

Richard Kearney

Heart-Mysteries

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Cork, Ireland

I had always been very close to my mother—like my six siblings—and loved to make her laugh with stories whenever I visited her over the years. But I didn't know how much she actually meant to me until she was gone. I discovered a hole in my heart. Curiously, just before she died my mother gave me a relic of the Sacred Heart that her own mother had given her—an image that she told me had helped several people close to her (her sister, Dorothy, my father, Kevin) through some very dark times. In fact there was a note on the envelope in which the emblem heart was contained with my Aunt Dorothy's writing. It read, "This heart was hanging on the cot when the house burnt in 1913 and I didn't!" My mother, though deeply spiritual, was never into sentimental piety. She was also well aware of my iconoclastic temperament when it came to such things. But she handed me this parting gift as something she felt I needed. It was accompanied by a passage from the first book of Wisdom. "You are so intelligent Richard," my mother said. "You can write all those books and teach all those students. But you lack wisdom sometimes, don't you?" She said it with a quiet laugh, tilting her head slightly so that I would know she meant it kindly. "You're right," I smiled back. "But what can I do?" Life *without* wisdom seemed so much more exciting! The passage from Wisdom spoke of "seeking the Lord in simplicity (integrity) of heart" (1:1) and of discovering the divine as "the witness of one's inmost self and the sure observer of one's heart" (1:6).

In other words, in the verses my mother gave me on her deathbed wisdom was identified with the human heart as a place of seeking and finding, of

giving and receiving, a special site of exchange between God and his creatures. The Hebrew “heart” described here was where the human and the divine intersected with each other—a space of crossing and traversing. Several months after she died, I felt an abyss yawning inside me. The old black dog of depression was about to pay me a visit and pull me into the pitiless void. I saw a doctor and was about to take medication when that very night I had a dream in which my mother spoke to me, her head tilting inimitably in her knowing, caring way, “Put down the book, Richard, pick up the heart.” When I awoke the blackness had lifted.

Spirit lives through flesh, and flesh through spirit, in a vibrant circuit of reversible exchange, and the heart is the place where both meet. I was reminded of this yet again after my mother’s funeral in West Cork. As I walked the roads around Myross island in the evening, I would drop in to visit some of the more infirm members of the community. Joe O’Connell, a retired fisherman living alone in Squince harbour. James Neal who looked after the boats on Myross slip during the winter storms. Margaret Donovan now in her nineties and still chattering away in Gaelic to her sheepdog and last-surviving horse (her brother, Dan Joe, reared foals for the army up to his death ten years ago). On each occasion, as I knocked on the door, I found myself asking “How is the heart?” placing my hand over my chest as I did so. I thought about this afterwards and realized several things that I must have already known but not consciously acknowledged. First, it was a way of asking how they were as persons. After all, whenever one wants to indicate “I” or “you” one points to the heart, not the head or the stomach or feet. We all know, somehow, that the heart is the centre of our being, and by implication, of our well-being. And this was poignantly brought home to me when sitting down one evening with Margaret over a long cup of tea (once you are in there is no getting out), I noticed she interspersed her comments to me with the affectionate term in Gaelic, a *chraoi* (heart). This is, of course, a colloquial idiom of endearment in many languages—*mon coeur*, *mein Herz*, sweetheart—but in Gaelic it includes persons outside one’s intimate acquaintance. So my asking “how’s the heart?” was, in some simple sense, a throwback to deep-rooted vernacular usage in these parts of the country, instilled no doubt by my childhood acquisition of basic Irish at school.

But there was a second reason, I realized, for my West Cork phrase of greeting. And it was this: several of the elderly people in the area had been treated for heart problems by three generations of Kearney doctors, starting with my grandfather J. J. Kearney who was born near Roscarberry and practiced medicine in the Cork area during the first half of the twentieth century. The third generation, following in the footsteps of both J. J. and my father Kevin, was now represented by two of my brothers, Peter, a cardiologist in Cork University Hospital, and Michael, one of the medical pioneers of the Irish Hospice movement for palliative care in the 1980’s and 1990’s. So the phrase, “how is the heart” was in my familial blood, so to speak, and referred to both a spiritual *and* physical condition of being. The heart is the weathervane of healing and illness par excellence. If you really want to know how someone is, look to the heart!

Boston, U.S.A.

When I went to my first yoga class in Boston, encouraged by my wife, Anne, who had been practicing for several years, I filled out a questionnaire. One of the questions was: "Why have you come to Yoga?" I decided to be truthful for once in such situations, and said to my instructor, Peggy McLoughlin, that while it might sound odd I had come because I couldn't sleep! "That's fine," she nodded, adding that most people came to yoga because of some kind of hurt. She smiled serenely and ushered me towards a blue mat lying at the front of the room. I lay down, closed my eyes and breathed deeply. And when I heard the next words that came from my gentle instructor—"Let your eyes move down from your head to your heart"—I knew I was on a journey that would continue for a long time.

The second question that Peggy asked me at that first class was: "Do you know Frank Clooney?" Frank was a colleague of mine at Boston College. He was a world expert in Hindu-Christian comparative theology and had a deep knowledge of the Vedantin and yogic traditions. I decided to look him up. Within a week we had arranged to have lunch and I was soon embarked on a study of the Vedanta. When I first entered Frank's office I was taken aback by his simplicity, his slightness. How could this thin, demure, unassuming man, dressed in a faded yellow T-shirt and threadbare cotton trousers, be the famous pioneer of the comparative theology movement I had heard so much about? But he was; and the ostensible disparity between his modest physique and capacious psyche actually lent an aura of enigma to the man. I was also taken by his impish humor. His desk was surrounded by dozens of garish images of sacred figures—Goddesses like Durga, Lakshmi and Parvati alongside Shiva, Krishna, Hanuman and the Buddha. It reminded me, in fact, of Freud's famous desk in London. Not adventitiously perhaps, as both were sounders of unconscious depths—libidinal in Freud's case, spiritual in Frank's. Two aspects of the same journey, no doubt; two sides of the same heart; systole and diastole.

