



MOTH & THE FLAME

GLIMMERINGS

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None is poor, O Bhikha.
Everyone has rubies in his bundle;
But how to open the knot
He does not know,
And therefore he is a pauper.

— Bhikha Sahib (1713-1763)

*E*n route to Tangiers, I arrived in New York's Greenwich Village. By prearranged plan I was to connect with an artful friend from L.A. who had our tickets and traveling money. Snow fell as I waited by Washington Square where the fountains had already turned to ice. Hours passed with no familiar face in sight. When the last Village coffeehouse closed, I was out on the street, freezing, thinking wistfully of my mother, my fate and survival. With suitcase in hand, less than forty dollars, light shoes and thin clothing, I aimlessly walked the bitter streets, hoping for warmth and refuge, yet wary of strangers. There was cruel beauty in the snowflake patterns swirling about the cold streetlights. Somehow I survived the long night and those that followed.

According to a Hindu proverb, *one uses a thorn to remove a thorn*. Suffering can be a dross-burning fire and the journey's goad. After some trials, a spare room and studio were found, while New York was buried under a mantle of heavy snow. I painted 18 to 20 hours a day, preparing another major exhibition, and the quest, like a smoldering coal under dead ashes was uncovered by a favorable wind and re-ignited.

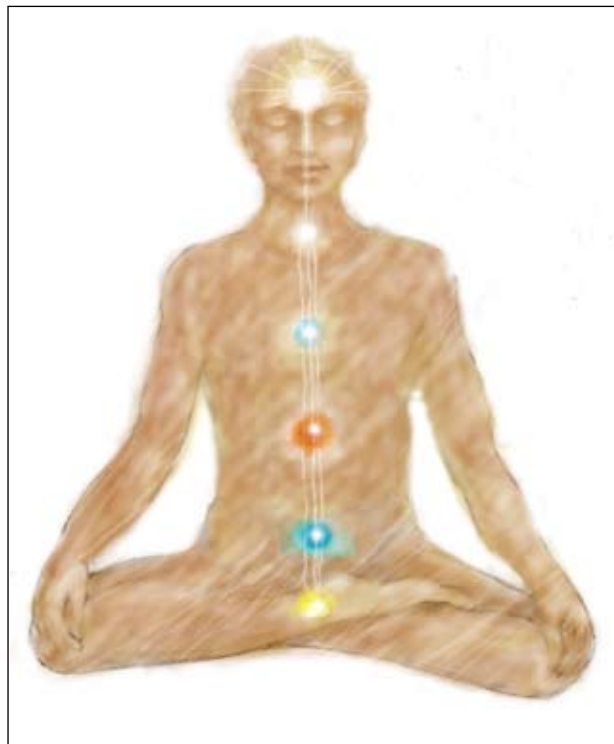
In the basement of Weiser Books, I discovered the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* by the great medieval saint of Tibet; *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* by Alexandra David-Neel; *The Secret of the Golden Flower*—a sacred text on Chinese mysticism; *All and Everything*, and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* by G.I. Gurdjieff; Osborne's biography of the silent sage Ramana Maharshi; and works by Sri Aurobindo. These fed my ever-growing hunger for the spiritual life. There were great sages, to whatever spiritual heights they had attained, some of whom offered no specific technique or system, while organizations offered techniques for pay, but had no living Master. The seeker has to find his or her way through the

maze unless awfully lucky to just have treasure land in one's lap.

While the world outside my door was covered by an eerie mantle of ever-deepening white snow, alone in the orb of imagination I was a yogi perched in a grotto amongst the crags, the neighboring walls deep canyons, their windows cavern mouths. After a two-year lapse, daily meditation recommenced. In the absence of a spiritual guide, I developed a simple technique of visualizing two triangles, one above and one below, and would bring them together in my mind's eye. If concentration were unflinching, at the moment of their intersecting a spiritual Light would flood the darkness. After some practice, the radiance began to disclose the presence of a brilliant figure within its center, a form filled with luminosity and power so intense, the features were indistinguishable. This I took to be the illumined Buddha-Christ-Self.

