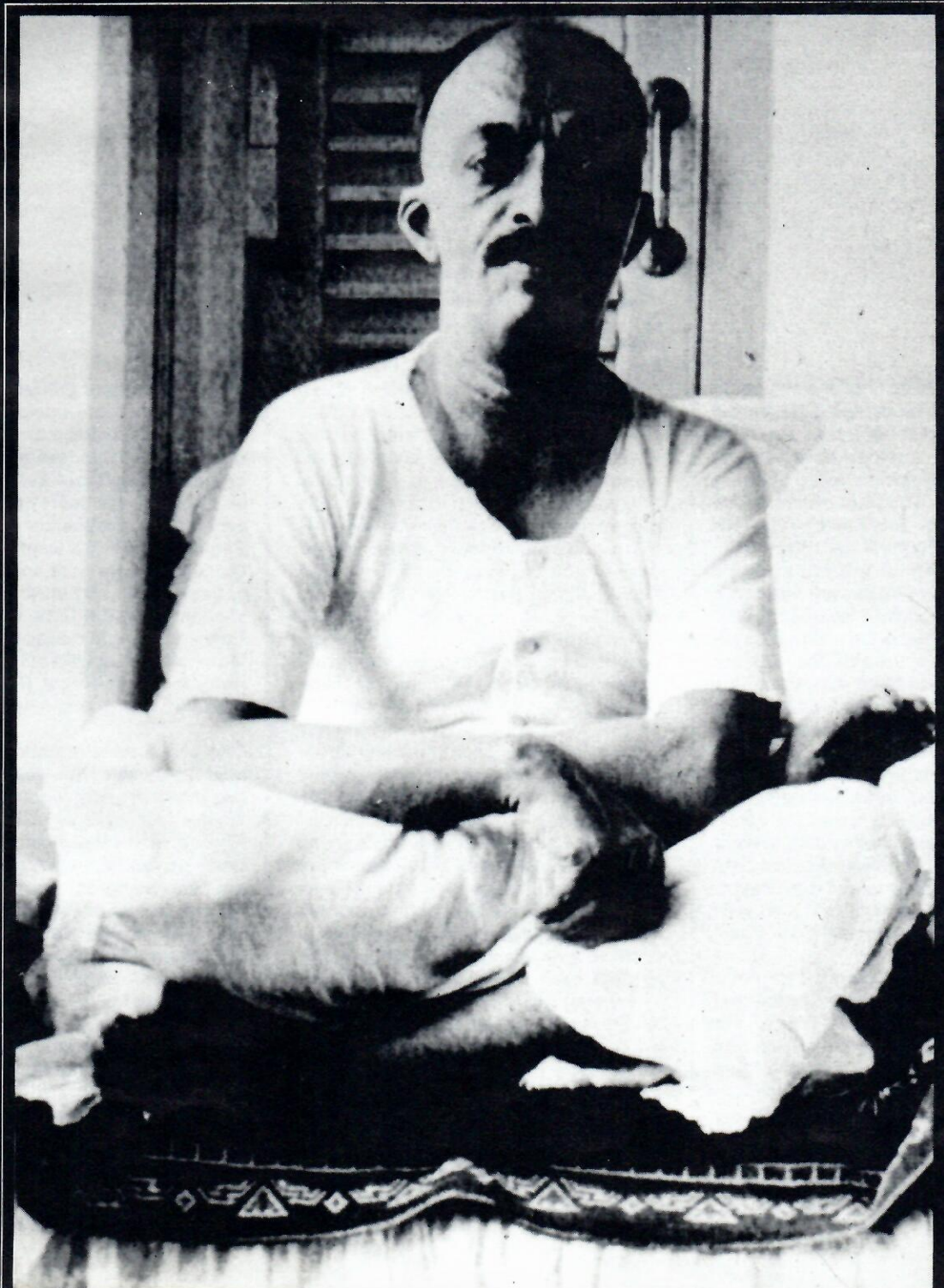


MYSTERIOUSLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

THE SERVANT KING

SRI NARAYAN MAHARAJ

BY DAVID TODD AND TY KOONTZ





Sri Sadguru Samarth Narayan Maharaj, called simply Maharaj (great king) by his devotees, was born on Wednesday, May 20, 1885, in Bhagalkot, West India. His father, Bhimarao, died when Maharaj was five. For the next four years Maharaj wandered from relative to relative. He was raised mainly by his maternal grandmother in Nargunda. The young child was sent to school, but he preferred to go to the nearby temple of the god Venkatesa, where his lessons were forgotten in the joys of devotional singing and prayer. When he was only seven years old, he suddenly renounced all worldly goals; and at the age of nine, upon hearing a rumor of his impending adoption into a different family, Maharaj left his home and family forever.

