

Mother's Play

By Swami Tathagatananda

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A letter was written by a householder devotee of Holy Mother to communicate his feeling arising out of a sudden spiritual experience. This incident took place in Shillong where the writer, Panchanan Brahmachari, was working as a schoolteacher. The letter was published in Kartick 1346 in Udbhodan, the Bengali journal of Ramakrishna Mission. A summary of that letter is given here. Interested readers may read the original letter written in Bengali by the blessed devotee.

—The Editor

SHREE SHREE DURGA
Shillong, May 16, 1912

Dear Nemaï,

With much hesitation, I am writing to you about a miraculous incident that has left a lasting impression in my devotional life.

Feeling ill one day a few months ago, I came home from the school early. Ever since Dacca became the capital city, most of the houses remain unoccupied, making Shillong appear like a deserted city. Antisocial youths are using this as an opportunity to wreak havoc on public property. Looting, arson and robberies have become commonplace.

It was in this unfortunate climate that I was returning home that day, in spite of my illness, at around 2:30 p.m. I had engaged two coolies to make some repairs on my house. No sooner had I arrived than a big fire was seen at a distance, which I mistook for a forest fire. Hurrying towards it, I discovered it was a house on fire. I frantically searched around for water buckets and tap water, to no avail. In one house, I managed to collect a single bucketful of water and ran with it towards the fire, calling out to my coolies to follow me. These Gurkhas, however, were terribly upset by my apparent madness. Spellbound, I struggled with all my might to reach the roof of the house that was already gutted by the fire. A big house four yards away from this house where the fire had originated and was now being engulfed by the same fire.

Observing my rash decision to douse the fire with only a bucketful of water, the coolies

tried to warn me of the danger with sincere, loving appeals. I myself did not know how I would be able to climb the roof of the big house unaided. Meanwhile, a strong wind enabled the flames, which were now leaping up all around me. Stunned to think of my impending danger and with no one to help nearby, the coolies pathetically tried to draw my attention to the dangers of the raging fire. Heedless of their entreaties, I nevertheless reached the center of the straw roof. At my request, one of them had lifted the half-empty bucket into my hands before running away but a sudden blast of wind came and poured most of the water over me. What little remained was useless in the fire.

I was now completely encircled in crackling flames and could no longer hear the coolies' wails. There was only fire, fire, fire and the excruciating pain of my face roasting in it. Unable to bear the pain, I felt that my life was about to ebb. In that state of mind, I went beyond myself, forgetting the world as well as my body. Unable and unconcerned to save myself, I began shouting the words that suddenly gushed forth from within my breast: "Mother! Mother!" I do not know how long this intense outburst lasted.

Dear Nemaï, I cannot adequately write or tell of what I saw in that critical moment. I heard a sweet, divine voice: "Have no fear, I have come." I opened my eyes to see Mother standing before me in Her lightning form, Her effulgence more brilliant and radiant than fire. Mother, anxious for her child, had rushed to save me. The embodiment of compassion, Mother set aside her terrible form and with Her upraised hands came to save me, who is the very part and parcel of Her life. How can I ever describe Her? She lowered Her hands and the burning power of fire was removed—I felt absolute coolness amid the flames. Unable to speak, I took leave of my senses, muttering "Mother, Mother." I lost outer consciousness for nearly three hours, when the sun was about to set on the horizon.

With the setting of the sun, I awoke to the realities around me. I saw that the nearby house, the first to catch fire, was totally gutted by the flames. However, not a single straw of the big house had been burned, to the pleasant surprise of all. This house and I, both engulfed by flames, were completely saved by the grace of Mother. This stupendous fact transported me to another world and utterly changed my vision. Everything was beautiful and rapturous in my sight—soaked with a divine glow. Indeed, the grace of Mother alone had brought about my inner transformation.

As soon as they saw my body moving, the coolies cried out, "Babu! You are still alive! Come over to this side and we shall help you to get down." Somehow, I came to the edge of the roof and they carried me down as tenderly as they would a child. I saw where flames had destroyed the green creeper on the roof, where not a single straw had been burnt. I came to know from the coolies that my face was badly burned and blistered. They also told me that they had been unable to see me through the flames that had reached as high as seven or eight yards as they engulfed the entire roof. And though they heard my strenuous calls of "Mother! Mother!" they were convinced I was dead because I had remained motionless.

