

I Remember...

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Part Four

A Shangri-La in India

A Westerner recalls how Sri Maha Sannidhanam reminded him of the ancient Upanishadic Rishis.

PETER J. FELL

When I was a boy, I used to speak with an Indian family friend who was a disciple of the Sringeri Math. He would tell me about his *guru*, Sri Maha Sannidhanam, and of the tradition of Advaita Vedanta at Sringeri reaching back to the time of Adi Sankara. Having been brought up in a family with a strong connection to the Ramakrishna Mission, I was sympathetic to Indian philosophical traditions and practices. And because of Sringeri's ancient and revered lineage, I felt a special regard for the peetham and the Sankaracharya occupying its seat. Sringeri seemed to me like a Shangri-La of South India.

After several years, this same Indian friend graciously gave me a copy of His Holiness' book,

Jagadguru of Sringeri, compiled in two volumes by Mr. R.M. Umesh. I appreciated the trenchant and candid character of His Holiness's teachings. It seemed to me that His Holiness was speaking from personal experience. One excerpt in this respect that I have often remembered comes from the section on *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*. After much discussion on the topic, the disciple asks a final question: Disciple: Will your Holiness say something about *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* from personal experience? **His Holiness:** (With a smile) Do you think that all these times I was only quoting what is said in the scripture? (Vol. I, p. 81)

Here, it seemed, was a teacher akin to the *Upanishadic Rishis* of old.

Visit to Kalady

In 1984, 12 years after first hearing of Sringeri, I visited India with the purpose of meeting His Holiness. At that time, His Holiness was staying at Kalady, the birthplace of Adi Sankara, during the period of Chaturmasya. His Holiness was kind enough to grant me an audience.

With trepidation I approached His Holiness where he sat on the porch of his living quarters, calmly reading. In front of me, I thought, was the embodiment of Sankara and I, a Westerner, was as far removed from the ethos and sanctity of Sringeri as could be imagined. I asked His Holiness several questions. His responses were entirely in character with his written teachings which I had read: succinct, incisive, authoritative, and compassionate. Yet I felt his responses were meant specifically for me. As a result, they had a deep effect. Over the five years since that meeting, His Holiness's words have often come back to me.

It seemed to me during those

days in Kalady that His Holiness was abstracted from the events around him. He would come out for his morning walk, he would perform *puja* and occasionally speak at a function, yet throughout he seemed unmoved, at rest, but still very much alive to his surroundings. In his presence I felt very tranquil.

I believe that it is because great men like His Holiness exist that others have some faith in the efficacy of religious practice. In my own practice, however feeble, I am bolstered by the belief that I have seen and talked with a man who has known the truth of the scriptures. I am honoured that he saw fit to meet with me and to grant his blessings.

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