Little is known about the next seven years of his life. It is generally agreed that he went through much hardship and suffering. Apparently he traveled from place to place. Then, while living with a couple who had taken him in for six months, Maharaj had a prophetic dream. During his sleep, he was visited by Lord Dattatreya,² who invited him to come to Ganagapur, a famous pilgrimage site sacred to the Dattatreya sect. The young Maharaj set off immediately. At the temple at Ganagapur he entered into a period of worship and prayer in the spiritual Presence of Sri Dattatreya. Shortly thereafter, he moved three miles away to Sangama, a sacred site at the confluence of two rivers. There he

The spiritual history of the twentieth century is a bizarre and paradoxical tale. In the last thirty years, the West has seen a remarkable influx of Eastern teachers and a growing interest in Oriental contemplative practices. This wave of Eastern spirituality has met with a wide variety of responses. Many Westerners have awakened to a genuine practice of spiritual life by adapting to these Oriental paths. In addition, though, this Eastern spirituality has been denounced by scientific materialists, scorned by Christian fundamentalists, and naively embraced by youth and bohemian intelligentsia. Meanwhile across the globe, India has been torn apart by political strife and social decay, Japan has succumbed to post-war over-industrialization, and China has fallen under the sway of the Maoist communism that also sent Buddhist lamas fleeing from Tibet.

Yet how strikingly different a situation persisted through the first half of the century. Riding on the seesaw of booming industrialization and economic depression, the West knew virtually nothing of the "wisdom of the East." At the same time in the Orient, which was just waking up

from centuries of patriarchal monarchies, there occurred a spiritual renaissance of real significance. This was especially true in India where there lived at least a dozen great spiritual figures who each taught thousands of devotees. Beginning with Sri Ramakrishna of Calcutta, a galaxy of spiritual giants appeared that included Swami Vivekananda, Sai Baba of Shirdi, Sri Upasani Baba Maharaj, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Bhagavan Nityananda, Sri Rang Avadhut, Meher Baba, Swami Ramdas, and others less well known.

One of the most remarkable of these modern masters has somehow remained virtually unknown in the West. In the eyes of millions of Hindus, including most of the teachers mentioned above, he could not have been more highly regarded. He was in fact at the very center of this spiritual awakening that, through the work of these great teachers, spread to all parts of the Indian subcontinent.

What follows is a brief introduction to the life and remarkable teaching work of this great Adept, Sri Narayan Maharaj of Kedgaon.¹

passed his days in repetition of the Name of God, while sitting under a *neem* tree which faced a shrine honoring Dattatreya. So absorbed was he in worship of Dattatreya that he began to treat each person who came before him as Lord Dattatreya Himself.

One day a wandering monk taught Maharaj a sacred chant with the instructions that he was to obtain his food by standing before a house in the village, repeating the chant five times. If he was given food during that period, he should accept it. Otherwise he was to move on and try again at another house.

Once when he was out begging, he came across a monk who asked Maharaj to feed him. Maharaj explained his method of gathering food, and then promised to get some for the monk also. "All right," the monk replied, "but wait for me. Do not eat alone!" He pointed

out his living quarters, telling Maharaj, "Bring the food, and the two of us will dine there." Maharaj gladly agreed to this and went off to gather food, thinking, "The Lord Dattatreya has asked to dine with me today! I am blessed."

When Maharaj returned to the appointed spot, there was no one there. So he went to the place where he often prayed to Lord Dattatreya. To his great disappointment, no one was there either. He then hung the bag of food on the branch of a tree and sat down to pray and wait, saying to himself, "Unless my Guest shall come, how can I eat?" For three days and nights he sat there neither eating nor drinking, praying ceaselessly: "Lord, why have you become cruel to me? You asked to dine from my hands, and yet you are not coming. I will surely die!"

On the fourth day without food or drink, while bathing in the river, Maharaj saw the monk on the other shore. "Hold on there!" called the monk. "Lord!" cried Narayan Maharaj. "Cross the river and we shall eat," said the monk. Narayan Maharaj quickly crossed the river and placed all the food onto one plate from which they ate like children. Then the monk took a morsel of blessed food from his own mouth and fed it to Maharaj, putting his hand on the boy's head and speaking a sacred word in his ear. In this way, the monk revealed his true identity as Dattatreya to Maharaj.

Then he spoke: "I know your future and I know the work you must do in the

world. Go find your own place. Abide there and all things will gather together around you. You will see how it is all My doing. Whenever you will remember Me, I am with you. I am always with you; I am in your heart now. I have taken your heart as my abode. Is it not good?"

