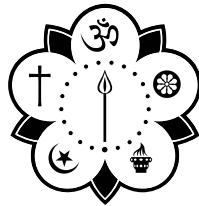


Living with God

The Autobiography of Guru Sri Subramaniam

VOLUME II



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PART I

Laying Foundations

CHAPTER ONE

Arriving in Wales

It was a mammoth task, first of all in moving to Wales, then secondly, to establish ourselves as a community and become a charity. The work that I had started in Earl's Court, one of creating a firm foundation of non-involvement in materialism, helping people realise that spirituality was free, that there was no price to pay for it, had to follow through in Wales. It had involved spending time with many people – teaching them, cooking and caring for them, hoping to bring them into the fold of an orderly conduct of spiritual practice. Many people came and went, and from many different nationalities. The Sri Lankan community had come regularly for our *poojas* but, like so many others, they came because they wanted something other than spirituality. They came to give God something so that they might receive something in return. They made offerings to have a special boon from the Lord, and the Lord, being very generous, gave them their boon and that was that. What I wanted for them was not what they wanted. Instead, it was the westerners who really spent time learning from me, and this is the same thing that is happening here in Skanda Vale.

Many Asians wanted me to follow a strict orthodox system, and this I didn't want to pursue because it was not real spirituality. What they wanted was wrapped up in a whole load of mumbo jumbo that had nothing to do with real spirituality. Traditions are marvellous, I appreciate tradition very much if it safeguards good qualities, but not when it is upheld for its own sake, for the sake of simply "doing" it. Temples in Sri Lanka have got a lot of traditions, like in India, and through such



*They chose to make a commitment to be with me in Wales –
Brother Ian, Sister Rosemary, Brother Henry, Brother Justin,
myself, Joe and Brother Holger*

traditions the whole system of the untouchables came into being. Tradition also promoted the notion that you could only go to God through the priest, who was somehow a superior human being. That same impression I wasn't going to cater to, or carry through, here in Britain. I wanted people to realise that they could go to God without me. Consequently, many Hindus from the orthodox community wanted to have nothing to do with me initially, and I enjoyed that. I enjoyed them not coming purely and simply because it would only have caused me more problems, and not been helpful. However, now that we have come to Skanda Vale, they have all returned to the fold because they appreciate that the system and the way I have set out in Skanda Vale is about incorporating all peoples of the world, not just one community. No one is excluded.

I think the real challenge we had in Earl's Court was of bringing those westerners that were spending time with me into a spiritual path, because it was from that group of people that I was able to lay the foundations of a multi-faith community that would evolve into Skanda Vale. Brother Henry, Brother Peter, Justin, who was at one time Swami Shanmukhananda, and who initially came as a visitor with Ian Macmillan, another one-time Brother, all came for the meditation and hatha yoga that I taught there, and that experience of spirituality we carried through in those early stages enabled them to make a commitment to come and be at Skanda Vale. I say this because, when it became known that I intended to leave London, people thought I was committing suicide! They were extremely critical and were telling me how nobody would come to see me. 'Oh, this man has gone mad!' they were thinking. 'He is leaving a perfectly lovely business and lifestyle, and for what? To live in a derelict farmhouse in some remote part of Wales!' However, I obey the Lord, not people's fanciful concepts. I obey the Lord, and if the Lord tells me to do something I never question why, when or where. I follow it through. But obeying the will of the Lord was a great challenge to my followers, especially those who had affluent and comfortable lives.

The move itself was not easy because, quite literally, there was nowhere to move into. What you see of the farmhouse today, and now it has been transformed into a temple, is not what it was when we first arrived. When the owners finally left to go and live in London, they left behind not just a derelict building, and I use that word most accurately, but a building full of filth. Shellie their sheep, as well as all their dogs and other animals, had shared the place. Every single living thing seemed to have lived in it, and for some unknown reason the dung and urine from these animals was allowed to just pile up. And when it became too inundated, then all this faecal matter was simply shovelled out of the front or back door. Not only that, the back door served also as a depository for all the other refuse. A rudimentary wooden triangle had been constructed outside the door into which were thrown all manner of tin cans and rubbish, as if they had thought that it then would just go away. The place was a total, absolute mess and quite uninhabitable, and our first six months in Wales were very traumatic, involving an enormous amount of cleaning and scrubbing.

My first priority, therefore, was to buy a caravan and move into that so that I could spend time with Justin, and whoever came to visit us, cleaning up this mess. The next priority was to bring some order to the land, which had been totally neglected and left to go wild for a long, long time. Brambles were everywhere; the track that led from the road to our front gate, and then on to the farmhouse and beyond, was completely overgrown with them. Again though, if the Lord told me something, I obeyed without question, and this time it meant picking myself up and going for a drive.

‘Where are you going?’ Justin called out after me.

‘You will know when I return!’ I shouted back, and what I was doing was going to collect three goats. On my return, Justin couldn’t have looked more surprised.

‘But what are you going to do with these?’ he asked.

‘They are going to be my workers!’ I explained, gleefully.

You know, two hands couldn't do what they did, and they ate and ate and ate, and as they cleared all the thorns and brambles, I followed along behind pulling up all the roots. All you had to do was move them slowly up the area you wanted cleared, and they would do a darn good day's work without any interference. They love brambles and even now, wherever brambles are growing, I advise the swamis just to put the goats in because, if not, and the place is left unattended, the brambles will come up very, very quickly.

