

Maha Kumbha Mela

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24 January, 2001, Allahabad, India

After a week of wandering through dusty Mela grounds, sitting with gnarly, ganja-smoking Naga Babas practicing various degrees of intense tapasya, sleeping on stone floors, eating endless ghee-glistening chapatis with dal and subjie, sneezing and gritty coughing from storms of dust and dirt. 'til our abdomens should be washboard-tight, stealthy forays from the ashram after chow mein and chocolate chip cookies, momentary visions of God in the glances of children or passing saints in the market place; after all the obscene blasting from the giant TV screen promoting Colgate toothpaste and other corporate sponsors, the relentless loudspeakers repeating the million names of God and lost children, it is here, it has finally come, the day of the great bathing in the Sangam, the holy confluence of the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the mystic Saraswati Rivers, the moment the waters will flow with Amrit, the nectar of Immortality, Forgiveness and Enlightenment.



All day before we question saints, saddhus, soldiers and sweepers, trying to ascertain the exact astrologically auspicious moment for bathing. “One a.m.”, “three a.m.”, “six a.m.”, they tell us. “When the sun first dances on the waters of the Ganga.” No one seems to know for sure, but each one is sure. Thirty million people gathered for a vast drama with no script, save to go to the River and bathe and be purified.

Laurence wakes me at three a.m. It is time. Already the crowds are moving toward the Sangam, millions of pilgrims wrapped tightly in shawls the color of earth, or of saddhu saffron orange, chanting Hare Ram, Hare Ram. They come carrying brass pots and plastic jugs to gather the precious water, fingering malas, with bundles on their heads and babies in their arms. The old, it is their chance after a lifetime of suffering and prayer, one moment to set it right for eternity. You can see the determination in their



eyes. Streaming millions of people converging, walking barefoot halfway across India to be here this morning. Fifteen thousand people a minute, it is said, arriving in Allahabad.

We are leaves in a stream, twigs in a flood. We are the water itself seeking its own level in Mother Ganga, the merging of spirit with spirit, our sweetness with her sweetness; ahead somewhere in the mist and darkness she lies waiting to hold us in her arms. For a moment the Shakti is too strong, I stand unable to walk, overwhelmed, weeping and breathless.

And then we are there. The crowd suddenly congeals into a struggling mass moving at odds with itself. Sand turns to tangles of seaweed under our feet; uncertain footing, slippery, lifted and moved by the crowd streaming to and from the river. The crowd, close to panic, yet still trusting. A momentary eye contact held to say, "it's ok, you are safe with me. We are here together to seek Mother's blessing."

Somehow our little group circles, sorts roles- who will bathe first and who will keep the clothes and hold the beacon flashlight high. We strip down to sarongs and trunks, barely keeping our balance in the crowds as we remove pants and shoes.

And then we are there. Earth changes to water. It is the only clue that we have arrived, for the crowds are still too thick to see the river. Up ahead it becomes thinner and suddenly there is openness and a silent privacy, as we stand waist deep in stillness and gratitude and prayer.

I want to stay here in the warmth of the water and gentle wind and garlands of marigolds floating by and holding the precious photos of my friends and family. To stand there for a long time, to remember all the nuances of prayer and blessing and aspiration that I have been holding back, but suddenly there is only love and that is all that is needed, and the warm wind is breathing all around us, is breathing us, and we return to the shore, re-entering the pushing crowd to find our friends, these people we may never see again but with whom we share this one astounding Karmic moment, this walk to bathe in the Sangam at the Maha Kumbha Mela.

We struggle into our damp clothes and climb the hill against the crowds advancing, pushing to replace us at the River. We are moving against the crowd now, and only Mantra and eye contact keep us going. Clear spaces appear, interrupted by chains of people desperately holding the ends of each other's saris, forming chains of family and friends, clots of villagers mad not to lose contact with each other.

I have come so far in surrender I would never have thought possible; and this is my true pilgrimage, to trust my journey and to know quietly, deeply, that I will be, that I am, alright and safe and whole, and even in this seeming chaos that I am part of and one with it, this great assembled vibration of humanity in love with God.



My hands in Namaste, the crowds open in front of me. There is eye contact to encourage those newly arriving, and smiled shared blessing. We have reached the top of the hill now and it is easier to walk. We finish dressing and head home, a little cold now as the winds pick up. Here and there in the night, groups of people crouch around tiny fires, huddled tight as lotus buds. They wave us over to share the warmth, all smiles of welcome, eyes full of love.

Walking home, we follow a father and small son, chanting Hare Ram, Hare Ram, walking hand in hand, and I think that one day, when he is an old man, the boy will tell his grandchildren of this day, the day of the Maha Kumbha Mela, when he walked through the crowds, a small boy safe in the protection of his father and the Mantra, when they came to the holy Mother Ganga to pray for the world.

That day, 30 million people bathed in the Holy Ganga.