At this, Maharaj fell into divine ecstasy while tears of joy rolled down his cheeks. Then the manifestation of Lord Dattatreya suddenly disappeared. Such was the spiritual initiation of Sri Narayan Maharaj, at the age of sixteen.

The Founding of Bet Narayan Maharaj

Maharaj had no money to travel to his "own place," so he began to consider what to do. That night he dreamed there was a golden amulet near the root of a particular tree. He was told to use the amulet to pay his way. The dream proved to be true and with the proceeds from the sale of the amulet, he began his journey. First he went to Poona. From there he headed toward Aravi, but on the way he was attracted to a place near Kedgaon called Bet, which means "island." The place derives its name from the fact that during monsoon season, when the rivers swell with rain, a high piece of land nearby is given the appearance of being an island. There he decided to settle into a small dwelling on some land owned by four brothers.

1. The principal source for this article is the late Krishna Jogletkar, a longtime devotee of Sri Narayan Maharaj. A member of the staff of The Laughing Man Institute interviewed Krishna Jogletkar at his home in Bet Narayan Maharaj in February of 1980. All references to the spoken or sung words of Sri Narayan Maharaj are from this same source unless otherwise noted.

2. Dattatreya is the godhead of the Dattatreya sect of Hinduism, which is most popular in central and western India. Living from ancient times, Dattatreya is said to still wander throughout India. He is often pictured with three heads, embracing all of the qualities of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. He appears in visions to his followers and has incarnated as numerous great saints within the Dattatreya sect. See Hariprasad Shivaprasad Joshi, *Origins and Development of Dattatreya Worship in India* (Baroda, India: University of Baroda, 1965).



Bet Narayan Maharaj

At Bet, Maharaj had a vision of thousands and thousands of people coming to him for enlightenment. He saw that he must provide a temple, residences, a huge kitchen, storage spaces, and so on, for all these people to come. So Maharaj began to wander about the area in the evenings, looking for the right place.

About a mile away he was attracted by a place where there was a large rock under a tree, and there he sat down. What had drawn him to this spot was not immediately apparent; the place was literally in the middle of a jungle. The land was forbidding. It was covered with fifteen- to twenty-foot-high thorn bushes and inhabited by dangerous wild hogs. The only people who ever visited this inhospitable place were Englishmen pursuing the sport of "pig-sticking" (that is, hunting the wild boars on horseback with spears). However, Maharaj had a vision that this spot was sacred and decided to stay.

One day a group of Englishmen who were professors at the nearby Deccan College came to Bet for boar hunting. In the course of the day, one of the professors, Mr. A. G. Woodhouse, felt terribly thirsty and realized that there was no water to be had. While searching for water, Woodhouse came upon the young Maharaj. When Maharaj miraculously produced a spring at his feet, the professor was taken aback. He was a teacher of Hindu philosophy and was therefore familiar with India's tradition of remarkable spiritual teachers. Hoping that he had met such a one, he talked with Maharaj for about an hour and was greatly impressed by his clarity on all matters of spiritual life. He asked to visit again, and he also requested permission to write an article about him for a newspaper. Maharaj consented to both requests.

As it turned out, the newspaper to which Professor Woodhouse referred was *The Times of India*, which had a worldwide circulation. Up to this time, Maharaj's spiritual nature was known only locally, in an area five or six miles around. But after Professor Woodhouse's long article on the remarkable youth of Kedgaon appeared in *The Times*, things began to change quickly. The professor recommended to all who wished to live a spiritual life that they would do well to visit Maharaj and ask for his instruction.

What Professor Woodhouse and the millions who followed him found in the company of Sri Narayan Maharaj was far more than mere erudition or even the ability to perform miracles. Through the process of spiritual initiation enacted by the very Divine, the young Maharaj had been awakened and transformed into the state of God-Realization, or perfect identity with the Reality and Truth of all existence. Unlike many practitioners who undergo years of intense spiritual practice, often under the guidance of a living master, Maharaj passed through the process of spiritual transformation quickly and apparently effortlessly. His realization came in a spontaneous manner similar to that of another modern Indian Adept, Sri Ramana Maharshi, although the actual experiences they passed through were quite different. When confronted with a terrifying fear of death, Sri Ramana instantaneously awakened beyond the separate egoic self into identity with the Divine Self or Transcendental Being. What is most significant in the lives of great teachers is not the manner in which they become God-Realized but the remarkable *fact* of such realization. It is a living demonstration of the ultimate workings of Divine Grace in the world.