We met regularly for lunch discussions and seminars and before long Frank spoke to me one day about a French Benedictine called Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux was his original name) who had come to India in the 1950's to set up an ashram at Shantivanam, a pilgrim place for Hindu-Christian dialogue where he was later joined by his confrere, Dom Bede Griffiths. He was convinced that the Western Church of Christ and Abraham needed to be renewed by contact with the Eastern tradition of yoga and Vedic spirituality which still held a place for the breath, for divine bodily poses (*asānas*) long lost in the West. Here, Abhishiktananda believed, Christianity might rejuvenate itself in dialogue with mother goddesses and mystical gods, with the ancient traditions of sacred shakti, symbolized by the iconic images of the Shiva Linga and Female Yoni which stood at the center of countless temples and shrines throughout India. Towards the end of his life, Abhi—as he came to be known—set off on a pilgrimage to this holy Hindu city of Rishikesh on the upper Ganges where he had a mystical experience of death and rebirth and initiated his disciple, Marc Chaduc, into the mystery

rites of the heart, before the latter's mysterious disappearance into the Himalayan mountains.

When I told Frank Clooney I was planning a trip to India, he suggested I pay a visit to an interreligious ashram called Jeevandhara near Rishikesh. It was established in the early 1970s by a group of pioneering sisters of the Sacred Heart, in the spirit of Abhishiktananda who had made a special pilgrimage there shortly before his death.

Jeevandhara Ashram, India

When I climbed the steep hill to the small village of Tapovan where Jeevandhara Ashram was located, I was welcomed by a sister of the Sacred Heart. Her name was Suriya, locally known as Mataji, a friendly way of saying "mother." She showed me to my Spartan quarters where I slept for twelve hours (though it was still day) exhausted from my travels. Next morning, Mataji woke me at 4 am for meditation: two hours of sitting cross-legged in a small room with candles lit before icons of Shiva, Christ and the Buddha. There was a pair of vertical windows to the front of the sanctuary through which you could peer into the night and just make out the starlit Himalayan hills overlooking the town. When I closed my eyes I heard the wind gusting down through the valley of the Ganga, accompanied by the muffled whispering of the river as it coursed over the rapids just beneath the ashram garden.

Mataji told me how Abhishiktanda had encouraged Sister Vandana and herself to learn more about the ancient Vedic understanding of the "heart." The term *hrd* in Sanskrit was one of the most operative idioms of native yoga instruction, inspired as it was by the ancient teachings of Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras* and the *Upanishads*. Abhishiktanda frequently used expressions like attending to the "eyes of the heart" or "letting one's eyes sink back to the seat of the heart;" he would cite his favorite *Yoga Sūtra* whenever he got a chance: *hrdaye cittasamvit* (III, 34)—"In the heart, the knowledge of the mind." After which he would often muse over one of the learned commentaries of this same passage, explaining how the citadel of the soul (*purusa*) is the heart, how the famous *anahata cakra* has always been considered the seat of pure knowledge and consciousness. By *samyama* (integration) in the heart, the sages taught, a yogi can learn to unfold and tap the source of his being, and identify himself with the Supreme. But it wasn't, said Mataji, until she started reading Patanjali and the *Upanishads* for herself that she realized what a central term the "heart" actually was in the whole yogic and Vedic culture, leading simultaneously back to the inner core of one's being and out into the limitless universe. It had greatly amplified the theology of the Sacred Heart she'd acquired in her novitiate in Bombay.

When Mataji inquired why I had come to India, I told her I was eager to learn how the ancient wisdom of the East had responded to one of the most insoluble conundrums of existence, and of my own particular existence at this moment in my life: how to reconcile desire of the body and desire of God. This

was, I admitted, an age-old question in Western culture going right back to Plato and the Bible. How do we combine *eros* and *theos*, carnal yearning and divine peace, the flesh and the spirit? Mataji threw me a knowing look. "Perhaps your heart is where both meet?" she said.

My deep resistance to the Catholic iconography of the Sacred Heart was not a reason, she assured me, to remain blind to what Abhishiktananda and the Upanishads might teach me about the cave of the heart. She brought me a book entitled *Ascent to the Depths of the Heart* by Abhishiktanda, his personal spiritual diary from his first pilgrimage to Arunachala right up to his last pilgrimage to Rishikesh. Mataji confided the book to me, as if she was handing me a missal in some liturgical rite.

On the face of it, this was a most unprepossessing volume. Her personal copy was dog-eared, poorly produced (by a small Indian publisher) with a broken spine and torn cover. But I was soon absorbed. The first marked passage contained an early reflection by Abhishiktananda on the "cave of the heart." This was a phrase translated from the ancient Sanskrit term, *guha*, which referred to a hidden space of interiority. It was also used to describe certain isolated caves inhabited by Hindu sages engaged in the quest of the inner space or *akasa*. The Vasistha Guha—located upriver of Rishikesh and which Abhi seemed determined to visit before his death—was just such a place. But long before he resolved to enter the dark pit of Vasistha's Guha, this Benedictine pioneer spent years exploring the internal Guha of the soul as recorded in these audacious diary entries.

I was particularly struck by an entry recorded on Nov 24, 1956. Having lived in India for several years and founded the Shantivanam ashram in Southern Tamil India, Abhi made what was for him a major discovery: his Christian God was ultimately the same One that revealed itself in the secret heart space (*guha*) of his Hindu neighbors. He wrote as follows:

You who shine in the mystery of the cave (*guha*) which the *rishis* (holy sages) revealed to us, after You had been revealed to them first of all under Your name of Hidden One (*guhacara*, the one who moves in the cave, in hiding, *gudha*, hidden, secret). You, the *Brahman* who gave our Vedic chants their ritual power, You, the *Brahman* who shine in the form of the "I Am" in the eternal presence of the Father, in the mystery of my own heart, at the heart of the "I," You who "kenosized" (emptied) Yourself in those very mysteries which are not of your Church...(ADH, p. 174).