After a considerable period, I returned to my normal state and asked them to put out the fire. Four or five coolies came then, bringing water from the ditch. They extinguished the fire and there was darkness all around. With great difficulty, I proceeded home and met two of my Brahma friends along the way. Naturally, they were surprised to see this miracle. Once home, I closed the door from the inside, sat down, and began to weep with words “Mother, Mother” ever on my lips. The whole night passed in this way.

As expected, the condition of my face worsened horribly. People I had known intimately and well claimed I was unrecognizable to them, but in spite of such provocation, I did not lose my peace of mind. A few weeks ago, an acquaintance from Dacca came to stay at my house with his family. One day, I became upset with their frequent depressing remarks about the condition of my face but after a while I forgot all about it and talked with this friend late into the night.

Dear Nemai, I have one good habit: I regularly get up at 3 a.m. to meditate, no matter what time I go to bed and on that particular day, I sat for meditation as usual. An unusual phenomenon took place. I lost my outer consciousness in the room, which was entirely filled with divine light. I have seen that particular form of Mother with Her smiling face; on that occasion, She was restless and Her two eyes were red. However, on this night She was calm and quiet, appearing before me as the embodiment of love and affection. That beauty I cannot describe. In a sweet, affectionate tone, she said to me:

“Is it not that you were a little disturbed with regard to your facial condition?”

“Yes, I was,” I answered, “but not at present.”

“Well, why do you not tell me about it? It will be O.K., just now.”

“O Mother, that I can never tell You. That is Your grace. This is all right—what shall I do with outward show? There are many books that I can ask for.”

Mother began to persist: “Please, do tell once. It will be again like your original face at once. Please, once.”

I also persisted, “Don’t entrap me in Your maya; I will not ask about it.”

Bursting into laughter, Mother radiated peace, sweetness and serenity. With a divine smile, She said, “Well, when you won’t tell me, I’d like to say that it will be all right on the coming Chaitra Sankranti day, after your bath.” Then Mother vanished. I wanted to speak to Her but could not. No longer able to see Her, I broke into tears. It was getting late. With great pain, I unlocked and opened the door.

The days rolled on and the appointed day was approaching. Inwardly, I was very worried. I was unable to resist divulging the secret to my pessimistic friend, and he kept reminding me of it. Others came to know about it and some doubted the veracity of Mother’s words.

How could his face ever become normal again, they reasoned. Everyone was extraordinarily curious about the outcome.

The night before the fateful day I went to bed late; seized by an uncanny fear I passed the whole night in great mental distress. “If Mother’s words do not become real then my Mother’s Name and glory will lose their sanctity in the minds and hearts of the people and they may even condemn Her. I should never have divulged the secret,” I thought in my anguish. By daybreak, I was possessed by an oppressing sense of fear. I mustered the courage to go to the fountain where I usually took my bath. I was so assailed by pervasive doubt and suspicion that I could hardly proceed. I walked with faltering steps, like a drunkard. Agitated by my own disbelief and lack of faith in the truth of Mother’s words, I suffered excruciating pain in my mind whenever I imagined my Mother’s prospective loss of prestige and honor. I decided to walk in a direction away from my acquaintances, in case Mother’s prophecy might turn out to be false. My brain thus deranged and with a languid heart in a seemingly paralyzed body, my drooping soul stood motionless. A strange feeling was generated in my mind that made me forget everything about the significance of the day. A complete and pleasant forgetfulness overtook me. I began to walk normally towards the fountain where I usually bathed.

After the bath, I was busy spreading the wet clothing to dry. That friend and his wife came over to look at my face minutely and stood before me stupefied. This only made me unhappy. After a long silence, they exclaimed: “There is not even a single scar mark in your face—what a strange phenomenon!” As soon as they spoke these words, I began to shake uncontrollably. After a while, I cried with the words, “Mother, Mother” on my lips. I wept there profusely. With great difficulty, I returned to my room trembling and unable to maintain my balance. Safely inside the bolted room, I fell upon the floor. Dear brother, I cannot express any further . . .

Yours,

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Between the dream at night and the assurance of the Mother and its cure, there were only four days. 27 Chaitra the devotee had a dream and Sankranti was four days after on 31.12.1319—the Sankranti.