awakened in total darkness from a dreamless sleep by a constant thundering roar on all sides, a stupendous waterfall of sound pressing into my being. Inability to lift even a finger led to desperate panic. ‘God! I’m dead! Help me!’ I cried, though no sound escaped numb lips. Physical paralysis and lack of bodily sensation were complete and terrifying. With Herculean effort I eventually began moving fingertips, then toes, and gradually the rest of my alienated body—a mere husk inside of which the real me lived.

I began searching through the monastery’s well-stocked library, and discovered a translation of the millennia-old Bhagavad Gita (The Celestial Song), the celebrated sermon of Krishna, the avatar, to his disciple Arjuna, the warrior-prince, who trembled and wavered in his duty when called to action on the battlefield of life. The Gita examined morality, religion, duty, yoga, meditation, and the goal of human existence, an elusive goal that can be attained by realization of one’s immortal higher Self. Self-realization, the Gita affirmed, led to ultimate freedom from the cycle of births and deaths, through realization of the *Paramatman*, Overself, or God.

Something inside resonated to the ancient message; one passage in particular whispered to slumbering memories, setting them astir:

*Let the yogi sit in Sidh-aasan,
in a place neither too high nor too low,
...And, fixing gaze at the root of the nose,
He should make his mind as still
as a candle’s flame in a windless place.*

When I sought knowledge from my brother-monastics about yoga and meditation, they warned that their study and practice were forbidden at the Fountain of the World. Ever a rebel, I soon found a solitary place on the mountain away from prying eyes. Here I would go daily to sit straight-backed, left leg folded under, right leg folded on top, hands resting upturned on each other, thumbs touching, eyes closed, the body and mind a laboratory; my secret temple. The burning pain which quickly developed in my Westernized legs was excruciating, but with determination the time for sitting was gradually increased each successive day from a few minutes to

half an hour, from half an hour to an hour, and longer. The outer form was irrelevant. What mattered was the fact that whenever I sat like this, after a few minutes the soft golden Light would return, imparting a delectable inner state. Each encounter left me strengthened; each plunge into the billowing radiance helped heal the sickness in my heart. I began to realize how disciplined behavior strengthened the connection to the divine and conversely, how dissipation weakened it. Even Michelangelo had an earthy saying: ‘What one expends in acts of dissipation by night cannot be put into the sculpture by day.’ The causal relationship intrigued me.

At night, too, I would slip from the men’s dorm while others slept, following a long and precarious trail through bushes and rocks to sit alone atop a huge prehistoric boulder overlooking the dark valley, and the few lights of the monastery below. These late vigils under the glittering stars were rewarded with further joyous and radiant experiences, although encounters with the lower mind and its fecund phantasmagoria left me shaken and fearful. First-hand, I began to realize that a cosmic, benign force is always in service of the aspiring seeker, but a corrupt power lurking in the darker corners of the mind is also there to assail and test one’s resolve. Despite such unwanted intrusions in my practice, I persevered in solitary struggle, intensely invoking God’s protection, throwing myself on His mercy, even shedding tears. Then, as reward, like candy for a child, the Light would return and banish the phantoms. I could now begin to empathize with Saint Anthony of the North African desert and what he endured in a lengthy and celebrated battle with the forces of darkness, immortalized in the medieval art of Pieter Bruegel and Mattias Grunewald.