Abhishiktanda was recording here what he considered to be his first moment of radical enlightenment. He had spent two days alone in the dark Shiva temple by the sacred mountain of Arunachala where he had traveled to meet the holy Hindu sage, Sri Bhagavan Ramana. Here, in Ramana's silent presence and in the adjacent Shiva temple afterwards, Abhi experienced a meeting with what he called the divine "element" in the very depths of the heart space. He realized now, in a lightning flash, that his inherited Catholic conviction that formal Christian baptism was the only way to salvation no longer held. The divine was in all things, beyond all particular forms or doctrines we, as humans, constructed. The sacred ultimately defied our man-made attempts to pin it down, possess it, invoke it as if from some

position of privileged ownership.

The words on the tattered page before me, written by Abhi under the shadow of Shiva's holy mountain, attested to an incredible audacity. I read and reread his new credo addressed to his host Sri Ramana:

If to become Christian again I had to give you up, O Arunachala, to abandon you, O Ramana, then I would never be able to become Christian again, for they have entered into my flesh, they are woven into the fibers of my heart. How could I become Christian again if I had to forget Ramana and the people of the mountain... all those who were my companions on the way, and were each in his own way my helper or my guide towards the great enlightenment. If to say Mass I had to give them the slip, then I could never again say Mass (p. 175).

Abhi confessed that to fully embrace what he described as the "forgotten abysses of his heart," he could no longer "reject that person—that element—in (himself) which penetrated with so much emotion into the dark sanctuary of Arunachala." To condemn this would mean that "the Eucharist could no longer be true for (him)" (p. 176). For the journey to the inner mystical space of another spiritual tradition like Hinduism was not like ashes on your forehead that you wipe off with your hand. These ashes on his brow, as he put it, "are the silvery background on which glows redly the cross of Christ, and they cannot be wiped off without removing the cross" (p. 176).

In short, these diary entries showed that Abhi had reached a point where to deny Shiva was to deny Christ. He had passed beyond confessional persons and personifications to the heart of the mystery where all loving beings meet. Abhi had rediscovered Christ at the heart of Shiva and Shiva at the heart of Christ.

After I finished reading the passages marked by Mataji, I placed the book face down on the stone floor of the veranda, sat back against the wall and closed my eyes. I repeated the word *guha*, *guha*, *guha* over and over in my mind until a deep peace invaded every fiber of my being.

Next day Mataji brought me shopping. As we reached Tapovan square, she tugged my sleeve and steered me towards a soft drinks vendor at the far side of the street. The vending stall, tucked between a textile boutique and vegetable shop, sported a row of assorted bottles on its counter, each with a different colored liquid for the various fruits—guava, mango, orange, lemon, coconut, lime. I thought Mataji wanted some juice and offered the elderly vendor a 100 rupee note. But Mataji shook her wrist, indicating she had not come for that, but to show me the series of icons running along the rim of the stall. These included the usual menu of Vedic deities—Shiva, Parvati, Kali, Durga—but also three images of blazing hearts! These were the ones Matajai was eager for me to see. The Immaculate Heart of Mary. The Sacred Heart of Jesus. And, right beside them, the open heart of Hanuman, exposing his cherished Rama and Sita, residing inside his breast. Christian and Hindu icons side by side. One, two, three, all in a row. Abhishiktananda would have loved to see that, she added gleefully. And maybe he did when he walked these very streets on his visit to this town thirty years previously.

I asked Mataji how Hindus felt so at ease about mixing Hindu and

non-Hindu images like that. She explained, amidst the holler of shouting rickshaw men soliciting fares, that Hindus were generally welcoming of other deities. Since they have over three million and thirty names for the divine, there was a lot of space for foreign gods. So not only were Buddhist icons welcomed into the family fold (in fact, far more Hindus visit the Buddhist shrine at Sarnath than Buddhists) but certain Christian figures too. And most especially those—Mataji nodded to the stall across the street—with blazing or wounded hearts. Jesus with the heart crowned with thorns was one favorite. Mother Mary with the immaculate heart ringed with roses was another. And yet another favorite, especially in Tamil Nadu, was Saint Sebastian, whose self-surrendering heart was pierced with arrows. Hindus worshipped these figures with fervor, revering them on certain holy days—Mary on the feast of the Assumption, St Sebastian on his feast day in May when mothers would come to his shrine in Chennai bearing sick children and praying for healing cures.

"Our Christian Churches have not been so ready to reciprocate, have they?" I asked. Mataji lowered her head, shaking it slowly back and forth before raising it again: "May God forgive us. How often have we preached the love of Christ and closed our doors to other faiths!"

Mataji woke me next morning at 3.45 am. Two knocks on the door. The moonlight was bright enough to illuminate the gravel path through the cloistered garden to the chapel. Lemon and orange trees cast a deep purple shade across the neat flower beds and grass. As I took off my shoes at the sanctuary door and slipped quietly onto my cushion by the wall, I noticed that Mataji and some other guests—Jeff, Tamara and Bimal—were already seated in prayer. It was as if they were folded into themselves, heads bent, attentive to some inner voice. There was a penumbral glow about the altar cast by two lit candles placed at either side of the icons of Christ and Krishna. After one hour of silent meditation Mataji turned on the wall lights and, placing her steel rimmed spectacles on the bridge of her nose, reached for a book beside her.

The readings of the interreligious eucharistic service which followed were from I Samuel, John, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. I was full of admiration for Mataji's audacity in mixing biblical texts with Sanskrit literature or hymns like *Om Visva jivanaya Namah* (Praise to the Life-Giver). When I asked her about this after breakfast, the vehemence of her response took me by surprise. Western Christianity had been far too slow in acknowledging the holiness and wisdom of other religions. Too few Church leaders make the effort to understand why thousands of young people come to sacred cities like Rishikesh or Benares and throw themselves at the feet of half-starved, naked old men. So many people today are crying out for spiritual depth, are hungry for the living testimony of those who have journeyed to the divine and back, and who may guide them on the way! We need to listen and learn!

