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CHAPTER 1

My Parents and Early Life

The characteristic features of Indian culture have long been a search for ultimate verities and the concomitant disciple-guru* relationship.

My own path led to a Christlike sage; his beautiful life was chiseled for the ages. He was one of the great masters who are India's truest wealth. Emerging in every generation, they have bulwarked their land against the fate of ancient Egypt and Babylonia.

I find my earliest memories covering the anachronistic features of a previous incarnation. Clear recollections came to me of a distant life in which I had been a yogi† amid the Himalayan snows. These glimpses of the past, by some dimensionless link, also afforded me a glimpse of the future.

I still remember the helpless humiliations of infancy. I was resentfully conscious of being unable to walk and to express myself freely. Prayerful surges arose within me as I realized my bodily impotence. My strong emotional life was mentally expressed in words of many languages. Amid the inward confusion of tongues, I gradually became accustomed to hearing the Bengali syllables of my people. The beguiling scope of an infant's mind! adultly considered to be limited to toys and toes.

Psychological ferment and my unresponsive body brought me to many obstinate crying spells. I recall the general family bewilderment at my distress. Happier memories, too, crowd in on me: my mother's caresses, and my first attempts at lisping phrase and toddling step. These early triumphs, usually forgotten quickly, are yet a natural basis of self-confidence.

* Spiritual teacher. The *Guru Gita* (verse 17) aptly describes the guru as "dispeller of darkness" (from *gu*, "darkness," and *ru*, "that which dispels").

† Practitioner of yoga, "union," ancient science of meditation on God. (See chapter 26: "The Science of Kriya Yoga.")

My far-reaching memories are not unique. Many yogis are known to have retained their self-consciousness without interruption by the dramatic transition to and from “life” and “death.” If man be solely a body, its loss indeed ends his identity. But if prophets down the millenniums spake with truth, man is essentially a soul, incorporeal and omnipresent.

Although odd, clear memories of infancy are not extremely rare. During travels in numerous lands, I have heard very early recollections from the lips of veracious men and women.

I was born on January 5, 1893, in Gorakhpur in north-eastern India near the Himalaya Mountains. There my first eight years were passed. We were eight children: four boys and four girls. I, Mukunda Lal Ghosh,* was the second son and the fourth child.

Father and Mother were Bengalis, of the *Kshatriya* caste.† Both were blessed with saintly nature. Their mutual love, tranquil and dignified, never expressed itself frivolously. A perfect parental harmony was the calm center for the revolving tumult of eight young lives.

Father, Bhagabati Charan Ghosh, was kind, grave, at times stern. Loving him dearly, we children yet observed a certain reverential distance. An outstanding mathematician and logician, he was guided principally by his intellect. But Mother was a queen of hearts, and taught us only through love. After her death, Father displayed more of his inner tenderness. I noticed then that his gaze often seemed to be metamorphosed into my mother’s gaze.

In Mother’s presence we children made an early bittersweet acquaintance with the scriptures. Mother would resourcefully summon from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*‡ suitable tales to meet the exigencies of discipline; on these occasions

* My name was changed to Yogananda in 1915 when I entered the ancient monastic Swami Order. In 1935 my guru bestowed on me the further religious title of *Paramahansa* (see pp. 248 and 440).

† The second caste, originally that of rulers and warriors.

‡ These ancient epics are a hoard of India’s history, mythology, and philosophy.

chastisement and instruction went hand in hand.

As a gesture of respect for Father, in the afternoons Mother would dress us children carefully to welcome him home from the office. He held a position, similar to that of a vice-president, in one of India's large companies: Bengal-Nagpur Railway. His work involved traveling; our family lived in several cities during my childhood.

Mother held an open hand toward the needy. Father was also kindly disposed, but his respect for law and order extended to the budget. One fortnight Mother spent, in feeding the poor, more than Father's monthly income.

"All I ask, please," Father said, "is that you keep your charities within a reasonable limit." Even a gentle rebuke from her husband was grievous to Mother. Not hinting to the children at any disagreement, she ordered a hackney carriage.

"Good-bye, I am going away to my mother's home." Ancient ultimatum!

We broke into astounded lamentations. Our maternal uncle arrived opportunely; he whispered to Father some sage counsel, garnered no doubt from the ages. After Father had made a few conciliatory remarks, Mother happily dismissed the cab. Thus ended the only trouble I ever noticed between my parents. But I recall a characteristic discussion.

"Please give me ten rupees for a hapless woman who has just arrived at the house." Mother's smile had its own persuasion.

"Why ten rupees? One is enough." Father added a justification: "When my father and grandparents died suddenly, I had my first experience of poverty. My only breakfast, before walking miles to my school, was a small banana. Later, at the university, I was in such need that I applied to a wealthy judge for aid of one rupee per month. He declined, remarking that even a rupee is important."

"How bitterly you recall the denial of that rupee!" Mother's heart had an instant logic. "Do you want this woman also to remember painfully your refusal of ten rupees, which she needs urgently?"



GURRU GHOSH (Gyana Prabha Ghosh)
(1868–1904)

Mother of Paramahansa Yogananda; disciple of Lahiri Mahasaya

“You win!” With the immemorial gesture of vanquished husbands, he opened his wallet. “Here is a ten-rupee note. Give it to her with my goodwill.”

Father tended first to say “No” to any new proposal. His attitude toward the stranger who so readily had won Mother’s sympathy was an example of his customary caution. An aversion to instant acceptance is really only honoring the principle of “due reflection.” I always found Father reasonable and evenly balanced in his judgments. If I could bolster up my numerous requests with one or two good arguments, he would invariably put within my reach the coveted goal—whether a vacation trip or a new motorcycle.

Father was a strict disciplinarian to his children in their early years, but his attitude toward himself was truly Spartan. He never visited the theater, for instance, but sought his



BHAGABATI CHARAN GHOSH
(1853–1942)

Father of Paramahansa Yogananda; disciple of Lahiri Mahasaya

recreation in various spiritual practices and in reading the Bhagavad Gita.* Shunning all luxuries, he would cling to one old pair of shoes until they were useless. His sons bought automobiles after they came into popular use, but Father was content with the trolley car for his daily ride to the office.

Father was not interested in the accumulation of money for the sake of power. On one occasion, after he had organized the Calcutta Urban Bank, he refused to benefit himself by holding any of its shares. He had simply wished to perform a civic duty in his spare time.

Several years after Father had retired on a pension, an

* This noble Sanskrit poem, which forms part of the *Mahabharata* epic, is the Hindu Bible. Mahatma Gandhi wrote: "Those who will meditate on the Gita will derive fresh joy and new meanings from it every day. There is not a single spiritual tangle which the Gita cannot unravel."