I saw my body astrally transparent, with its multicolored chakras revealed with glowing intensity. The secret of *T'umo* or yogic heat employed by Tibetan yogis in freezing conditions was briefly unveiled, as psychic fire from the thousand-petaled lotus (located in a higher dimension paralleling the cranial area) was drawn down in a steady stream into the navel plexus. Upon reaching that center, glowing heat spreads to every part of the body. I tried to capture the transparency of the subtle body with paint and brush on canvas. The results, although interesting, were but crude and inaccurate material representations. At times of detached focus, the room's atmosphere became filled with a ringing thunder. These brief and isolated experiences blessed and lifted an otherwise empty existence.

My paintings were exhibited at Thompson Galleries in Greenwich Village, alongside two large and rare original oils by Gustave Doré, arguably the greatest illustrator of the 19th century. Renowned for his astounding etchings for *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Dante's



Divine Comedy, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Doré was not known for his oil paintings on canvas, which actually were filled with a sublime use of color, illumination, form and depth. On the opening night reception, a terrific thunderstorm burst over the city. Not one buyer or reviewer showed up, even for priceless Doré! The exhibition was a flop.

Apart from a few glimmerings, the past three and a half years had been a denial of all that was healthy and holy. I had been steeped in darkness, intoxicants and selfishness, but by now I was weary of the gutter and my health was deteriorating. I craved the firmest discipline and order. At this crossroads, I was introduced to the local Gurdjieff meetings. The next nine months were spent avidly studying under the tutelage of philosopher-pianist Willem Nyland in New York. I earned my bread variously as grocery deliverer, furniture-mover, and waiter in a macrobiotic restaurant, while otherwise exploring new dimensions in art, diet, health and spirituality.

Then in his late seventies, Nyland had spent twenty-four years off and on with the enigmatic George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff in France, while working in espionage for the Allies during both World Wars. Gurdjieff exerted tremendous influence over some of the most renowned writers, musicians and thinkers of the West during the second quarter of the 20th century. Nyland, in turn, was passing along what he had received, and was the best teacher I'd met so far.



The Heavenly Choir - etching by Gustave Dore

The Arising was painted in oil in my New York studio on the back of an antique wooden mirror-holder, and attempts to portray various faces of the human condition: greed, avarice, anger, lust, confusion, vanity, etc. One amongst them looks up and sees a wonder in the sky: the illumined Buddha/Christ Self, surrounded by two guardians. Luminous spheres are seen rising from the head, intimating higher regions of consciousness to be attained by the seeker of enlightenment (begun in 1964, still unfinished—like the painter).



The Work, as Gurdjieff's teachings in practice were known, contained traces of Truth gleaned during extensive travels and studies with monastic Sufis and Lamas in the Near and Far East. His principal teaching was that we are all "asleep" and must awaken in a higher sense through various esoteric practices, including self-remembering and sacred dance. The dance involved movements synthesized from Mevlevi and other dervish orders, aimed at bringing the participant into harmony with self and the cosmos.

While benefiting from the practice of self-remembering, a teacher and support group, plus my ongoing exploration of other teachings, I felt that some of Gurdjieff's ideas did not hold water. He maintained that the soul perished with the physical body at death; that man 'does not have a soul, but has the possibility of developing a soul;' that reincarnation and transmigration do not exist; eating of meat develops will-power and it was OK to consume alcohol. I could not agree. Gurdjieff's approach aimed at shocking students from their 'sleep,' but his sometimes drastic methods have been called into question. I was eventually left high and dry in Gurdjieff's mysterious intellectual desert. Rafael Lefort, one of his direct students later commented, 'Gurdjieff was more than a teacher but less than a Master.' How could I know a Master even if I met one? How could the blind find the Way?