She spoke with fierce intensity, her righteous indignation scarcely contained by the contemplative peace that hooded her petite swarthy frame like a halo. Her head bobbed back and forth as she spoke, like a marionette

whose strings are tugged by a higher power. Mataji had no doubt thought long and hard about this as she dwelled here all these years amongst some of the holiest swamis of the Vedantin tradition, watching as countless young Westerners came in search of some kind of healing while our own Church—which she clearly loved—railed against the dangers of yoga and New Age spirituality! “Sometimes I think we are the biggest sinners of all,” she added with a flash of her eyes. But she quickly regained her composure and changed the subject, offering to arrange a meeting for me later that day with an instructor in the nearby Omkarananda Academy of Yoga. His name was Ashish Das and he was an expert in both the Yoga Sutras and Vedanta. He would have much to teach me, Mataji promised, in both the spiritual practice of yoga and the Vedantin teachings on the heart.

Omkarananda Academy, Rishikesh

When I first met Ashish Das I was struck by his youth. All that I had heard from Mataji about his yogic wisdom had led me to expect a white-haired elder. He stepped forward to greet me as I mounted the steps of the Omkarananda Yoga Academy, a slight-framed young man with big glasses and a white cotton jupa. The Hatha yoga routine Ashish conducted was relaxing and relatively undemanding. We began with a simple enough sequence of warm-up postures. Starting with the rotation of toes, feet and ankles to left and right, clockwise and anti-clockwise, we then proceeded to the swiveling of knee-caps and legs, hands, wrists, fingers and elbows before eventually reaching the shoulders and head. Each pose or *asana* involved a reciprocal rotation of the joints or limbs on both sides of the body. This opening sequence was followed by a number of loosening poses for the jaw, neck and eyes and the usual routine of sitting, standing and triangular *asanas*. The main session culminated with a flowing sequence of sun salutations and gentle relaxation into sleeping posture (*savasana*).

The asanas were accompanied, in turn, by a series of deep breathing exercises known as *pranayama* (*prana*, vital energy; *ayama*, expansion). These represented the Fourth of the Eight Limbs of Patanjali’s traditional yoga. We ended this sequence with a slow chanting of the sacred Sanskrit word, *Om*, in five-stage single breaths. But the pose that really caught my attention during that first day with Ashish was called *nada-anusandnam* or “Listening to the Heart Sound.” It involved blocking your ears and eyes with your fingers, curling forward between your legs, with elbows resting on knees, as you listened to your own heart beating. Ashish said that this was known colloquially as the *Guha* position since it was associated with the final descent into the cave of one’s own inner heart, the place where yoga begins and ends.

Having heard about my special concern with this subject from Mataji, Ashish let me hold this pose for an extended time. He promised me that once I could hear my heart beat in unison with my breathing he would bring me to visit a place called Vasistha Guha, a legendary saint’s cave by the Ganges

some twenty miles north of Tapovan. I lost the rhythm of my breath when he mentioned this. It was the same place which Abhi talked of visiting after his ultimate Awakening in Rishikesh three decades ago.

The aim of pranayama breathing was to help us transcend the fluctuations and addictions of our human condition by putting the body into a pattern of breathing that most people would never observe. It was, in other words, a refusal to breathe like the majority of mankind, inducing one to descend from shallow chest-breathing to deep abdominal-breathing.

Ashish then taught me to inhale and exhale in such a way that the spine balanced the movement of the diaphragm, the lower vertebrae drawing down with each exhalation and allowing for the release of the whole back of the body through the sacrum and lower abdomen. It is the key to grounding. Each inhalation, by contrast, was described by Ashish as a drawing up of the "bird of *prana*" from the interiority of one's being, allowing the energy of one's individual self and of the universe (*prana* refers to both at once) to infuse one's entire being. The proper balancing of inhalation and exhalation enables us to reach the rhythm of sleep without renouncing lucidity and awareness.

Finally, Ashish introduced me to a selection of Sanskrit texts. All centered on the *guha* or "cave of the heart." These precious pearls were chiefly located in the sacred Vedanta scriptures, most especially the Upanishads. Ashish brought along the Sanskrit originals with commentaries by Swami Chinmayananda.

The first passage we looked at together was from the opening chapter of the *Kaivalya Upanishad*: "*Parena nakam nhitam guhayam vibhrajadetadyatayo visanti.*" Rendered into English this read: "Higher than heaven, seated in the cave of the heart (*guhayam*), it shines, which seekers attains" (Chapter I, verse 3). What struck me most about this image was that the shining truth which the seeker desires is larger and higher than the heavens themselves, but is to be discovered at the bottom of the innermost vault of the heart. Excited by my delight at this paradox, Ashish quickly turned to chapter 18:61 of the *Bhagavad Gita* where Krishna reveals to the warrior, Arjuna, that "God dwells in the heart of all beings (*hrdese*)...which turn and spin through the wonder of His illusive power." Here again, explained Ashish pointing to his chest, we encounter the image of the highest divinity residing within the most intimate core of our being where the source of power invisibly resides.

But it was when he opened the *Katha Upanishad* that the Vedantin imagery of the heart, gravitating around the ancient Sanskrit tropes of *guha* and *hrd*, really leapt from the page. Sitting beside me with the old leatherbound edition spread wide on his knees, Ashish chose six particular verses that, he was convinced, had deeply inspired the spiritual imaginations of both Sri Ramana at Arunachala and Abhishiktananda at Shantivanam. Ashish almost chanted the six verses, raising up the *Kathopanishad* in both hands as though it were a votive offering. And as he sang aloud it was as if the breath of his living person was becoming the actual medium of the words themselves, a medium in temporary possession by some other, some third, some departed person or thing, some timeless spirit writing and reading and

speaking itself through him. He seemed lost in incantation to the point of self-forgetting. The white parallel stripes on his forehead, marking his Shivaite faith, suddenly seemed to shine like arrows sprung from a bow which preceded this moment and sailed towards some distant target situated well beyond our ken as we sat there in the walled Academy garden.

As soon as he had finished reciting, Ashish bent forward and started to interpret each verse for me in turn. His words were guided by Swami Chinmayananda's deft commentaries, appended to his edition of the Upanishads, but I suspected from the fire in his sallow eyes that many of the insights were his own. He would help me get to the bottom of this, Ashish promised.

