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Stroke Victim Swami Brahmananda Tests a Yogi's Mind-Over-Brain

Most swamis enter mauna, the discipline of mind-and-voice silence by choice. In the mineral stream regions of the Blue Hills, South India, a cave-dwelling yogi - Swami Jeganatha - has practiced silence for nearly twenty years. He also wears jocky underwear in lieu of a loin cloth and when he really wants to communicate can scribble across a blackboard faster than you can say Dakshinamurthi, Siva as the silent teacher. But sitting inside his rock-hewn meditating niche, absorbed in the unending stillness of mauna, Swami Jeganatha touches God's face of pure consciousness.

Swami Brahmananda Sarasvati didn't enter mauna by choice. He's a gifted, driven communicator - casual conversation, formal lectures, audio cassettes and long streams of writing. He talks of deep, and deeply personal, subjects: yoga, the psychology of yoga and the Shankaran Vedantist philosophy his yoga teaching cloaks.

But the swami's karma retooled communication into introspection. It came late in his life, he is now in his 70's. One evening over four years ago, while the sprightly monk was consumed in his ashram affairs, an artery in the left lobe of his brain burst. The right side of his body froze in paralysis. He couldn't speak. His right eye and ear didn't relay sense information. As he lay on the bed surrounded by friends and students, he couldn't even remember their names or his name for that matter. Visual memory was intact, but language was gone - three languages went silent.

It faintly returned. He was Dr. Ramamurthi Mishra - neurosurgeon, psychiatrist, Sanskrit scholar and yoga guru with two major ashrams in North America: Ananda Ashram in Monroeville, New York, and Nadabrahmananda Ashram in San Francisco, California. Swami Brahmananda, whose pre-sannyas life as Dr. Mishra was like three lives triple-helixed into one, was gaining his verbal history back.

Day by day the mental cobwebs of words grew to match the pictures of the past: teaching at a Bombay medical college, coming to the West in 1955 for advanced studies, joining the staff of Bellvue Hospital at New York University. In 1958, a full decade before the flower-child generation embraced drugs and Eastern mysticism,

When ISKCON founder, Swami Prabhupada, first came to New York in 1966, totally unknown, Dr. Mishra took him in. Prabhupada cooked delicious meals and the two of them would duel over the merits of Chaitanya dualism versus Shankaran monism. Prabhupada took it much more seriously than Mishra, who is playful by nature. He was dark-haired with a mercurially-altering face, compact - like a tank - and undaunted about rumbling over rough terrain and obstacles. In his next two decades he would face many.

But now in the aftermath of the stroke, when his teaching mission was going so well, half of his body wasn't working and mauna had been biologically imposed. Swami recalls - through writing done with a retrained left hand - "My condition was like a defective telephone, like a one-way phone which could receive in-coming calls, but could not be used for outside calls."

The silence came as a yogic opportunity. Swami Brahmananda has always been an experimenter. The Dr. Mishra side of himself was at the vanguard of mixing psychology and yoga, a frothy but not incompatible alchemy. When he quit his New York medical practice in 1966, he eventually became a doctor of acupuncture.

Out on his beautiful Ananda Ashram, he briefly introduced LSD as an artificial booster into Ananda. Swami Brahmananda knows his brain. He was a neurosurgeon. He also knows his mind. He was a yogi psychiatrist who had written a successful 518-page book on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras entitled, The Textbook of Yog Psychology. Here was the ultimate experiment: impaired by a stroke that had throttled memory and speech, where would his mind go? What happens with a mind, even a disciplined mind such as his, when it is cut off from internal and external expression? Not surprisingly, the mind curves back on itself, for that is what happens in yoga as the process of pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sense withdrawal) and dharana (mental concentration) shuts down bodily awareness and the second chakra activity of thought creation. Swami Brahmananda viewed his stroke as a God-send, even as a samadhi experience. He writes, "...so God knocked on the door of my mind and brain in the form of a stroke. Thus, heavenly bliss and God were revealed to me. In the form of a stroke, it was

final enlightenment. Half of my body is gone. When I close my eyes during meditation, the other half of my body also is gone. Thus, I become like blue sky." Nice phrase: "like blue sky." Like the blue of the cosmic akasha.

Within a couple of months of the stroke, he was able to intone Aum. Gradually, a modicum of speech returned and that seemed to disappoint him, "I now know that 99% of all talk is useless. Only 1% is real talk, and that I can speak. The power of silence is pulling me in. I am not too happy to learn to speak again."

Over the past four years, speech never returned to the swami. He can walk gingerly. As we watch at his Nadabrahmananda Ashram - a warm, roomy house - he communicates with gestures, short utterances and brief written messages. He wears a giant talisman on a chain for important ceremonies, a seeming sign that he is patriarch of several yoga and, ironically, health organizations. They all come under the one banner of International Center for Self-Analysis and are flung across North America into Europe.

We have joined Swami Brahmananda for the 1988 Maha Sivaratri celebrations, and typical of his fastidiousness - because there is a question over when the astrologically-correct night is - Swami is staying up 'till midnight the evening after Maha Sivaratri. It's an act of will, and all his disciples, a little bleary eyed, are gamely going into their 36th hour of Siva celebration with harmonium-powered chants and droning of a bija (seed) mantra. There's a circular fireplace in the middle of the temple room surrounded in mosaic by the signs of the zodiac. Offerings of incense, oil and wood go into the fire. Off to the side is an altar alive with nearly the entire pantheon of Hinduism.

Swami's sishya are attentive to him. They know their Sanskrit well. Both the East and West coast ashrams have branched into natural healing, message and cultural classes besides the yoga schooling. It's obvious that swami's stroke hasn't stopped his guidance. There are, of course, all of his books and essays and cassettes to draw from, but now they have learned to rely on a glance, a guttural word and most importantly, his centered, silent presence.

Swami's Yoga Insights

"According to yoga, the Self of man is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient although such power is not fully manifested in an untrained mind. Individual mind is representative of cosmic Mind, so it can communicate with any other individual mind or phenomenon anywhere, in any planet and solar system.

As in the principle of radioactivity all substances are radioactive, so all substances of the world are psychoactive. There is no substance on which mind cannot act and react.

Development of body and physical health are not ends in themselves. Such development is for the purpose of developing the mental world and, by means of that, developing a healthful mental, physical, social, national and international atmosphere.

Likewise, development of psychic powers in yoga is not an end in itself. The main aim of yoga is nirvanam, kaivalyam (realization and freedom). Supernatural powers are an aid to that goal."

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