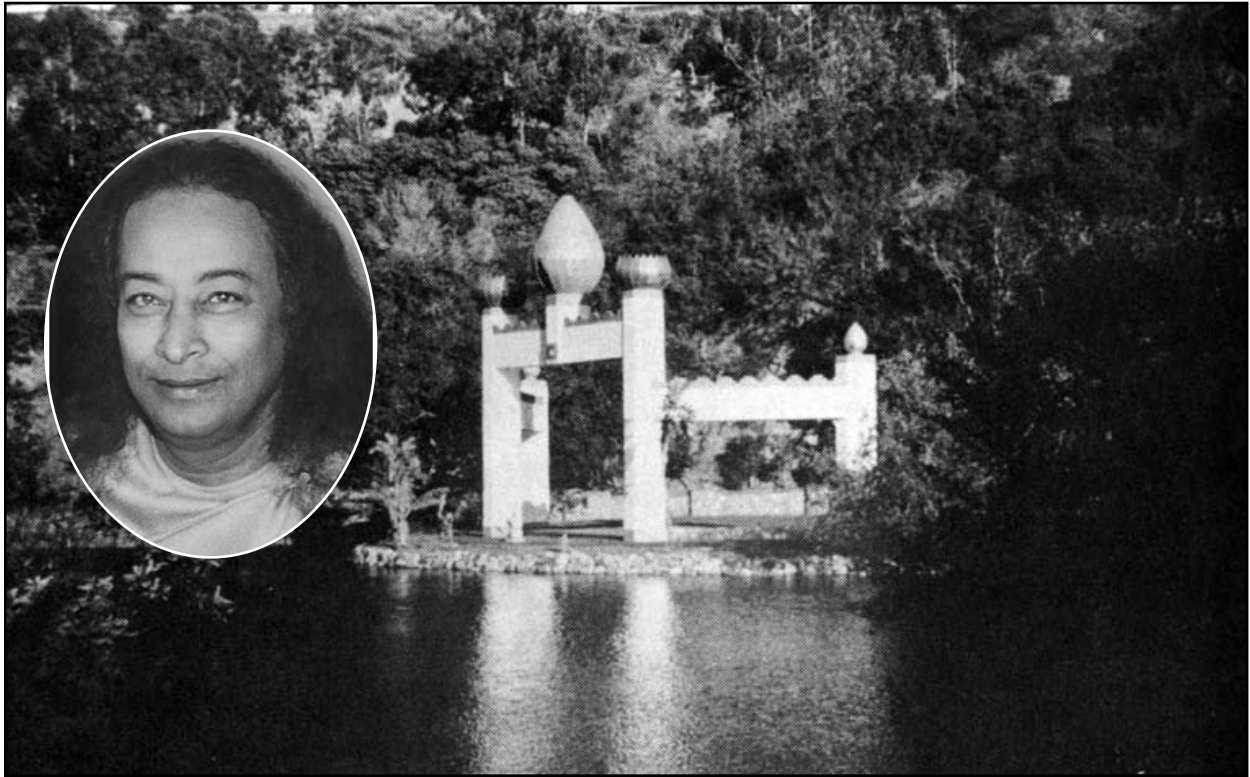
In the this painting, I gave another twist to the theme of Anthony’s temptations based on my own overblown struggles. Mine depicts a many-headed dragon—metaphor of the mind, tormenting the desert sage. After nearly ten years of solitary meditations and struggles in a mountain tomb, Anthony finally discovers the secret of the Inner Light, surrounds himself with it and overcomes the forces of darkness. No mere ascetic, Anthony goes on to rescue many early Christians from the cruelties of the Roman circus, and is today the patron saint to the Coptics of Egypt.

Two months passed. Increasing pressure was being brought to bear to renounce the world and become a full-fledged monastic brother. This vow meant renouncing a fledgling art career, money, property (not that I had any), family and friends on the outside,



and living a life subservient to a puzzling theology with Krishna Venta, their departed founder, at the top. From talks with his few remaining original followers, and reading magazine articles and mimeographed pages, I learned that Venta, a white American, vainly claimed that he was none other than the long-awaited and final Messiah, the Buddha, Krishna, Isaiah and Jesus all rolled into one, yet his alleged behavior with followers left much to be desired. I was neither ready nor willing to surrender life and freedom in blind obedience to anyone. To the questions that dogged my existence, I longed for answers that rang true on all levels.