Only on the basis of actual realization can someone truly function as a spiritual teacher for others. This is a process that cannot be easily rationalized or explained in merely psychological terms. Even so, if we examine the lives of great ancient masters like Buddha and Jesus or modern teachers like Sri Narayan Maharaj and likewise consider the testimonies of their devotees, we find that they are capable of effecting in others the same spiritual awakening that they themselves enjoy. Thus, behind the varieties of ways that such teachers have worked with their followers, what was fundamentally communicated and transmitted was the transforming power of the very Divine through the vehicle of the living spiritual Adept.

This "mysteriously effective" influence was undeniably felt by those who came into contact with Sri Narayan Maharaj. Shortly after Professor Woodhouse's article appeared, the thousands of seekers that Maharaj had foreseen began to appear in the wilderness of Kedgaon. They came from all walks of life—rich and poor, skilled and ignorant, farmers and merchants. They found in

the young Maharaj a being whose spiritual presence was profoundly attractive and healing. Soon they began to care for Maharaj, serve him as their spiritual master and provide the necessary funds to build his residence and the temple complex that became Bet Narayan Maharaj.

Sri Narayan responded by instructing those who came to him in the path of devotional surrender. He taught that the way to happiness and the ecstasy of God-Realization was found in complete surrender to God, total reliance on Divine Grace, and loving remembrance of God and of the spiritual master as the living expression of that One. Through this submission and remembrance, the devotee would realize that everything, including his or her own self, was the very Divine.

His Spiritual Work

Soon after Sri Narayan Maharaj began to teach, he initiated one of the most significant aspects of his spiritual work: the revitalization and expansion of the sacred Hindu practice of ceremonial worship. India has perhaps the richest and most ancient tradition of sacramental rituals extant in the world. Since the earliest Vedic times over four thousand years ago, there has been a constant evolution of ritual worship, or *puja*, in which the living power of the Divine is invoked to aid humanity. The principal ceremony used has been centered around fire pits into which priests would make offerings pleasing to God (or to the various expressions of the Divine in the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses).³ Through such worship, the priest could gain access to the elemental forces of nature as well as to higher cosmic influences. However, the most potent form of *puja* brought the priest into contact with the benign power of the Divine Itself.

In the Hindu Vedic tradition, as in its Western counterpart of Orthodox Christian liturgy and sacrament, the practice of ceremonial worship can deteriorate into hollow ritual. Priests become mere figureheads of power and

3. In Hinduism, the numerous gods and goddesses represent various qualities of the Divine and are felt to be neither exclusive characterizations of God nor separable from the transcendental totality of God.

sacramental rites lack life and energy. It was just such lifeless and superficial performance of ritual that Gautama Buddha rejected, causing him to remain silent when questioned about the existence of a personal God that could be worshipped. In a similar fashion, Jesus rebelled against the shameless Pharisaic priests, who played upon the common person's childish desire for a parent-like God to take care of him. Thus, what can be a profoundly enjoyable and effective means of worship and devotional surrender can also become the foundation of a shallow and deluded practice of religion.

Sri Narayan Maharaj, however, did not try to suppress the performance of ceremonial worship or deny its effectiveness. Rather he demonstrated the right way to perform such worship.

The first structure he had built at Bet Narayan Maharaj was a magnificent temple for Dattatreya. As in most such temples, at the center was an image of the god that became the focus of worship. Maharaj performed a daily puja

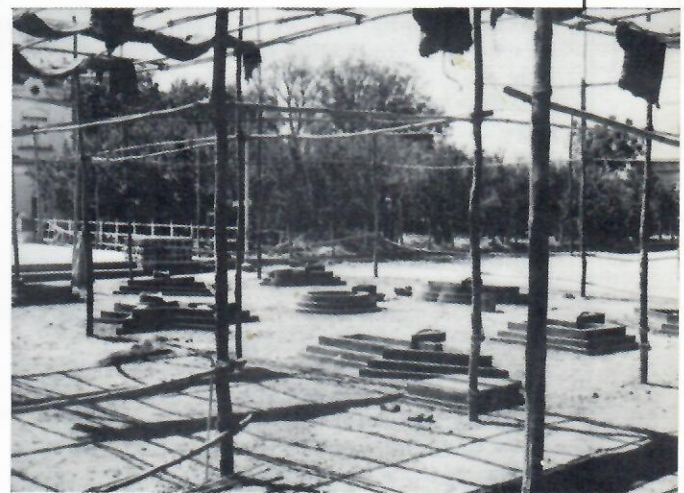
in front of this image, making offerings of flowers, food, and sandalwood paste as the symbols of his surrender. Through his invocation and offerings, he prayed for the benefit of all beings and called upon the Divine to bless his work and devotees. Although Sri Narayan Maharaj was God-Realized and was even considered by his devotees to be an incarnation of Dattatreya himself, he lived as a devotee of God in the form of Dattatreya. He demonstrated to his own followers the way of "Divine Association" that fulfilled the path of surrender, faith, and remembrance.