II SHANTJI

For days Shantji has been asking me questions I cannot answer. Sitting by the morning fire, or in satsang, he invites me to speak or to question him. My answers, when they come, are terse, clipped and unrevealing. I, who have so many opinions, am silent, intimidated before him.

And he loves to provoke drama, does Shantji, to stir it from the bottom of the pot with his stick, like a chef adding spice to balance a flavor, or salt to make an ingredient taste more like itself.

I wonder if he thinks I am stupid or careless. And my ego wants to show him I'm not, and come up with the perfect comment, diagnosing totally the nuances of the situation, with some added element that will surprise and delight. Because, yes, I want him to love me as I love him, as I fell in love with him as I massaged his feet with salve after the fire

walk. He told me I was a healer, that he could feel the energy from my hands, and my ego loved that. But it was only love, and the flow of love through my hands, and wonder of wonders, to hold and soothe the feet of the Guru. If he were my own Guru, and I were given to do that, could I keep from vaporizing on the spot, burning in the heat of my own bliss? How are they different?



Shantji is a complex man, given to confronting saints about their own spiritual attainment, and whether that makes them better than the God in the rest of us. And what I watch for is whether his dramas are those of a man or a Guru.

Tonight, one of his closest devotees here has been spending time with a western woman at the ashram. She is beautiful, energetic, insatiable. She dances with abandon, enchanting the whole room full of celibate devotees, whom she further astounds with long discourses on sexuality. My male roommates have dubbed her “She Devil” and “Cock Tease”, offended by her licentiousness at this modest gathering.

Shantji's devotee is smitten. Instead of accompanying his Guru, he has begged off to help the woman go shopping and do her errands in the marketplace.

Coming in late to the Kirtan tonight, Shantji is quiet. Cryptically he announces, “I have been shaken to the core of my being!” He asks us, why do we think he feels on a different energetic wave length when he enters the room?

Gradually it comes out that the issue is around Raju, his devotee. But on what level is this? Is it the petty jealousy of a man spoiled by the attention of his followers? I watch for clues, still unsure of him. He tells Raju, “If you cannot please me, you will have to leave!” The American woman is stricken and rises to leave herself. He calls her back, questions her. She says she will go instead, that he is acting like a punishing parent, threatening with his stick. Why can't he let Raju be with her, she asks? She will only be here for a few days more. Then Shantji can have him back. Shantji objects. Then he will have him in defeat. He wants his devotee in victory!

Like Moses down from the mountain, Shantji has returned from the Holy Place to find his children worshipping false Gods, and it sickens him and breaks his heart. No matter if the errand was a generous one, it turned Raju's attention from Sadhana, Guru and God. It is a cosmic drama. The Guru against the Maya, the illusion, of the world, played out on a tiny stage here in Allahabad.

Furthermore, and here Shantji softens and smiles kindly, this woman has cracked open the man's heart, and he is happy for that. And that this opening, however worldly its cause, is truly an opening for love, an energy that can be redirected, in time, to love of God, and so Shantji is pleased. And besides, she need not leave. How can he make her stay more comfortable, he asks, now the perfect Indian host? This is Shantji's drama, his play, his stirring the pot with his stick and adding salt to make each ingredient taste more truly like itself.

So which is it, the too-human man jealous for attention, or the Guru, whose every action is designed to purify and pulverize his disciple's ego? Can it be both at once, or something else? Later, as I go to bed, I pass Raju sitting alone, staring soberly



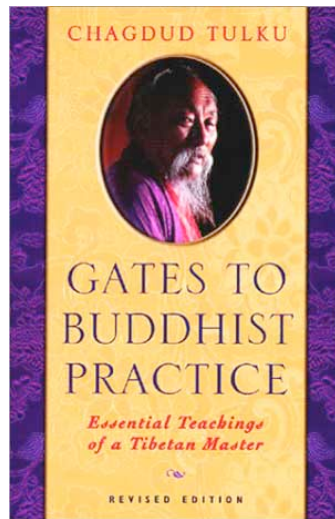
into the lights of the Mela below. The woman, has she understood her role? Have I gotten the lesson for my own Sadhana, the stupid wasted time spent away from my own Guru, neglecting my own practices? The others here, what are their lessons? And who am I to judge another's enlightenment? I pray only to be open to receive and understand what lessons I am given to learn in this lifetime.

God stages His grand play for us all to know Him. It is He who casts both the Guru in his chair and the sweeper stooped over his short broom.

Laurence, reading this asks, "what is Shantji's drama here? Why have we all come here to play our bit parts for him? Shantji the instigator, the rebel saddhu. What does Shantji see reflected here of his own drama?"

And what of Laurence himself? He has come to India to commit his daughter's ashes to Mother Ganga, and knows so well the excruciating pain of the parent who loses a child. He also questions the quality of his discipleship to his own Guru, Yogananda, and weeps to find affirmation that, however imperfect his practice, he has not been forgotten.

This morning I take my own Guru's photo from the waterproof bag I carried when I bathed in the Ganga at the Kumbha Mela, and carefully replace it in the little frame by my bed.



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