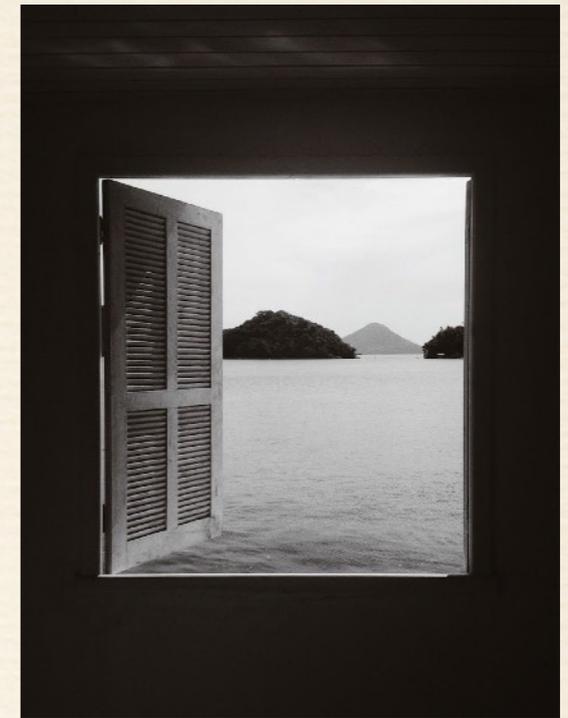


Dream work with Ashishda

A personal account by Sujata Jagota

For many of the Mirtola community, ‘dream work’ was (and still is) often the centre of numerous discussions. The effort involves paying attention to one’s dreams in order to uncover the subconscious compulsions that come in the way of meditation. Most of us recorded and discussed dreams, studied many of the standard books on psychology as well as some more esoteric accounts, tried to interpret our own dreams (and sometimes those of others!), and brought dreams to Ashishda for interpretation and discussion.



Photograph by Stephen Mann

Introduction: The Self as Dream-Maker

How did Ashishda’s dream method work?

Looking back now at the vast numbers of dream journals we recorded, the intense personal discussions, and the number of letters he sent us in thoughtful, meticulous response to dreams and other issues, it seems as intense as long-term work with any therapist. The principal difference is the

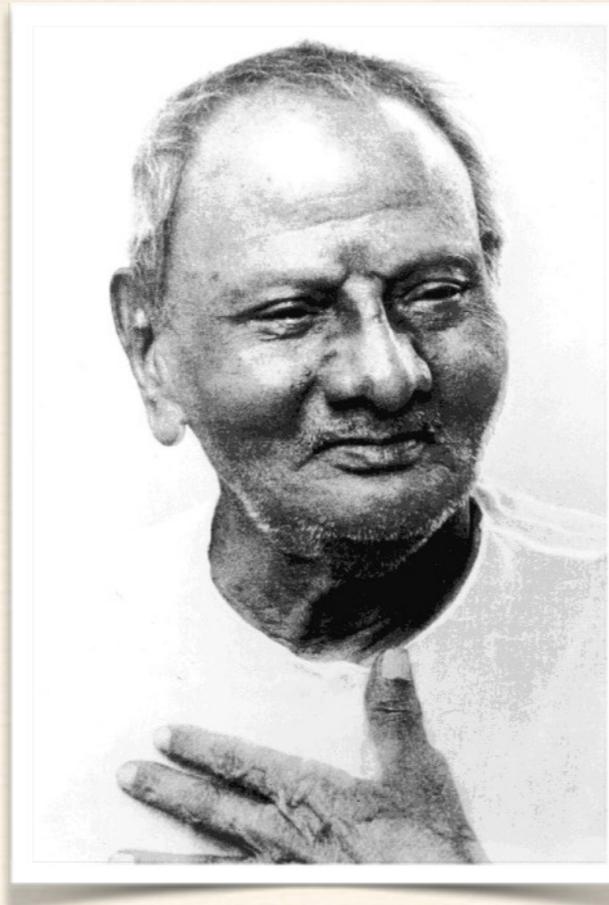
spiritual teacher’s aim versus the therapist’s. Ashishda, in his book, *An Open Window: Dream as Everyman’s Guide to the Spirit*, has emphasized that the higher Self is the dream-maker in the role of the inner guru. Its primary aim is to lead the essence out of the quagmire of the personality, to shed light on the goal of the inner inquiry (which is fundamental to all human experience). Paradoxically, it does this by showing the dreamer facets

of their personality (traumas, other features) hidden away in the subconscious from the waking state. Seeing and accepting these, and working to change one’s hitherto unexamined attitudes, can help the mind to go quiet in meditation. This may then lead to rare but key glimpses of an inner space that reflects a non-personal awareness. Dreams can also provide a space for communication of direct teachings for the inner inquiry,

including messages and teachings from spiritual guides.