Upon completion of the Dattatreya temple, Maharaj began a regular performance of puja that he maintained throughout his life. He displayed his own distinctive style of worship. For instance, there is a traditional practice of circumambulating the temple during a puja. This is often done in a rather ponderous, slow manner. When Maharaj circled the temple, he practically ran. He performed the ceremonies with great energy and forcefulness, demonstrating to his devotees that the effectiveness of

these services is directly related to the intensity with which they are performed. In addition, Maharaj was not satisfied with humble pujas managed by a single priest and attended by a handful of devotees. He created massive ceremonies employing thousands of priests and at times attended by as many as half a million people!

Maharaj's favorite ceremony was the Satnarayan puja done in honor of the god Narayan. The traditional form of this service takes a little over an hour to complete, but Maharaj composed a new version that required five hours. In 1935 he undertook a mass ceremony in which 1,008 separate Satnarayan pujas were performed by two thousand orthodox Brahmin priests, each of whom used an individual fire pit.⁴ It was a mammoth undertaking, and many people considered its accomplishment to be a miracle in itself. However, Maharaj soon

4. 108 is considered to be an extremely auspicious number in the Hindu tradition: the mala, or rosary, has 108 beads, there are 108 Upanishads, and there are said to be 108 energy currents in the subtle body of man.



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surpassed it. The following year he directed a ceremony in which 108 Satnarayan pujas were done every hour, twenty-four hours a day for a full week! He personally performed the first puja on each day and was present for many of the others. At the end of the week a total of 18,144 pujas had been completed. Such a major ceremony had not been performed in India for more than two thousand years.

These outrageously enormous pujas not only demonstrated Narayan Maharaj's appreciation of the benign collective force of prayerful worship amassed in such large gatherings. They also revealed his own innate mastery of ceremonial worship. He was never formally trained as a priest, yet he was fully capable of instructing thousands of the finest priests in India. His inherent mastery of the subtleties of devotional surrender was born out of his realization of identity with the Divine, not mere experience or acquired knowledge. Thus, Maharaj's spiritual genius greatly enlivened and clarified the practice of ceremonial worship in this century.

Another significant aspect of Sri Narayan Maharaj's work was the blessing and purification of established holy sites. Throughout India there are countless temples and sacred places that have been created for worship. Many sites are hundreds or even thousands of years old. They are important places of contact with the Divine Presence. However, if these sites are not served regularly, they can lose their spiritual potency.

Over the course of several years, Maharaj visited many sacred sites. He found that the spiritual energy in many places had become weakened and diffused since they were first created and empowered. He served the strengthening and purification of the spiritual power in these spots by performing simple pujas and bestowing on them his own spiritual blessing and presence. Also, in keeping with the grand style of his pujas, Maharaj was often accompanied on these pilgrimages by as many as four or five thousand devotees, filling half a train with pilgrims. By the end of his lifetime, he had travelled throughout the whole of India performing this unique service.

On his tours, Maharaj met many of the greatest living Adepts in the various spiritual lineages of India. Some of these figures were already spiritually realized

when they met Maharaj. At these times a profound transmission and blessing took place, although outwardly the events appeared undramatic. For example, Maharaj saw both Sai Baba of Shirdi and Sri Ramana Maharshi while passing their ashrams. In each case they made only visual contact and, as one devotee put it, silently "exchanged notes." Even so, a tremendous event had occurred. Later when a devotee of Maharaj came to Sri Ramana after her master's death, Maharshi remarked, "You will never find another person as great as Sri Narayan Maharaj."

Maharaj also served as spiritual master to a number of individuals who later became teachers themselves. He worked for a brief period with Meher Baba, who afterwards traveled to the West. Maharaj also served the awakening of Sri Upasani Baba, who later became the spiritual successor of Sai Baba. It is said, for example, that Sri

Upasani Baba received the grace of realization through eating a piece of food given to him as *prasad*, or a gift of blessing, by Maharaj.⁵ Over the years many spiritual teachers, yogis, and saints came to the Bet to receive Sri Narayan Maharaj's blessing and guidance. Maharaj was considered a "master's master" due to the profound nature of his spiritual influence and his great mastery of every aspect of religious life.