The first mention of the *guha*, explained Ashish earnestly, occurs in a stanza where the Kathopanishad broaches the question of self-discovery. Beneath all the fine theories of Eternal Truth and Total Mind, it suggests, resides a more intimate experience of the ultimate in the form of an utterly simple realization, "This I am" (*Ayam Aham Asmi*). This ultimate reality points to a deathless, "ancient" inner Self beyond the ego-self (*Ahamkar*) of our normal surface life. This is *Atman*. But it is, the first verse tells us, "hard to see." To our ordinary perception it remains illusive; just as the eye, being an instrument, can only see objects external to itself, never itself. The *guha* is like the blind spot of the eye, that which enables us to perceive all things but cannot itself be perceived. The truth of *Atman* is lodged, as the stanza says, "in the inmost recess" of our being; it is the subtlest principle in all of us, deeper than Mind, Body or Breath. It is the Bliss Sheath where the source of life, the spark of the divine, the steam at the core of water lies. It is that truth "hidden in the cave of the heart."

Ashish's voice reached a mini-crescendo with the last sentence and then subsided gently, like soft rain onto a flower bed. He sat back against the whitewashed garden wall for a few moments before opening the Chinmayananda commentary at another particular passage which he also read to me:

It is an ancient Vedantin concept, sanctioned by the Vedas and acceptable even today, that in the cave of the heart is the seat of True Intelligence. To a modern microscope-gazer, whose philosophy rises no higher than the principle of "see to believe," this statement may read as absurd, for to him intelligence is lodged in the brain. But if we walk from the laboratory to the library and listen to the opinion of great authors of what true intelligence is we shall even today hear a quite different story. The immortal Shakespeare himself has caricatured more than one of his unforgettable characters to show that sheer intelligence divorced from the softness of emotions amounts to brutality and villainy. All poets, philosophers and thinkers, in short, all but the matter-of-fact scientists, roar in unison, that enduring thoughts can bubble up only when an intellect is sweetened by the syrup of the heart. In spiritual Self-discovery also, an intellect tempered by the qualities of the heart alone can be of service. And this truth is pointed out by the general acceptance in the Vedas that intelligence resides in the cave of the heart and Self-realization is gained through a controlled application of a happy synthesis of both head and heart.

I could not help but suspect that Ashish had chosen this passage as a

lesson for me, a typically Western philosopher who placed abstract reason above experience. I felt targeted and responded somewhat defensively. Isn't that a *dualist* way of thinking? I frowned, interrupting his reading. Isn't that suggesting that the hard head and soft heart are two *separate* entities that then need to be brought together into happy synthesis—after the event, as it were?

It all depends, replied Ashish, relishing the challenge. He shrugged exaggeratedly, hunching his shoulders as high as his ears and opening his palms flat as if expecting something to land in them. The intensity of expression assumed during his recitation gave way to an engaging mirth. He clearly loved being interrogated like this since it invited him to pick even more minutely through the intricate thickets of sense garlanding each verse. It all depends, he elaborated, who is doing the thinking. If it is the ego-self then everything appears as fundamentally divided, separate, apart. But that is only in appearance. It is but an illusion conjured by the jugglery of our projecting minds. *Maya*. If, however, we consider the matter from the heart of the Atman or True Self, there is no division at all. That is why we are told that the intelligence dwells within the heart. Not above it or beyond it, but at its very core.

The old oppositions of higher and lower, external and internal, small and great dissolve altogether when we reach the *Guha*. Atman—as the goal of all seekers—is described as smallest of the small and greatest of the great. The cave of the heart contains a tiny inner space—the “size of a thumb”—which is also larger than the universes whirling around outer space! *Akasa*, the ancients called it. Even the minutest space conceivable, the smallest gap within the tissue of veins or joints of bones, even such chinks are pervaded by the great Divine Influence, the All-Pervading-Essence. The smallest pause between the systole and diastole of heartbeats, between the inhalation and exhalation of breath is where God resides. That is the opposite of dualism, no?

With this last question, Ashish cocked an eyelid and beamed. I was beginning to realize there was an imp inside this yogi! As a follower of *advaita* wisdom Ashish was, I could see, firmly committed to the principle of one-without-a-second, the radical vision that “all is one.” Our afternoon chat here in the garden was proving a perfect occasion to demonstrate his belief to a captive audience. He had me cornered, so to speak, and was not about to let his quarry escape. But his earnestness was far from cheerless. There was a childlike sense of fun and folly about him which, I recalled at that moment, I had witnessed in some of the wise mystical people I had occasion to encounter earlier in my life: the Passionist philosopher, Stanislas Breton, in Paris who at the age of ninety would get down on all fours and play cat and mouse with infants; the Buddhist sage, Thich Nhat Hahn, sitting on a cushion in his Vermont retreat house like a small Koala bear balancing on a bamboo shoot; the hoary-headed Iyengar, one of the great yoga masters of our time, bellowing like a mischievous water buffalo as he flung flowers back at the audience from the stage in a Boston Theatre; the Dalai Lama in New York yawning and scratching himself like a badly behaved baboon; or more

recently, the minute Lama Choquinyma, squat and wide-eyed as a smiling tortoise on his coach in the Schechen Monastery in Kathmandu, passing one visitor's gifts along to the next with a gentle chuckle and embrace. And Mataji herself, a cross between a bold lioness and a nimble gazelle.

Perhaps the Kingdom really was the dwelling place of children? A garden alive with animals and birds? In any case, I was struck by the way Ashish himself almost mimed the shape of each creaturely pose he performed in asana practice—dog, turtle, lion, cobra, pigeon, locust or crane. As if yoga was a way of taking us back to nature through the renunciation of nature. Enabling us to return to the flow of the natural universe by “unnatural” methods of breathing, sitting, balancing or bending. As though we had to stand on our heads to see things right side up!