The Sufi tradition pays attention to dreams with such direct teachings from guides in a similar way (see Michaela Ozelsel's *Forty Days: The Diary of a Traditional Sufi Retreat* for a description of use of dreams related to the inner quest in a Sufi context). Ashishda's method spanned a broader horizon that included work on personal psychological issues that came up from one's life experience to find this point of clarity.

Recently I also found a parallel affirmation of this approach in the context of meditation in one of Nisargadatta's conversations, as reported in his book *I Am That* (Page 13, Chapter 6). In response to a query about the purpose of meditation and use of a quiet mind as the goal of meditative practice, Nisargadatta responds:



*'We know the outer world of sensations and actions but of our inner world of thoughts and feelings we know very little. The primary purpose of meditation is to become conscious of, and familiar with, our inner life. The ultimate purpose is to reach the source of life and consciousness. Incidentally, practice of meditation affects deeply our character. **We are***

***slaves to what we do not know;** of what we know we are masters. Whatever vice or weakness in ourselves we discover and understand its causes and workings, **we overcome it by the very knowing;** the unconscious dissolves when brought into the conscious. The dissolution of the unconscious releases energy; the mind feels adequate and becomes quiet. When the mind is quiet, we come to know ourselves as the pure witness. We withdraw from the experience and its experiencer, and stand apart in pure awareness.'*

How We Began

After college and before we left India for graduate studies in the US, my husband Anand and I took initiation from Ashishda soon after we were married, in 1983. That began a fourteen-year period of work with him: through

discussion during regular visits to Mirtola, or by letter. Regular meditation was the fundamental practice, with dream analysis being parallel and complementary.

We began to see how the two were inter-dependent – one bringing to light hidden subconscious traumas or inhibitions which coloured one's view of reality, and the other (hopefully) sometimes leading one towards a state where the personality could be dropped to find a non-transient, non-personal centre in oneself. No formal structures – physical or social – were prescribed for meditation, except regularity, and a sincere effort to constantly remember one's query of 'Who Am I?' if not the body, mind, desires or fears that control one most of the time. For some pupils meditation

included repetition of the mantra given at initiation. This is similar to the mindfulness exercises now popular with Buddhist/Hindu meditation groups and the self-remembering exercises recommended by Gurdjieff. Through those years, the relationship with the guru deepened, as he very much held one's hand in the journey through the jungle of one's mind with an extraordinarily supportive amount of loving kindness and empathy while we coped with the usual demands of adult life: building careers, starting a family, etc. But at no time was there a sense that he was our therapist or life-mentor helping us to become better adjusted and more successful in our outer life. His only concern at all times was to help us pursue the inner aim: to

try and find what does not change and die. Dropping the demands of the ego is no easy task when one needs to survive in a fiercely competitive world; but the alchemy the guru provided by his method was one that helped you bring out the best in what you did – by working for excellence for the sake of excellence itself, loving beauty for the sake of beauty only, by essentially deleting one's personal baggage from the equation. Both dream work and meditation are key components of this alchemical mixture.

To illustrate his way of using this method, here are two dreams, separated by eight years. The central motif in both is a river, but the significance – the dream's message – is utterly different.