His Play with Devotees

The most significant aspect of Sri Narayan Maharaj's work, however, was not his pilgrimages or even his massive pujas. His true greatness was demon-

5. For an account of the life of Sri Upasani Maharaj, including a fuller version of this story, see "The Dark Patch on the Moon Adds to Its Loveliness," *The Laughing Man*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 63-70.



strated in his play with devotees. Here again, Maharaj did things in a large way. Rather than teaching a small group of followers, as was common with many Indian teachers, Maharaj literally had millions of devotees. Nearly three thousand lived at Bet Narayan Maharaj at its peak. Hundreds of others gathered daily for his *darshan*.⁶ Millions more were scattered throughout India and would occasionally travel to see him. Many of them found him appearing in their dreams or in visions during meditation, if they could not be in his physical company. Thus, Maharaj created his grandest theater of Divine Association through his relationships to devotees. They became like the ritual objects he worked with in a wild and ecstatic ceremony that encompassed every moment of his life from the moment he began to teach.

When Maharaj was at the Bet, he kept a regular routine of contact with devotees. He rose at four o'clock in the morning. After a period of meditation and puja, he sat in darshan before his devotees. At these times, Maharaj sat in silence, filling the room with his spiritual presence and love and bestowing his blessings on all who sat with him. Afterwards he visited those who were too ill to come to the meditation hall. He allowed them to place their heads at his feet and he put sacred ash in their mouths or on their foreheads.

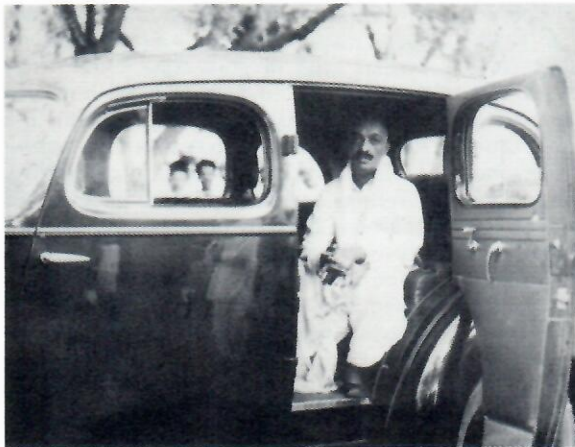
After lunch, everyone slept during the heat of the day. Then, after sunset, as the earth began to cool, he gathered again with devotees. This would be the most energetic time of the day. Maharaj, surrounded by thousands of devotees, literally held court while devotional songs were sung, religious stories were told, and discourses were given by scholars. At times plays were performed, or he was entertained by great singers, magicians, or dancers. On some days Maharaj received other teachers, or a raja or maharaja came to pay his respects. This was a time when his followers could show their great devotion for Maharaj, and he would respond with the gift of his love and radiant Presence. The entertainments always ended with a brief puja performed in front of Maharaj, followed by a period of darshan.

6. Darshan, or spiritual sighting, is traditionally regarded as the highest form of contact between the master and the disciple. Through the process of seeing the form of the teacher, the devotee receives the transmission of the Adept's state of realization.

Maharaj then ate his evening meal and a bed was prepared for him in the meditation hall. Devotees occasionally massaged his body and chatted with him. At times he asked a scholar in attendance a question about the Hindu scriptures. He then listened to the reply and commented on its correctness.

At eleven-thirty the last tea time was announced and everyone left. After tea, Maharaj came out again. Now only the circle of his closest twenty-five or thirty disciples was allowed back. This was the most intimate time spent with devotees. Throughout the day, Maharaj maintained a very formal relationship with those he saw. Now, in the company of his intimate disciples, he grew more playful and wild. At times, he was incredibly sweet and loving, while at other times, he grew quite angry and dealt with his devotees forcefully. Often he told jokes and played tricks on people, laughing with devotees for hours.

Sometimes Maharaj gave simple talks on meditation, morality, or spiritual life. More often, though, he sang to his devotees. His songs contained ecstatic



Maharaj was chauffeured about in a Rolls Royce once owned by the king of England. At times, he would be carried in a silver palanquin.

praise for God as well as his own confessions of oneness with the Divine. In such a state of identity, the guru and God are One. The master becomes the vehicle for the transformation and the realization of the devotee. Maharaj said:

"The safe way is devotion to the Lord, who is nobody but the master. Because of his great compassion for you, the Lord has come and taken the form of your master. He will do anything for you. He will make you like himself."

Often his songs were about the Heart.⁷ For him, worship of the Heart

7. Here the "Heart" means the Divine Self or

was the Way. Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, "I am situated in the Heart of all beings." Likewise for Maharaj, God resides in the Heart, indeed the Heart is synonymous with God. "O Lord of Love," he would sing, "Oh, do come and stay in my Heart, stay in my Heart!"

He would tell devotees, "Why go to the jungle to meditate? This very image that is before you is the Heart. My Form is the Heart. Accept Me as Truth. Accept this body as Truth because the body itself has become God."