Mayashanti Ashram, Rishikesh

The ashram porter, Kaliki, ushered me into a long wooden hut built on the sands of the Ganges, and showed me into an empty room, all windows and wicker and white silk drapes. He left me there and closed the door. I had time to cast my eyes about and take in various items in the room. The usual Vedic figurines of course—Lakshmi, Siva, Krishna, Sri—flanked by replicas of the Sarnath Buddha. There were also precious carved stones from aboriginal tribes in Australasia and a small ebony Linga, shrouded in lace. I was equally struck by the opulent Kashmir rugs draping Mayashanti's vacant couch located in front of an immense single-sheet glass vitrine which looked right onto the river. The water was so close you could hear the rapids purling and gurgling in mid-stream and vaguely make out figures of half-naked sadhus taking their daily bathe on the far shore.

I heard a voice and wheeled around. Mayashanti stood at the open door, resplendent in flowing fire-pink sari and sandals. She shook my hand, then walked gracefully to her chaise longue motioning me to take a cushion by the small altar. Seated, she sized me up with wide green eyes as she tucked her chignon into place behind her head. I was astonished to find her so fleshy and fulsome, not at all the ethereal goddess I'd expected.

“In the heart, love is all the same,” she began portentously. She let the phrase hang in the pregnant air and did not speak again until I spoke.

“And what about desire?” I asked. And when she did not respond, I elaborated. “Is desire the same as love? How do we reconcile the yearnings of our heart with the mystical non-attachment recommended by Vedanta?”

“Hindu philosophy speaks of *akama* as a state of desirelessness,” she said cautiously. “But that is not the last word. After *akama* comes *abhikama*, the final freedom to desire all things. That is a higher state.”

“Then why the obsession with celibacy and chastity, with abstinence and asceticism? Why all the purging and purifying?”

Mayashanti thought for a bit, inclining her head and raising it again before replying. There was a lilt in her voice now. “My own guru, Maharajji Baba Jai, has always held to the traditional teaching. But I am not hung up

on this. I believe it is different for each person. I myself had three children between the age of fifteen and nineteen in Iowa. My eldest son is now forty. I only left them when they were grown enough to cope. That is when I came here, to Rishikesh, to study with Maharajji." She spoke with a colloquial mid-Western accent, and I felt surprisingly at ease as I took in her soft-spoken words and watched the sunlight drench her frame with blinding rays. She told me then the story of an Indian medicine man she once knew who was a drunk and a womanizer, but who loved each of his women with real deep love. She suddenly rose from her couch and taking me by the wrist declared that she was bringing me to have *darshan* with Maharajji.

Maharajji was a bearded old man sitting out on his veranda with a cane and hearing aid. He looked quite put out to see me arriving in tow but put a brave face on it. I sat at his feet (one must, I'd learned since arriving in Asia, be careful never to sit higher than one's spiritual superiors) and started to explain about the research for my book. But I saw after a few minutes that Maharajji wasn't listening. He was jiggling his head like a yo-yo but this, I promptly realized, was just a way of revving himself up for his own peroration. Interrupting me in mid-flow, Maharajji Baba Jai announced that all religions were a great mistake. The only thing that mattered, he said, was the "spirituality of the heart." Krishna, Buddha, Jesus. They are all saying the same thing, deep down, and not one of them ever wanted to found a religion. Their devotees did that! And they betrayed them in doing so.

Mayashantii whisked me away then, leading me down a series of narrow stairways to the Satsang Hall. On the way, she slowed her pace and wheeling around said gently in my ear: "To plunge deep you must be a warrior, you must be a fierce Samurai. Remember, the challenge is to bring the head down to the heart."

To my surprise, before the Satsang congregation, Mayashanti said she was going to speak today about the Heart as there was an Irishman who had come all the way to Rishikesh to learn about its mysteries. She asked me to stand up and identify myself, which I did rather bashfully. Then she spoke without pause for an hour. Slipping a pair of light-rimmed spectacles onto the bridge of her nose, she began with a passage from an ancient Tamil hymn to Apirami, a Goddess possessed of a lovely body which enthralled Lord Shiva:

Adorned with pearls
Your firm yet tender breasts grown as large as hills,
Make the Lord's strong heart dance;
Your vagina is a fine cobra's head,
The Vedas cooling words are Your anklet bells,
O excellent lady.

The word for heart here, she explained to us, is *nenju*, a Tamil term for the inner place of sentiment and reflection, heart-as-mind and mind-as-heart. It is the special inner space where the divine strikes us, the place where divinity can be best imaged, seen and imagined, where the invisible takes flesh and sight. It is also that place, she added in measured words, of endless bliss represented by the cobra. A place where desire can be transfigured.

becoming a desire beyond desire. For the cave of the heart is where Brahman dwells within us, a room the size of a lotus seed but containing the whole cosmos. "In this fort of Brahman is contained the whole world, all beings and all desires," she intoned, citing verse 8 of the Chandogya Upanishad. The Sanskrit word is *hyrd*, a term found in key parts of the Upanishads to refer to that inner site where Atman—or true Self—blends with all-embracing Brahman. Those who discover the "real desires" of the self, the Song tells us, gain "complete freedom of movement throughout the worlds." God and the Heart-Self are one, Mayashanti declared, reading out what she said was one of the best kept secrets of Vedantic wisdom. Chandogya Upanishad 8.4, she announced, holding the text in front of her like a pastor quoting chapter and verse,

Now this self (*atman*) is located in the heart. And this is its etymology—"in the heart (*hrdi*) is this (*ayam*)," and so it is called "heart" (*hrdayam*). Everyone who knows this goes to the heavenly world every day. So what we call Brahman is nothing but "the same as this space here within the heart, full and non-depleting(3.13)."

Placing the Upanishad to one side and casting a rapid glance in my direction, Mayashanti insisted that this insight into the mystical Heart was not confined to the Hindu scriptures. Christian and other mystical traditions had also recognized this. Here in India the Tamil hymn to Mary—*Mataracamma Antati*—used the very same term as Hindus to praise the Goddess Apirami, "If you reflect on the Mother of Mylapore, she will give a lovely eye to your inner self. O Heart!" If you dig deep enough in any spiritual tradition, great or small, you come to the same heart. Apirami and Mary are both mirrors for us, Mayashanti concluded, they show us how to become God-realized, how to become one with the One.