Two Dreams: Similar Image, Different Meaning

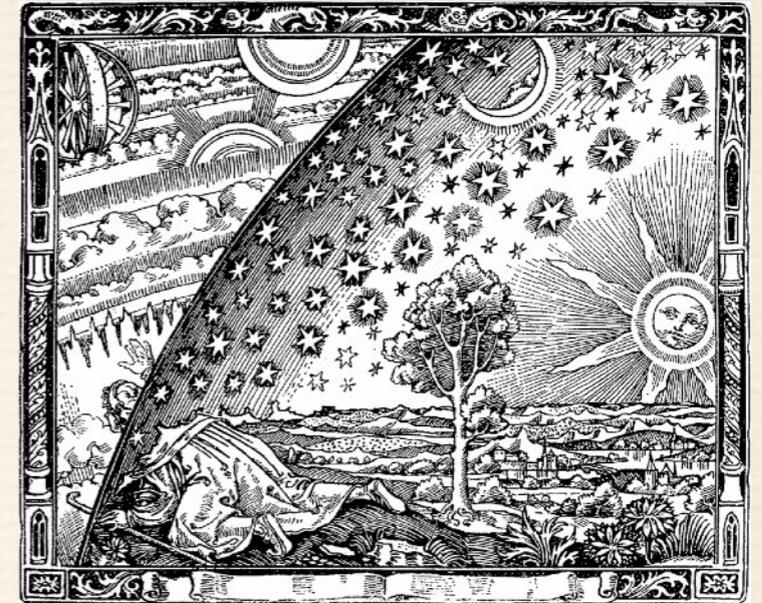
Dream One: Some Background

It was back in 1984. A great many 'first' experiences happened to me at the time: marriage, initiation, coming to the USA, – and the last chapter of *Beelzebub* (*Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*, the colossal allegorical novel by G.I. Gurdjieff).

A quiet winter afternoon in Ithaca NY: the sun streaming in through the window under which I sat, on a floor cushion, reading *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*. Seduced by the warm pool of sunlight on the cushion, I dozed off after reading the following passage:

'...it will be useful if we compare human life in general to a large river which rises from various sources and flows on the surface of our planet, and the life of any given man to one of the drops of water composing this river of

life. This river at first flows as a whole along a comparatively level valley, and at that place where Nature has undergone what is 'cataclysm not according to law', it is divided into two separate streams...a 'dividing of the waters'. All the water of one stream... ultimately flows into the vast ocean. The second stream... seeps into the very depths of the earth. Although after the branching of the waters the waters of both these streams flow further independently and no longer mingle, yet...they frequently approach so near each other that ... at times during great atmospheric phenomena, such as storms, winds, and so on, splashes of water, or even separate drops, pass from one stream into the other. Individually the life of every man up to his reaching responsible age corresponds to a drop of water in the



Flammarion engraving, 1888

initial flow of the river, and the place where the dividing of the waters occurs corresponds to the time when he attains adulthood.'

Extract from the first dream

The river found me in the subconscious: a wide expanse moving with a strong current. I was in a train that was rushing over the water's surface. I saw glimpses of the blue waters of

the river through chinks in the train windows as it moved. Inside the train there were stone statues – Khajurao-type panels and one large one of a woman with baby Narayan in her arms. Through chinks in the shuttered windows of the train compartment I saw boats crossing the river. Finally, balanced gingerly on a cardboard platform attached to the moving train, I'm crouched on the flimsy platform surrounded by water on three sides moving at a great speed with the train. Looking at the expanse of the surrounding water around me and sensing the speed at which we were going, I am afraid. Then there was a question: 'are you initiated? You can cross the river only if you've been initiated for otherwise you will be sucked in by the eddies and currents along the way.'

My dream journal notes that in the time between trying to wake up and my actual waking up, I felt great fear.

Ashishda's comments:

In the Naasene document, part of the Hermetic tradition, there is a saying: 'Jordan (the river) flowing downwards, giving birth to man, flowing upwards, giving birth to gods.' Jordan is the same as Ganga, the river of life or of Eros. The Khajurao temples depict the uninhibited play of Eros in the outer worlds. Inside is Shiva. The real question is the nature of the child to which you should give birth.

When you understand the inner aim of the erotic power – transformation, self - transcendence, the birth of Narayan within – then you need not be confused over your role as a woman. Your role is not to give birth to physical children, but to the inner spirit. The ananda in the act remains ananda. You are

not deprived of it. But you must see that it is not 'yours'. It is His. Don't take it to yourself. Guide it to its own fulfilment. It will certainly carry you, as the train is carrying you in the dream. At present you do not see it clearly. You see only through chinks. Like everyone, you are as if in a box, a compartment, getting only fleeting glimpses of the universal flow of life. The cardboard on which you are floating may refer to the ephemeral nature of phenomena.

'You cannot cross unless you are initiated.' The answer is:

'I *am* initiated.' But this can be said truly, only when you have made your initiation real by seeing it and using it as a means to *cross* the river of life – i.e. not to flow with it but to strike out for 'the other side'.

The fear of so much water is the fear of self-loss. Yet, 'He who loses himself finds himself.'

Dream Two: Some Background

This dream (of September 1992) came at a time when a new phase had begun for us in life – we had just bought a house, I had started a new job after leaving the university (in the same company where Anand worked) and we were hoping to have children soon. Outwardly, there was a feeling of change and new beginnings. Inwardly, the dream life was prolific, as if providing materials for the construction of the next chapter, perhaps?

