

MY FIRST MEETING WITH SATHYA SAI BABA

by Vladimir Afanasyev

"God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame."

Elizabeth Barret Browning

My first experience of close acquaintance with the holy land of India was staggering. Reality surpassed everything one could dream of, having longed for many years for an intimate contact with spiritual India and who found himself at last on the limitless expanses of pilgrimage. By the Grace of Providence I could pick a wonderful, truly divine fruit and taste it. I trust that the reader is aware of the difficulties I face in this attempt to describe on paper at least a small part of my heart's experience. And I'd be infinitely grateful to him if he would magnanimously excuse my imperfect narration.

I arrived in Puttaparthi with my Indian friends on October 10, 1988 in the afternoon. The sun is shining brightly as if trying to convince the whole white world of its indisputable significance, to prove to it its absolute supremacy and unique predestination. But now my thoughts are far from persistent revelations of the heat-emitting giant.

Several moments later we enter Prasanthi Nilayam, the main earthly abode of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. First we go to the Reception. "O, from Russia!" a rather elderly Indian looks through my passport with noticeable interest. The procedure of our registration is completed with a warm smile and a few approving, though somewhat reserved remarks. We are given the key to room No.2 in the 'Round house' where we, now enjoying full rights pilgrims, are heading.

We unpack our luggage, take a shower but have no time to rest after the travel: the darshan is about to start and we must hurry up. People from all over the world come here to see Sathya Sai Baba. And we, too, have come to Prasanthi Nilayam for this reason. The most cherished dream of every follower, devotee and probably any visitor of the ashram is a personal meeting with Swami and a personal interview with Him. But this opportunity is not available to everybody. Not so long ago, in the 60-ies, practically every visitor could count upon such a meeting with Baba. During the following years the number of pilgrims grew immensely and this tendency stands.

"The time will soon come when this huge building or even vaster ones will be too small for the gathering of those who are called to this place. The sky itself will have to be the roof of the auditorium of the

future; I will have to forego the car and even the airplane when I move from place to place, for the crowds pressing around them will be too huge. I will have to move across the sky; yes, that too will happen, believe Me." This prophecy made by Sai Baba way back in the early 60-ies has already come true to a considerable extent.

Shankara and me sit in the inner yard of the mandir under the vaults of the sky – "the roof of our hall." I look with interest and admiration at the wonderful building of the temple, so familiar to me from photos and books. I look around trying to memorize every fragment of the picture before me. The air is scorching-hot but not merciless. And crystall-clear! Blue sky, sparse, small snow-white clouds floating across it, and trees covered with thick foliage seem to compete with one another in brightness and purity of colours.

"What, you're uncomfortable?" – Shankara asks, having noticed me fidgeting uneasily from time to time on the cement pavement of the mandir yard. "Not so long ago there was sand here, it was more comfortable to sit but it was too dusty, so they decided to pave the yard with cement. Hever mind, we'll buy a mat today, they are sold here widely – both on foam and without". But a mat, even with foam padding had little interest to me at the moment. I was absorbed in anticipation of the darshan, a sacred ceremony of which Shankara had spoken and written to me so much and of which I had often read in the books about Sathya Sai Baba.

Noticeable movements or, more precisely, agitation of the people sitting around me and gentle nudge of Shankara's elbow gave me to understand that the moment had come. Instantly straightened backs of those in front of me, their swaying heads and torsos in search for a better vantage-point made me automatically follow their evidently habitual behaviour. My eyes were directed to the mandir, to its farther part. There, from under a beautiful balcony stretching along the whole length of the building, appeared a figure of a man with a large mane of black hair, clad in a long, rich-red garment. The figure stood still for a moment and then floated (so smoothly it moved!) away from us to the part of the yard allotted to the female pilgrims. After a while Sathya Sai Baba started moving towards us. I see Him better and better. He reaches out and takes a letter from somebody, then one more and more. A mass of reached out hands holding letters: everybody hopes that his message will be collected by Bhagavan Baba. But no, with a soothing gesture of His right hand and a benevolent smile Baba gives to understand that He knows whose letter to take. Beside Him there is a man, one of Swami's numerous assistants accompanying Him during His darshan. Baba gives

him letters every time when the pile gets too thick. Somebody in front of me lifted a baby. Bhagavan stopped as He was passing by. The next moment His hand was resting on the baby's little head. The blessing was delivered.

I kept on looking trying not to miss His single motion, to catch every detail of what was going on before my eyes. Some time later Swami started to move away from our place, continuing to give darshan in His unhurried, confident manner.

