

NAGA BABA

By S. P. Mukherjee

Naga Baba, who died only a few years ago, was a very aged Swami living in a small ashram on a low hill at Puri. None knew his name or provenance. He was referred to simply as 'Naga Baba', 'naga' meaning 'naked', since he wore not even a loincloth. People merely guessed his age, some of the guesses running into centuries. His manner was abrupt. He did not encourage people to visit him often or to stay long. Typically crabbed was his answer when some one asked him his age: "If you think I am fool enough to identify myself with this body, you are a fool to come here." When a visitor had been sitting in his presence for some twenty minutes or so he was quite likely to say: "Well, you have had darshan, you can go now." And yet people went to him. They felt a strange euphoria, even an exhilaration, in his presence and carried it away with them.

S. P. Mukherjee, who was an engineer in a large Calcutta firm, retired in 1960 (while Naga Baba was still living) and settled down with his wife at Tiruvannamalai, building a house near the Ashram. Neither of them had ever seen the Maharshi, but they had immense devotion and felt his guidance. Mr. Mukherjee tells the following story.

In 1952 I visited Naga Baba with a whole group of my family and relations. We sat for some time in his presence, but he simply ignored us - did not even look at us.

We were staying at a large hotel in the town. That night I could not sleep. Towards morning I felt restless and went downstairs to the lounge. The air was hot and oppressive. Altogether I felt ill-at-ease. Suddenly had an impulse to go and see the Swami then and there. I found a rickshaw waiting outside the hotel and went.

When I arrived it was about four o'clock in the morning. I found the Swami sitting alone under a neem tree and had the impression that he was waiting for me. I sat down in front of him, feeling glad to be alone with him, not in a crowd. He smiled and spoke to me in a very friendly tone, saying: "So you have come back."

That showed that he had noticed me earlier in the day, though he seemed not to. I felt happy and at ease in his presence and asked him a few questions that were troubling me, beginning with some reference to the course of my life.

The first was: "When should I begin to lead a life of sadhana (quest)?"

He replied simply, "Now."

I explained to him that circumstances were very difficult at present - my daughter was not yet married, my contract with my firm was not renewed, I was engaged in litigation and had a variety of worries. But he simply answered that that was the best time.

I next asked him whether I should retire in a few years before completing my service, and he said, "Yes." Then, without mentioning Arunachala by name, I asked him whether I should settle down and make sadhana in an ashram at the foot of a hill, to which I was strongly drawn, He closed his eyes for a few moments and then opened them and said: "Yes, you will do that."

After that I asked him a more profound question: "How shall I get rid of my ahankara (ego-sense)?"

He said: "What ego-sense? What ego?"

I told him that it was nothing specific but everything I do. For instance, if I do something well I feel proud and have a sense of being a better person.

He said: "That is egoism of the mind, You will get rid of it if you control your mind and start recoiling it to its source. It is like a person flying a kite. As he recoils the thread the kite flies over a smaller and smaller range till at last it comes to rest and stops flying altogether."

After sitting silent for a few minutes, but with no sense of constraint, he spoke again, saying, but in a kind and gracious way: "Well, have you had enough now?"

So I took leave of him and went away, feeling peaceful and elated.