When the day of ordination arrived for several probationary monastics, I had already made my decision to leave. Each step through the monastery grounds felt as though immense psychic weights were about my ankles, making movement exceedingly difficult. I looked around and noticed several crones whispering inaudibly, while directing their combined focus upon me, holding me. Definitely weird! With every ounce of will I struggled up the stairs leading to the open road, but once off the Fountain's property, I felt light as a feather and my feet took wings. I ran and ran till I could run no more, down that mountain road.



*The Self-Realization Lake Shrine, Malibu
(Inset: Paramahansa Yogananda)*

The Lake Shrine:

With high hopes and no money, before the day was out, I found myself for the first time at the gates of the Self-Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine in the Santa Monica Mountains—founded decades earlier by the yogi-saint Paramahansa Yogananda, who came from India to bring the science of kriya yoga to the West. The peaceful, meditative aura and jewel-like beauty of the lake, the gliding swans and the bright atmosphere drew me many times over the next few months. I'd hitchhike there from my studio in Venice Beach, to meditate and read from Yogananda's marvelous *Autobiography of a Yogi*, in which I discovered numerous references to the Divine Light experienced by saints and seekers of various times, places, and faiths. The extraordinary and often miraculous accounts of India's great sages and scientists of the spirit beckoned powerfully. Yogananda was a Christ-like man of great wisdom, but he had consciously died in 1952. After his well-documented death, Yogananda's body remained in a state of incorruptibility for weeks. But now, where to turn? I wasn't able to recognize his exalted stature among the kind and helpful monks I met. While returning to old haunts and dreams of art a few miles south in Venice, I

sporadically visited the Lake Shrine to reflect on the meaning of life and to escape the chaos of my life.

Ever a rebel and daredevil, one full-moon night, unnoticed and in secret, I climbed over the locked wrought iron gate that guarded the lake shrine, quietly navigated the shadowy path I had often paced in daylight hours, and found my way to the far side of the lake, beneath the lotus gate, next to a large stone urn containing some of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes. While swans glided silently across the lake and ghostly white marble statues of Jesus, Buddha, St. Francis, Quan Yin and Krishna looked down from garden prominences, this seeker sat in lotus posture with closed eyes, inwardly seeking help, understanding and wisdom. As he sat wrapped in silence, an ever-unfolding panorama emerged from the ether, and the hours rolled by. As consciousness receded deeper, he began to glimpse radiant beings extending blessings, comingled with waves of bliss.

Returning again to Venice Beach, I asked my heart how I could possibly reconcile such sublime experiences with my once-again besotted existence. One of my difficulties was that initial mystical experiences were quite overwhelming, if not bewildering. There were very few reference points. However wonderfully inspiring and great, how could past Masters and their words give practical guidance to the living? Then, how to reconcile the conflicting claims put forth by a plethora of teachers and followers? How was one to determine their validity and reach? One thing for certain, this new-found Light was the source of good and holy power, perhaps the unseen Source of all life and intelligence in the universe. Could it possibly be enough to transform a dissolute human life?

Pythagoras, the ancient Grecian mathematician, philosopher and mystic, had referred to the Science of Light, which, when mastered, can alter the structure of matter. With its aid, Pythagoras demonstrated his mastery of the elements by controlling an eagle and a rampaging bear which obeyed his higher will.

A remarkable experience involving an aspect of the power of this same Light befell some friends and me in 1963 in San Francisco. While strolling through a late-night crowd, one member of our party skipped ahead onto busy Market Street and directly into the path of a speeding bus. I was suddenly aware of subconscious gears shifting, and the prescient Observer emerging—both to witness and participate. Everything and everyone appeared dreamlike, in slow motion. Into this thickness came a sudden rush of adrenaline and a loud cry, 'Look out!' came automatically from my mouth. A brilliant

flash of Light enveloped the entire scene. Everything stopped, frozen in time-silence—the bus, the people, and all sound. In that split-second pause, only the would-be victim was able to break the stasis and move free from the path of certain death. The eerie stillness was replaced with the roar of everything. A brief suspension of time and space became enveloped in Light; a life was saved! A mysterious miracle had occurred, and all who were witness were profoundly thankful and mystified.