And then happened something I could never expect and what turned out to be one of the most exciting and unfathomable moments in my life, When Sathya Sai Baba was about 10 metres from us, He suddenly stopped and turning His head slowly in our direction, looked straight at me. Our eyes met... "My God, but He has recognised me!" – flashed through my head. His gaze showed it absolutely positively. But it was not even that that struck me. What struck me was the fact that *the eyes looking at me were not those of a human being.*

There are things that are hard to describe and even to conceive. Baba's gaze was one of such things. I had never come across anything like that before. Later, no matter how hard I tried, I just could not choose a proper word to describe that gaze because it was directed at me *not from this world.* That gaze was reflecting reality of some different spheres, dimensions, levels of existence totally unfamiliar to me.

That contact immediately triggered inside me a deep emotional experience. A wave of extraordinary force went through my consciousness and my heart, first making it beat faster and stronger and then kind of dissolve. My mind, though, kept on automatically recording the information coming from my organs of vision. I saw Baba slowly divert His eyes from mine and turn His head to the right (He was standing with His left side to us). But in a moment everything repeated: the same slow turn of the head and one more dose of unearthly injection into the very heart. That time it was a shock, a shaking to the core. It seemed that all liquid contained in the cells of my body rushed to my eyes under some mysterious pressure and was about to burst out of them in a powerful stream. It took me great efforts to withhold it. But nevertheless my eyes were filled with tears for a while. I don't think anybody noticed it, thank God! As if through a dim glass I saw Baba slowly diverting His gaze from me and turning His head to the right – exactly as it had been at the first time. But now He proceeded further.

I don't remember very well what followed then, and perhaps it is not important. The darshan was over, we got up and went somewhere. Shankara had seen Baba looking at me. He told me about it and was very happy and deeply satisfied. But he could not guess what really had

happened. Only later I confided my secret to him – my strange mystical experience, by means of which Sathya Sai Baba in such an unusual manner revealed to me one facet of His mysterious, inconceivable essence.

The next day brought new surprises. In the morning darshan by the grace of Providence I found myself in the 2nd row. That gave me a splendid opportunity to see Baba at close quarters. In my hand I had three letters: from my friend-sadhak from Pyatigorsk with a request to help him in his yogic practice, a doctor from Moscow with a desperate plea to cure a grave disease and myself. All were addressed to Sathya Sai Baba. "Will he take them or not? Now or later?" – these questions, naturally, were turning in my mind.

"What a fine view it is from the place I occupy with Shankara. If only it could always be so!" I wished but immediately reprimanded myself for such absurd thought. Having passed the brightly coloured live island of ladies-devotees and endowed them with His grace Swami came up to the men's part. I respond to His approach by mounting excitement. I feel that my heart starts to beat stronger as if before a vital examination. And suddenly, when Baba is next to me, my excitement disappears and the whole of my self is filled with a wonderful feeling of peace. Baba is in front of me... He is looking at me... He is reaching out to take the letters from me...

After breakfast, having taken a stroll around the ashram and enjoyed once more the air filled with fine emanations – a mixture of exotic flowers and incense – we take our places at the central entrance to the mandir in order to take part in the morning chanting, singing of bhajans, which starts at 9 a.m.

At 8:55 my new quartz watch "Chaika" ("Seagull") that I had bought a couple of days before departure for India, stops all of a sudden. All my attempts to revive it (I would shake, tap, manipulate it in every way) failed and I had to ask Shankara who was sitting beside me to lend me his wristwatch because the next day he was leaving for home and I just couldn't do without a wristwatch at the ashram. So, his Swiss "Titony" was soon on my left hand and I gave him mine asking him to have it repaired on his arrival to Mysore. If I only could guess at the moment what watch I got! As my friend later told me, somewhat proudly, this watch had been blessed by Sathya Sai Baba Himself way back in 1964. He told me the following:

"I bought it then for my elder brother Raghu who had spent over 5 years "side by side" with Baba. A fine singer, he was then the leader of a bhajan-group and Baba liked his voice very much. Noticing it on

Raghu's hand Baba said, "O, you've got a new watch, let me see it!" He put it on His wrist and wore for a while. Then He took it off and returned to Raghu saying "Wear it, it's a good watch!"

"Later on my younger brother Satish had it who also had spent several years with Baba. After that it was passed on to my father who, as you know, was an ardent devotee of Baba, and after his passing away – to me."

I'd like to anticipate events now and tell the reader of the subsequent fate of this peculiar watch. When I came to Mysore 10 days later, I asked Shankara, of course, whether he had had my "Chaika" repaired. "But it's OK. It works perfectly. I found that out when I was going to take it to the repairer's, but it doesn't need to be repaired." My friend's face beamed and his eyes were shining mysteriously. I had guessed that much from the very beginning. In his eyes I could see the confirmation of my guess. "Yes, of course, there is Baba's Will behind all this story. He wished that it was so, and so it happened, now it's your turn to wear it." I have never parted with it ever since.