Nine months of intensive study nevertheless rewarded me with sharpened focus. I was grateful for the mental and work disciplines taught by Nyland, the strengthening of the body through hard manual labor, and especially for a deeper exposure to the divinely inspired mystical verses of Jalal-u-'Din Rumi, a 13th-century Sufi mystic Adept. But one wanted *more* than poetry.

Rumi commended disciples and readers to the company of the *Friend*, but where, oh where could such a Friend be found?

*Friend! Sit near one who
knows the condition of your heart,
and who can make it whole;
Rest awhile under the shade of a tree
laden with fresh and fragrant flowers.
Loiter not in the marketplace,
going from shop to shop, as idlers do.
Go straight to one who has
a store of honey with him.
Take hold of the garment, O brave soul!
Of one who knows well
the spiritual regions of the journey,
Who is your true friend in life, or in death;
In this world, and in the next.
- Maulana Rumi*



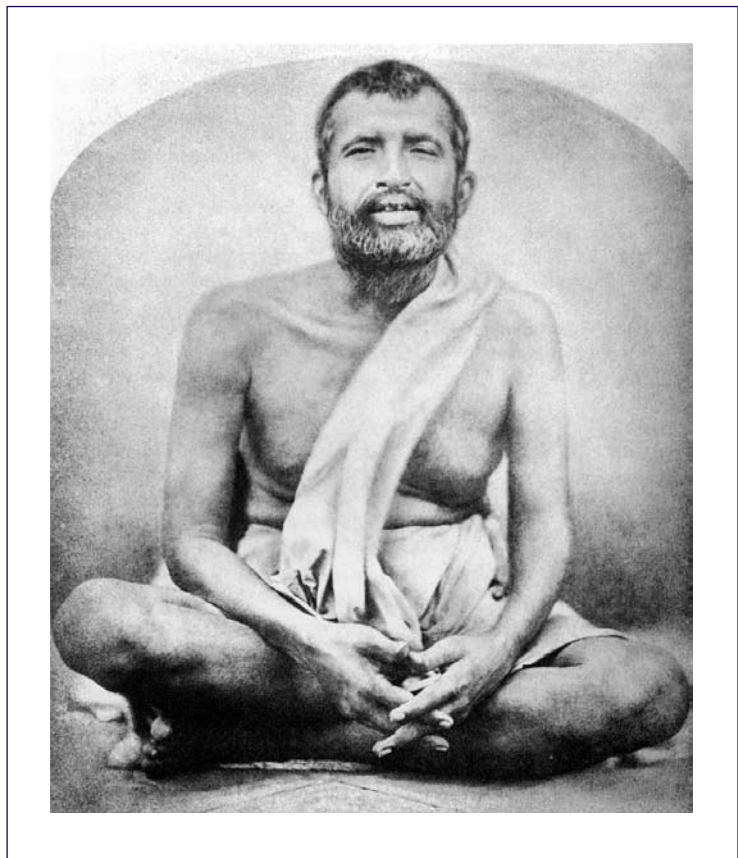
*Maulana Rumi,
from an old
Persian manuscript*

I thirsted for living waters, the oasis of a perfected one who had a *store of honey with him*, which Nyland opined no longer existed, ridiculing my search for a perfect Master as pure folly. But my yearning had grown white-hot. The destiny train was accelerating, and nothing could now derail it.

I crossed paths once again with the American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg in Greenwich Village. He had recently returned from India and loaned me his copy of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. This sublime spiritual treasure seriously affected the course of my quest as its pages unfolded the awe-inspiring life of the nineteenth-century Bengali saint. Ramakrishna's high degree of illumination was palpably present in exquisite sayings, supported by the records of his spiritual experiences and affirmed by the subsequent attainments of his direct disciples. As I read on, I learned how Sri Ramakrishna, as an act of conscious love, used his realized power to elevate the consciousness of close disciples. Sometimes a slap on the chest or a piercing glance would be sufficient to transport his students to the samadhi, or super-conscious state.