In the quest ahead, however lacking in maturity or wisdom, I never hesitated to investigate any teacher, religion or teaching. In some quarters, followers were adamant that their holy book, bible, or body of teachings passed down from past Masters was now the embodiment of the Guru or Master, and to be followed unquestioningly. Many claimed their path to be the highest, and eagerly sought converts. I craved an unsealed revelation, a living teacher of universal stature, yet he or she would have to be the humblest of the humble—if that were possible—whose teachings were universal and free (I had always instinctively felt that Truth should be free to the sincere seeker—never a business, as so many of the New Age groups and established religions have become); one who could answer all burning, relevant and timely questions; someone who embodied what he or she taught; who didn't place much stock in outer rites, rituals and dogma.

Such periods of God-longing and search were short-lived and unstable, satellites partly shot through the Earth's atmosphere, only to be recaptured and pulled back by the gravity of desires and attachment. From 1961 to 1964, with one or two exceptions, the springs of Divine Light all but dried up as this prodigal profligate wandered and squandered the spiritual capital we all come into the world with. Again and again I sank into the abyss of drug addiction and despair. The inevitable dark night of the soul engulfed me. Drained and spent, selfish, egotistical and irreverent, I watched the chasm open before me, and I was fearful of the consequences. Yet there was always a faintest awareness of God, the Watcher, the Recorder, the Waiter.

Following a solo exhibition at a major San Francisco art gallery at 19 years, I left for lovely Mendocino County whose rolling grassy hills invitingly beckoned to a damaged soul (brochure on following page).

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BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT

✻

Arran Blackburn Stephens

NOVEMBER 12 THROUGH DECEMBER 6, 1963


*Oil Paintings
Constructions
Graphics*

RECEPTION FOR THE ARTIST: 8 P.M., NOVEMBER 12

✻

Batman Gallery

HOURS: TUESDAY THROUGH SATURDAY FROM 1:30 TO 6
2222 FILLMORE ST., SAN FRANCISCO 15, CALIFORNIA
JORDAN 7-6730



In long and solitary walks through tawny wind-swept December fields, came flickerings of renewal and bonding with the Earth Mother. Resting beneath a magnificent solitary oak, one could but marvel at the sun's rays filtering through richly illumined layers of rustling dead oak leaves and then the eyes, breaking into prisms and inward meaning. The solidity of the world became diaphanous, translucent; every feature containing its nimbus, its glowing edge. The Inner Light, which had been lost for two years, began to resurface like a flood of hope and joy in the form of myriad sparklings across the wash of external sight. In a poem of sorts, I then attempted to capture that fleeting ecstasy, barely able to move the pen:

*Through the portal of the eye
All beings have Light & spectral color.
Lending from his splendor, the Sun said,
'Take a little PEACE of me,
& let it be your Light for the night.'*

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Too soon, alas, the inner/outer Light dissipated. Unable to hold or to surrender to it, I nevertheless knew that from the Luminous my peace and salvation would one day come, if only the layers that separated us could be peeled away. For now, my spiritual quest was sullied, but a rude but merciful awakening was speeding toward me like a night train careening around a hidden bend in a tunnel.

Ah, Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate! Who could say it better than you?

Obstinate are the trammels but my heart aches when I try to break them. Freedom is all I want, but to hope for it I feel ashamed. I know that there is priceless wealth within Thee and that Thou art my best friend, but I have not the heart to sweep the tinsel that fills the room. The shroud that covers me is a shroud of dust and death, I hate it, yet hug it in love. My debts are large, my failures great, my shame secret and heavy, but when I come to ask for my good I quake in fear lest my prayer be granted.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, p. 28, Scribner Poetry, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, NYC, NY. USA, 10020.