One more noteworthy thing happened that day. It was in the daytime. Me and Shankara decided to walk around the ashram and do some shopping. As we were on our way to the Purnachandra Auditorium, we noticed a few groups of people not far from it, all looking in one direction. Almost everybody held their hands together on the chest in a traditional deferential gesture – Namaste. We accelerated our pace knowing that Baba was near. And what did we see? At the house occupied mostly by the personnel of Sathya Sai's organization there was a deep-red "Mercedes" bearing the emblem of Sathya Sai Organization which symbolizes unity of world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrism, Islam and Christianity. (In Western countries, as I learned later, Judaism can be added to the above mentioned religions). Baba had called on some tenant of the house and everybody was waiting for His exit. We found ourselves at a very advantageous spot in front of the car, very close to it on the curb of the street. We did not wait long. In a minute or two Swami came out of the building. As He came to the car He turned to us and... looked at me closely. Then He got into the car and it started off. The next moment as the car was passing us by Swami brushed me with His eyes briefly and stopped His kind and loving glance on Shankara. Greeting him with a smile Baba went on His way. If you could only see the face of my dear Indian, his eyes! I do not have to say how happy we were.

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The third day in the ashram. In my diary it is defined as "the most wonderful in my life." Of course this bold formula was affected, in part, by my spiritual state, much higher at the time than usual. Nevertheless even today, when so much time has passed, I am still of the opinion that my initial assessment of that notable day was correct. So, what happened?

On the 12th of October during the morning darshan, at the very end of it, when Baba had finished His traditional 'walk around' and disappeared under the vaults of the balcony, yet all pilgrims remained seated at their places, two Sai Baba's "spiritual guardsmen" called me for an interview with Him. Complying with His Will they had hurried out of the temple and started searching for me repeating insistently in low voices, "Russian! Russian?!" I understood that I was the one, stood up and headed for the mandir to the interview room. Struggling through the regular but thick rows of people sitting under the balcony, when I almost reached my destination I slightly brushed my foot against one of the men. Swami, who was standing at the door of the room and waiting for me – the last one of those invited for the interview – instantly responded to my awkward movement, "No need to worry so much." And smiled at me. Those were the first words of Bhagavan to me.

I entered the room where those invited for a spiritual audience were sitting on the floor: women with children on the right, beside a window; men on the left. After I had settled on the floor Swami came in and went up to a very beautiful armchair looking more like a throne that stood in the right corner. By the circular motion of His right hand He created vibhuti, the sacred ashes and poured it by small portions into the immediately reached out hands of the sitting women. Then He let fall some remarks which animated the Indians (as Baba spoke a native language I could not understand the meaning), stood up and came up to a young Indian sitting in front of me. With a similar but more energetic motion of His hand He materialized a locket on a chain and put it around his neck. You can imagine how I was gazing at that scene which was happening in a couple of metres from me!

Another youth with an Asian appearance was sitting beside me. "Are you a Buddhist?" asked Swami in English. "Yes, I am" came the answer. The next moment with the same characteristic gesture Baba created a yellow trinket with some made-in image. I could not see whose image it was.

After a while, when Swami had started personal interviews with each of the invited in another room, to the right of His chair behind a curtain, one of the women asked the young Asian to show her the object Swami had materialized. The simple-hearted youth acquiesced. Curiosity, it turned out, is characteristic of the Indian women. It was fun to watch them scrutinize it, one after another, with unhidden interest and enthusiasm. Then all of a sudden, Swami came out of the inner room having interrupted His confidential interview. He looked at the locket which was at the moment in one of the women's hands, and gave a slight but impressive blow on the back of the head of the embarrassed possessor of the unique item, explaining that it was not a proper way to handle such items. Then He ordered the frightened woman to return the locket immediately.

Curiosity, it turned out, is also characteristic of the Russian men. In the evening of the same day, on Shankara's request I was bringing a mosquito repellent to his mother and grand-mother, who spent a good part of their lives in the ashram. Not far from their house I saw the young Indian for whom Sai Baba had materialized a locket on a chain in the morning. I could not miss such a chance. "Sai Ram!" I greeted him and grinned as widely and pleasantly as I could. "We've met today at Sai Baba and I saw Him present you a locket. I beg your pardon, could you please show it to me? I'd like to examine it closer." Without delay and wasting no words the fellow fished out the divine talisman from under his shirt and offered to me, not taking it off. A lamp was burning on a post above us which gave me the opportunity to take a good look at the unusual creation.

(Note. The rest part of it is in my Indian diary.)