In this way, Narayan Maharaj revealed his true condition to devotees. Although he maintained the disposition of a devotee of Dattatreya, he would allow his own disciples to worship God through him. For them, his own body would become the *murti*, or image of the Divine. Thus, if a devotee wished to worship him as Dattatreya, performing on Maharaj's body all the appropriate ceremonies, he allowed this. Likewise, others worshipped him as the Divine Mother, as Shiva, and as other deities, and he accepted it all freely. But for

those who were able to worship his very form as Truth, he would give his own name (Narayan) as a name of God, to be used as a form of Divine Remembrance. Whatever Name his devotee took—be it Shiva, or Datta, or Narayan—he would instruct his devotee to use the Name as a form of direct communion with God:

"Continuous loving-remembrance of the Lord is the Way. You have to become Radha (the beloved of Lord Krishna). She mingled with worldly life, but at all times, twenty-four hours a

Being. Although it is associated with the body-mind most directly in the physical heart, it transcends all embodiment or phenomena.

day, even while in sleep, her only objective—with all of the mind, heart, the whole being—was Lord Krishna alone. In the same way that she remembers the Lord lovingly, if you try to take the Name of God before you, then it will become very effective.

“Keep on your tongue the Divine Name, always with the loving heart, and just feel the Presence of God always within you, and it will help you in any circumstance of life.”

After spending this intimate time with devotees, Maharaj retired between one and three o'clock in the morning. If he went to bed early, he often went to the balcony of the meditation hall and wandered about singing the glory of God in a beautiful voice.

Thus, in the late hours of the night, Sri Narayan instructed his closest devotees in the path of guru worship. To him, as with many other great Adepts, devotion to the master was the true and sufficient practice. Such worship, when performed in the company of a God-Realized being, is not mere cultic adoration. The true teacher does not turn people to himself as a limited personality but rather reveals to them the very Divine Truth of their own selves. Again, this revelation is not intellectual but intuitive and filled with a feeling of such certainty that the devotee is convicted of its truth beyond the doubts of the verbal mind. The ultimate revelation of the true master is not that he is God and others are not. Rather he shows them that everything is Divine.

His Divine Majesty

Because Sri Narayan Maharaj perfectly realized that the world is God, he was free of the common conventions associated with Oriental religiosity and inversion away from life. He was no ordinary ascetic crying that the world is an illusion and shunning all contact with people or renouncing material possessions. Rather he openly embraced the world of relationships and wealth. He used both as instruments of his spiritual work and as demonstrations of his profound freedom in God.

Although the style in which Maharaj lived was essentially unique among

modern spiritual teachers in India,⁸ it was not at all uncommon in earlier centuries. Like the great enlightened rulers of ancient India, he allowed his devotees to engage in the practice of *raja puja*, or treating the master like a king. Thus his devotees cared for him in a royal manner, lavishing expensive gifts upon him and attending to him with great ceremony. For instance when Maharaj wished to be entertained at the movies, his devotees would rent out an entire theater for him and a regal caravan would descend upon the cinema.

Maharaj was chauffeured about in a Rolls Royce once owned by the King of England. He ate from a solid silver plate while sitting in a silver chair. At times, he would be carried in a silver palanquin. He was often attended by twenty or so guards in full dress uniforms. Maharaj himself sometimes dressed in a regal outfit on special occasions at the ashram. Even his name, Maharaj, means “his divine Majesty.”

He lived in an exquisite palace at Bet Narayan Maharaj. This home, like many others on the property, was built by a wealthy patron. Maharaj seemed to attract an uncommon number of such men, many of whom were themselves secular rajas or maharajas. Often, they would come to him and tell him that Dattatreya had appeared to them in a dream and told them to give their wealth to him. Maharaj would receive their offerings and respond with his own gift of Divine Blessing in return. The money received would be used to build temples or be distributed to the poor. In addition, these funds made it possible to feed all pilgrims who came to the Bet.

8. Sri Manih Prabhu (1817-1865), an earlier incarnation of Dattatreya, also lived in such splendor.

Sri Narayan's willingness to embrace relationships and live in a kingly manner extended well beyond the circle of his followers. For instance, he had frequent contact with the British Army in India prior to and during World War II. This contact began in a bizarre and humorous way. A large battalion was stationed near Bet Narayan Maharaj. One night a somewhat bored soldier on patrol casually urinated at the feet of a statue of a local god that stood at the perimeter of their encampment. The soldier went on his way but when he returned to the spot a few minutes later he was astonished by an unearthly peal of laughter coming from the darkness beyond the statue. The soldier fainted from fright.

The incident caused tremendous furor throughout the camp. When the story was told to the general in charge of the base the next morning, it was met with righteous disbelief. That night the general decided to put an end to this nonsense by camping near the statue himself. He sat with another soldier in folding chairs, and sipped brandy while chatting to each other. At midnight, though, came the same bloodcurdling laughter that now sent the terrified general reeling into unconsciousness.