Ramakrishna's holy and stainless life further convinced me of the reality of the spiritual path, the necessity of a competent living adept as guide, and the requisite discipline of mind and senses. His loving devotion to and direct mystical union with God was a far cry from the dry intellectual path I was on.

An impartial study of Sri Ramakrishna and the lives of other genuine saints reveals a familiar pattern, however counter it may seem to popular Western psychological and philosophical movements. Part of this



Sri Ramakrishna emerging from samadhi

pattern entails sublimation of the energy path, directing it from the downward senses, upward and inward to higher centers within the mind, and to dimensions beyond. I became convinced that the purity and self-control that Ramakrishna, Buddha, Jesus, Rumi, and others like them embodied, were necessary to the path of spiritual success. It would not be an easy undertaking, for the powerful steeds of the five senses continuously drag the attention downward and outward into the world of matter and illusion. This worldly tendency runs counter to the inward and upward centripetal flow—back to our divine Origin.

When I returned the Gospel three weeks later, Allen was visibly overjoyed, explaining, ‘The night you borrowed Ramakrishna, thieves broke into my apartment and stole my entire book collection. Your borrowing Ramakrishna was very auspicious for me! This is the only book not stolen!’ Very auspicious for me as well. I asked Ginsberg, ‘What did the holy men of India tell you?’ He replied with a laugh, ‘Go back home to America and get married!’ We were not to meet again.

In the pursuit of transformation, alcohol, drugs and cigarettes fell away like dead skins. Animal flesh felt unwanted by my body. First red meat, then fish and fowl and even eggs were discarded and replaced by the bounty of the vegetable kingdom. Accepting the discipline of continence with help from the constantly implored Divine, I turned from my former life, and never looked back. Because of this new way of living, the vitality of my body was renewed; various ailments disappeared, and with them, my haggard old-man appearance.

An unexpected meeting on a busy Lower Eastside street with a former acquaintance validated my new course, as I listened to the shocking news that our mutual friend, a talented twenty-one-year-old writer, had just been found dead in his flat from a drug overdose. After going our separate ways, my heart, while saddened, overflowed with gratitude at being spared for the great quest ahead. I would never touch nor miss meats, drugs or intoxicants again.

Creatures of habit are we, but unless we have a glimmer of something greater, it is difficult or impossible to leave the lesser

*Sow a thought, reap an idea;
Sow an idea, reap a habit;
Sow a habit, reap a character;
Sow a character, reap a destiny.*

—Anon

My quest took me to a kind and erudite Indian Swami-monk at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Center of New York, as well as to meetings by devotees of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Echoes of Truth were immanent in Aurobindo's words, in what he called the "Light of the Super-mind," but he too was no more on the earth-plane. Each nurturing step brought me closer to the life of the Light. It didn't particularly matter what group or spiritual practice I was exposed to, for whenever I closed my eyes, an engulfing experience of universal Light would come. I went to the Church of Swedenborg to study the teachings of this 18th-century Western mystic, and often escaped the busy and noisesome streets to pray/meditate in Catholic cathedrals. Though inspired by the great teachers and their messages, like the saints' statuary, the church and scripture were silent and lifeless. Inspiring, but not alive. My longing heart was broadcasting in all directions: 'Lord, send me a true Master—a living Master!'

Where to go? All the great ones were gone from this world, or so it seemed. Where was the living Master? Was he or she in some unknown monastery or village in Turkey, Tibet, Japan, or India? I had no clue. Since conditions in America did not, to my mind, seem favorable for such development, I looked to the East. I went to shipyards looking for work aboard Orient-bound freighters, but the door kept clanging shut. Resolved not to accept anyone less than a living Christ, a Ramakrishna, a Buddha, or a Rumi, I was determined to search and search until found.

Paradoxically, one doesn't find a Master. In the fullness of time, in response to the soul's keen yearning—if not just 'dumb luck' good karma, *the Master finds the disciple.*