Vasishta's Guha, by the Ganges

"This is it," announced Ashish. "We've arrived." I looked around, making a full arc with my body, but saw nothing.

"Where?" I asked.

"There," said Ashish, jubilant, pointing to a small cleft between a mass of palm fronds and overhanging banyan shoots. "You go through there," he said with an emphatic nod of his head. "But first you must remove your shoes. I will wait here for you. And do not rush. Take as long as you need."

I did as Ashish instructed.

Inside the cave there was a feral stench. It was like entering a wild animal's lair, and for all I knew that might be exactly what it was. I clutched at the stone wall of the cave, as much out of fear as for want of direction; it was so dark inside I could scarcely see where I was going. Getting my bearings back, I proceeded slowly down the alleyway, step by tentative step. After a few minutes, I began to make out a few faint shadows cast by the distant light of the entrance behind me onto the pocked walls. The air was

cold and dense. And just as I reached the bottom of the tunnel I suddenly stumbled, startled by a high-pitched sound rising up from the pit of the guha. The squeak of a bat? A rodent? Some small wounded animal? Or some other inscrutable thing? My stomach lurched with fear. I stopped in my tracks, pulling nervously at the collar of my shirt. I thought of E. M. Forster's Miss Quested lost in the Marabar caves. I breathed deeply, once, twice, and soon managed to compose myself sufficiently to retrieve a lighter from my pocket. Suddenly, with one flick, the invisible Guha flashed into view.

There before me was the Shiva-Shakti: a blazing statue crowning a low slab of altar. And above it, directly above it, rose the plumed head of a bronze Cobra—protector and guardian of the mystery; bearer of liberation once its mortal venom was swallowed without fear. Around the altar, in all directions, lay white faded petals mixed with the ashes of burnt incense. Someone had done Puja here not long ago, perhaps an hour, perhaps less. I searched for hints or clues but the play of shade and half-light yielded nothing. Just a shifting spectral glow cast by the small flame of my lighter. I asked if anyone was there, once, several times, my voice rising from a whisper; but there was no reply.

Then I noticed some candles by the statue and proceeded to light them with a second flick of my lighter. The altar chamber expanded now into ampler waves of brightness, the light steadier and sharper. I looked about me again, turning full circle to take in the full circumference of the cave. A bundle of rags and sticks lay to the left of the altar. Remnants of fruit and vegetable offerings were strewn in front of the statue, with bits scattered as far as the back wall, as if the pilgrim before me had been surprised in the middle of puja and left in a hurry.

I removed my coat and laying it on the damp earth, knelt down before the altar. I tried to pray but no prayers came. Neither the Jeevandhara prayers I had recited with Mataji, the mantras learnt from Ashish, nor even the childhood prayers I had learnt from my mother and the Benedictine monks at Glenstal Abbey. My soul was blank. I was too fearful still, too agitated and unfocused to recollect myself. My breathing remained ragged and irregular. I sat back on my heels and joined my hands in Namaste salute. I would have to concentrate more. This is where the discipline Mataji and Ashish taught counted. I bowed my head to the altar and when I raised my eyes again, began to stare at the statue illuminated by the circle of blazing candles and the cobra's tail coiled around Shiva's neck, its hood arched above his head. Another snake curled around his right arm. His left side took the form of Shakti, the goddess Durga emerging from the male Shiva with pendant earring, full breast and outward curving hip. She held a flower in her left hand as Shiva held a trident in his right. The double-deity stood on a lotus-petal base, their sex covered by a Tantric ankh, uniting yoni and lingam, circle and cross—a resplendent figure of the earth weaving male and female together; a union of primal opposites; the original Oneness of all living things.

I shivered. It was getting colder. I picked my coat up from the ground, unfolded it and put it over my shoulders. It smelled of earth, a damp faintly fecal odor, no doubt a trace of the rank remains from burnt offerings

moistened by a trickle of water to the right of the altar. I remembered the sandalwood incense in my coat pocket and took out several sticks. Placing them in a tin holder suspended from the ceiling on a metal chain, I proceeded to ignite each one with the candle. Replacing the candle in front of Shiva-Shakti, I sank back again onto both knees which were already feeling strain. I bowed my forehead down until it touched the lotus petal at the base of the shrine and spread two arms wide on either side flattening my palms onto the altar stone. The soil was soft beneath my knees, the altar cold to my extended fingers.

As I knelt like that in silence for some time, the air slowly thickened, wafts of musky incense dispelling the staleness and seeming to warm the walls surrounding me. I tried to breathe more rhythmically, remembering my pranayama lessons with Ashish, stopping every so often between breaths to strain my ears for any sound. *Ham-sa*. Pause. *Ham-sa*.

At one point, as I raised my head to shift the position of my hands and knees, I noticed several gleaming strands of spider-web running from the neck of the Cobra to the head of the Shiva-Shakti, as though some subterranean insect was weaving a silken cowl for this sacred androgyne of death and birth. I bowed my head again and recited the mantra of Om Nameh Shivaya to take away the fear. It seemed like an age now since I had been here. Even with my alpaca coat wrapped tight around me I was very cold. I looked across at the bundle of kindling and rags in the far corner of the cave. Before it lay the skeleton of a fire, a small circle of stones surrounding some charred logs. I approached it and noticed it was still warm from the previous pilgrim. But it seemed like too much trouble to light it again.

In the meantime, I would try to prepare myself better by practicing the Nada Anusandhana that Ashish taught me. The ancient rhythm of bees and drumbeats might, I hoped, bring me to the place of the heart—the secret vibration of the universe. Recalling the instructions, I aligned my head and spine before slowly bending forward and resting my elbows on spread knees. Then pressing the base of my hands firmly against each ear, I inhaled deeply. I concentrated and prayed, attending to the ebb and flow of breath. I listened. Yes, I listened patiently and calmly until I finally began to hear it. First the sound of oceans, then of rivers, then of winds. And as I listened more keenly still I heard the beat of kettledrums and jharhara drums and the shankha conch and gong. Then I strained my ears to an even deeper music until I heard the tinkling of bells and flutes and horns and eventually, descending down beneath this underground music itself, the buzzing of bees—black bees swarming about the mouth of Shiva’s hive, tiny creatures harvesting the honey of the dark.