Prior to the goats, though, came four beautiful Jersey cows that I had previously ordered before moving to Wales. They were our first residents at Skanda Vale, and were flown in from Jersey almost the instant we arrived so that we could start the process of milking them and having sustenance. Even though I had never really known how to look after animals like that, Justin and I instinctively took on the task of milking them by hand. It became our routine, and with milk like that you really don't need a meal. You drank a glass of good Jersey milk, and the grass was rich meadow grass so they yielded a lot of milk, not to mention the cream. I used to let the milk settle down and there was, oh, a couple of inches of really good, thick Jersey cream. I would then add some wild strawberries that we had collected, sit back, and eat them. Everything was natural.

Justin and I would also spend much of the day down in the river that bordered our land. When a car or van had become obsolete and the previous owners had no more use for it, they would very carefully push it to the edge of the bank and down the steep slope. We found four or five of these old rusting relics just dotted about in the river below, and we had to go in and somehow cut them all up. Slowly, piece-by-piece, we brought them to the top, and ultimately we hired a big van and drove them to the tip, but that, like the house, took an awful lot of time.



One of the strangest experiences we encountered when we

first came to live at Skanda Vale was the unnatural silence everywhere. As I got out of my car on that first day, I stood there absolutely mesmerised by the void that was part of the place. It was unearthly. You couldn't hear a bird sing. Everything had been shot at and killed. And, apart from the brambles and the like, flowering plants were non-existent; I found only one in the valley down below. Furthermore, some of the trees that I had noticed when I first visited the property had now been cut down and disappeared, presumably to make a few extra pounds. This saddened me greatly. I vowed then and there that I would invite all my brothers and sisters, the birds and animals, back here, and in that we have been very successful. So successful, in fact, that we soon became the target of much abuse, even being shot at as well. It really was a very dramatic part of our lives when we first came.

Apparently, people had been hunting on our land ever since anyone could remember. Now, all of a sudden, some strangers had come who were not going to tolerate this killing and were insisting on bringing in some element of order and discipline. For a lot of people this was beyond their comprehension. They couldn't accept the fact that they could no longer come and hunt on our land, so they thought they could frighten us into submitting to their will. It was quite a challenge, but a challenge that we were not going to shirk and run away from. On the contrary, we found it helpful knowing that we had such a challenge on our hands, that we had to dig in our heels if we wanted to be counted. At one point we even confiscated some of their dogs and brought in the police to make them understand we would never allow them access to hunt. We had to make a stand, and it was fun doing so, and now they are far more respectful.

For some reason, people never think that I can dig in my heels when I need to. That I will say, 'Get off! You are not going to tell me what to do!' But that is my nature. I have come to establish *dharma*, and I am not going to be bullied by anybody. If somebody was nice, I would be nice. If somebody was awful,

I showed him that I could be equally awful, which I would do in a big way, as happened on another occasion.

Having access to clean water had been a constant problem for us ever since we had arrived. This was because the source of our water came from the farm above us. For weeks on end our water was becoming contaminated from cow dung and all manner of things, even dead animals. Every time Justin went up to clear it all, it was fouled again. It became apparent that Dai, our neighbour who lived at the bottom of our track, was the culprit. Dai happened to be friendly with the old boy living up at Pen-y-Garn, the farm above us, and he would often come up in his tractor to visit him. He would then wash his tractor and mess around in the stream that was our source of water, fouling it, before returning home. He knew what he was doing, and every time he came and went, Justin would have to go and clean up the mess. This went on for quite a while.

One day, I happened to hear Dai driving his tractor up the hill to visit his friend. ‘These guys are cowards,’ I thought to myself. ‘They don’t like confrontation!’ I therefore prepared a reception for him on his return. In those days I had very long hair, which I normally kept tied in a ponytail. I loosened it and ruffled it up, creating as dishevelled an appearance as possible. Having made myself look as ferocious as I could, I ran out and called out to him as he approached our gate. ‘You dirty man!’ I shouted. ‘How dare you do what you are doing?!’ The reaction was immediate. Dai got so frightened he sped off in his tractor, almost climbing the steep banks on either side of the track as he went, and never came again to do what he did.

It was then that the Lord told us what to do. ‘Buy some pipe,’ He said, ‘And connect the pipe to the stream at the highest point of your land,’ which was where our old temple field was, and which we did. We put a little container there, and the problem was solved.



Time has changed these attitudes we faced, but with that respect has come the thought that I am barmy! And I enjoy that because that ‘barmy-ness’ has enabled me to be different, and I am different. We are different in Skanda Vale. We want to be counted as different. Who wants to be the same as those people who kill and are so mean-minded? They have nothing in common with us. We are here to establish *dharma*; a way of life, a spiritual path, and it can only be done with truth.

Looking back, those early days were all about making do because we had very little money. Self-sufficiency was important for our survival, and our resources were that which came from our work. The cows yielded milk, which we drank or turned into butter and different cheeses, cottage cheese and the like, giving us the protein we needed to sustain ourselves. We also grew vegetables; it was Sister Topsy who began growing our vegetables, and there in my mind is the image of Brother Henry objecting to being told by Sister Topsy that he must go and work in the field, to dig and put down potatoes for our consumption! An income would only become possible once the pilgrims themselves started coming on a regular basis, and that would not happen until they had first established in their minds that this was a place of excellence and a place of worship. We therefore had to bridge the gap, which took a year or more, but it allowed us to say to people who came to stay with us, we haven’t got much, we are learning to build our resources and be self-sufficient. It took time, but time was in our hands.



Sister Topsy