The general decided that he had better consult the locals about this matter. A man at a nearby school was a devotee of Maharaj and recommended that the general ask his master for help. Although the general had no previous contact with Sri Narayan and had no real knowledge of Hinduism, he felt so disturbed by what was occurring on his base that he consented to go see him. Maharaj received the general graciously. He took a packet of sacred ash out of his pocket and gave it to the general with instructions to sprinkle the ash around the base of the statue.



To the general's joy and amazement, once the ash was used the demonic laughter never returned. He then insisted that Maharaj visit his military base. The soldiers now had such respect for Sri Narayan that they learned all of the proper ceremonies to be performed and protocol to follow in order to receive him. In addition, during the war they allowed the lights to stay on at Bet Narayan Maharaj when the rest of India was blacked out.

Once the war began, many of these same soldiers came to Maharaj for help and advice. On one such occasion, the British general asked Maharaj, "Who is going to win the war?" Maharaj replied, "The British and the Allies. But then the victory will not be a very glorious affair."

The period of the war revealed that Sri Narayan's relationship to the British Army and even the entire world was much more complex and paradoxical than mere social niceties and mutual respect. Like many great Adepts, Maharaj apparently engaged in a form of transcendental work that intensified the power of the Divine in the world. Through his own spiritual blessing, he seemed to affect the outcome of the war.

Thus, Maharaj took great interest in the activities of the Allies and the Germans. He kept a large transistor radio with him, and every day a devotee would be asked to listen to the Berlin Review at eight o'clock, and the BBC report at nine-thirty. Then the devotee would prepare a detailed report for him. He wanted to know about all phases of the battle: on land, at sea, and in the air. He kept a map of Europe so that he could monitor the situation of the Allies, how far the Germans had come, and so forth.

As the war continued, while soldiers were being wounded and dying, mysterious wounds would appear on the body of Sri Narayan Maharaj with no apparent cause—on his fingers, on his feet, and on his torso. He had to be bandaged three or four times a day. He could not walk; he could not dine by his own hands. When questioned about the relationship between the spontaneous appearance of wounds on his body and the war in Europe, he refused to talk about it.

In the course of his many pilgrimages and his efforts during the war, the great master literally wore his body out.

Finally, in 1945, at the age of sixty, he began to look pale and to run a slight fever. He was moved to Ootacamund in southern India for his health, but to no avail. At last the Maharaja of Mysore convinced him to come to his palace in Bangalore. While there, Maharaj, foreseeing his imminent death, undertook the direction of a great celebration for Lord Shiva. This three-day festival, requiring over three thousand Brahmin priests, was to pray for "the blessings of peace to a stricken world, and to invoke the Divine aid and benediction for the prosperity of mankind."⁹ Sri Narayan Maharaj created an original mantra for this occasion and gave a mass initiation to the more than three thousand priests, during which their practice of the mantra was empowered. At the conclusion of the three day festival, Sri Narayan Maharaj invited the entire city of Bangalore to receive prasad. Then, having overseen the entire festival, Maharaj saluted the priests and asked their permission to rest while everyone received prasad.

He went to his residence and then sent away all his disciples, save one, telling them to go and receive prasad. Then he sent a message to see if the prasad ceremony, which was to take the form of a dinner, had begun. The head priest brought Sri Narayan Maharaj the news that the dinner had begun, and, after a brief ceremony, Maharaj sent the priest away, telling him to go and receive

9. Bet Narayan Maharaj, *Sri Sadguru Samartha Narayana Maharaj* (Bangalore, India: Bet Narayan Maharaj, 1945).

prasad for himself. During the prasad ceremony, with a single devotee at his side, Sri Narayan Maharaj entered his final samadhi while sitting quietly in his chair.

The date was September 3, 1945. Earlier that day, during the final stages of the puja, Maharaj was told that the British had landed in Japan. He had said, "The war is over. My work is finished."

Epilogue

For many devotees, the shock of the master's death was more than they could bear. Without the engaging theater of his company, they had no focus for their worship. They simply left the Bet, brokenhearted, never to return. For others, however, the death of their master did not interrupt their spiritual practice or their relationship to him. He would, and still does, appear to them in dreams and visions. And yet the most potent form of contact with his spiritual presence awakens in the process of remembrance that Sri Narayan taught to devotees:

"The Divine Name is God Himself. You cannot separate the Name from God. God is Name and Name is God. Repeating the Divine Name, you repeat God Himself. You might not know that, but God knows it. And when finally your devotion is complete, the Name has become everything for you. I am the Name that you have taken. I am He." ■