Extract from the Second Dream

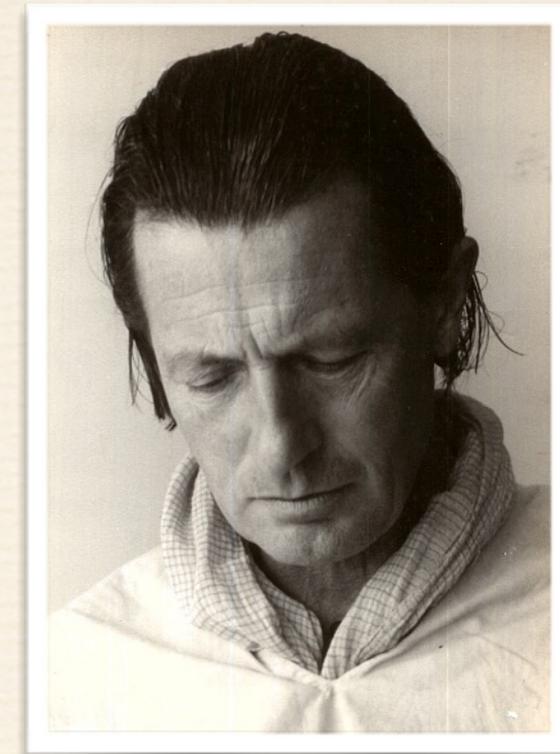
A man is showing me three photographs at the bottom of a large book. They are pictures of three views of a beautiful blue river, each with the head of Ramana Maharishi embossed over the picture in light grey pencil. The river is full and clean. The first picture shows a bridge across the river. The second has

rocks along the river bank with Khajuraho type carvings. The third image shows a lone cottage on the bank of the same river – the ambience is of peaceful silence. In the dream I sat regularly here each morning. It was here I once saw the face of Ramana over the waters.

One of us – the man or I – says that we used to swim in the river often. At this memory, I suddenly get an eerie fear that there may have been crocodiles under the silky blue waters of the river. Then, my friend Kalpana, who is sitting with me on a bend on a hill road overlooking pine forests asks: ‘Didn’t you and Anand visit a pond in the past, similar to this river?’ I reply, ‘Yes, we did, but that was so different from this river - somewhat swampy with dirty houses/villages around it.’

Ashishda’s comments :

The river of life is more often seen as turbulent and muddy, than



than as clean. But, seen through Ramana, it will appear clean. His teaching is indeed a bridge across it. Perhaps one can read the arrangement of the pictures as implying that both the second and third pictures – the eroticism of Khajurao (taken inwardly) and the meditation suggested by the cottage on the bank – are bridges, or components of the bridge: two ways of the way across which have to be united. It is a common mistake to think that anything erotic is *mere* sex, physical, worldly,

desire-ful and not spiritual, while the spiritual is purely meditative. Swimming in the river is probably the enjoyment of life itself, rather than just sex. It is certainly true that there are crocodiles that pull one down if one thinks that life is just for enjoyment.

Here it is clear that the task is to cross the river.

A university is only too often well described as a dull pond, neither in the river of life nor out of it. Stagnant. There may be exciting intellectual events, but they don't lead anywhere, until one gets out into life.

Whether or not a holiday is a stagnant pond depends on one's attitude. A holiday from the job can be refreshing – that's the whole point of it. But how can one afford to take time off from the inner thing? If one did that, wouldn't it turn the outer holiday into a pond?

In Conclusion: Crossing the River

Since then, the motif of the river and going across it has recurred many times in dream, each one addressing the present context of the outer life; each one addressing a different level; all within the inner, repeating trope of 'going across to the other shore'.

Now, more than twenty years after the guru's passing, one's understanding of the nature of the inquiry has changed. We still record dreams and discuss them. Intentionally coupled with meditation and also with the inputs from outer life during the sheer process of living, dreams help to provide a platform for an 'other' perspective. Teaching dreams still come through, often contextualized in the events of the moment. And again and

again the dream space presents for our understanding the different psychological obstacles to the inner inquiry that act as road blocks to quietening the mind (nightmares and anxiety dreams are stark examples along with more 'normal' dream narratives). It becomes more and more important in this later phase of the work (late middle age, careers stable, children grown up) to use the input from dreams to allow the meditative practice to deepen – whether during times of actual sitting in meditation or while engaged in outer activity – by letting the mind become quiet, eliminating (at least for a moment) the focus of the ego-self, thereby allowing the possibility of pure awareness to shine in through our attempts at creating 'an open window'.