I finally lifted my hands from my ears and recited aloud the last verse of the Nada taught me by Ashish in our last lesson: “Just as the bee drinking honey is unmindful of fragrance, so the mind engaged in Nada is free of all craving. *Nada Hridaya. Shiva dvadashanta.*” And as I sat there, inhaling the last fumes of incense, I felt the pall of night curl around me like a serpent’s tail, dark doubling dark, swaddling and binding me, curving me inwards to a place of calm repose. And I succumbed.

I think I must have fallen asleep shortly after because it felt like the middle of the night when I was awakened by a voice. I raised my head and looked all around. Nothing. I asked who was but no response. I called out Ashish's name, then thinking he might have changed his mind and come back to fetch me. Still no reply. So I wondered if it was the previous pilgrim returning to collect some belongings he had left behind? But there was no one. I held up a candle in each hand and scoured the walls of the cave. Bare walls. Silence. Not a trace of human presence. But if not human, what? The ghost of Vasistha who initiated Rama before this very altar thousands of years ago? Some immemorial persona, some Ultimate Self or Atman issuing from a secret source? Or maybe the spirit of Abhishiktananda himself come back to initiate me after all these years. Or the voice of Marc Chaduc who had not really disappeared after his *diksha* but had hid out here all these years undisturbed by humankind? Was it for this that all my guides and gurus had directed me here? To receive the wisdom of the lost disciple, here in this holy guha? Or, perhaps—did I dare imagine it?—the voice was issuing from the forked tongue of the Shiva-Shakti itself, there before me on the altar, uttering Tantric secrets from before the birth of time? I did not know where the voice came from. But this is what it said:

Ascend to the depth of the heart for this is where I am. This is what I am. This is who I am. I am who I am. Your heart pounds but you do not pound your heart. I am the one who makes your heart pound. I am the breath that makes you breathe. I am the blood that makes you bleed. I am the silence that makes you hear. I am the syrup of the honey-comb that makes you taste and sing. I am the altar-flame that makes you touch and burn. I am the secret river, the everlasting water, the endless spring from the underground nowhere that makes you thirst, then thirstless. I am the one with no one name that speaks and is speechless.

As the voice fell silent I rose to my feet. The thick air lapped about me. The candle had gone out, probably many hours ago, and the Guha was completely dark. But I had no fear. I felt a peace well up in the space below my breast bone, radiating out to ribs and stomach and limbs and head and fingers and feet. I wiped the moist soil from my knees and lit a match so that I might fetch the candles from the base of the bronze Cobra. I lit one of candles to guide my way back to the entrance, stepping carefully through the grainy light. As I did so I leaned forward to touch the plumed head of the Cobra, then put my hand to my forehead and blessed myself. It was at that moment, as I turned full circle again to make my way out into the light—for my watch told me it was day by now, I had been in the Guha for almost twenty hours—I noticed something jutting out of the canvas which covered the pile of logs by my right foot. I stood. The space around me was pulsing slowly. I moved closer and arched my back, bending down. The thing seemed to glisten in the candlelight, as though scaled or polished, and at first I thought it was a sleeping snake or lizard or some odd underground insect. I stared at it for a minute or so and when it did not move, I brought the candle closer, reaching my free hand out until I touched it. For some reason, I had no

fear. It was cold, like very smooth leather or hide, soft on the surface but resisting from the inside—skin, cartilage, nail, bone. It was, I realized, a foot—a human foot. I drew the canvas back to reveal the body of an old man.

But I did not cry out. I did not retch or swing away. I could hardly believe it but I still had no feeling of recoil or fright. Rather than revulsion I felt a wave of compassion rising and falling, falling and rising within me, the same wave, a single undulation of living and dying. To live again you have to die, I knew that now. For almost one day, I had lived in a cave with a dying man. It was he who surely emitted the high-pitched sound I'd heard on entering the Guha the day before. A pilgrim come to expire in the arms of his beloved Shiva-Shakti, deity of life and death. We had accompanied each other through the dark night, without even knowing it.

When I got outside I found Ashish standing by the Ganga. He had waited for me. He had not left. I called his name and he turned around. Everything about him, his every move and gesture, was unhurried. He tilted his head to one side, looking towards me in his placid, knowing way, eyes unfocused as if still peering past me, through me, into the cave. Rays of brassy light bounced off the river and made his cotton kurta shine with a special luster. He beckoned me to join him at the water's edge. I did. And standing there together we gazed at the steady flow of the pea-green Ganga powering its way downstream, as it had done for thousands of years, for Vashista and Rama, for Abhishiktananda and Marc Chaduc, and I told him about the old man in the Guha. I told him of the peace and fearlessness which filled my being but I did not tell him of the words that traversed my mind and soul as I made my long night's journey into day. I did not need to. I knew he knew.

Ashish took me by the elbow then and led me to the water's edge. Little wavelets licked at the parched sand, as we bent, one after the other, and cupped water into the small bowls of our upturned hands. Rising again we lifted our arms into the warm morning air, letting the water trickle through our fingers back into the river. We gave thanks to the Ganga. *Namaste*, chanted Ashish three times. *Namaste*, I repeated three times after him.

Three days without food and a night underground had made me light in the head. I felt as though I had walked out of the cave in the earth into the cave of my heart. Ashish left me after a while and I stood there alone by the river looking up towards the distant sky. My whole body ached, my soul fretting before the emptiness that gaped within. I felt rootless, unmoored, afloat, as if I weighed nothing at all. As if I was nobody. Nobody at all. And I knew I was free. Free to let everything go. I crossed my hands over my chest and whispered, again and again, "Oh Sacred heart, Oh Sacred Heart, I place my trust in thee." I repeated the prayer over and over, through loss and tears, through dark and light, my eyes opening and closing as I faced towards the sun, until the emptiness inside began to well with living waters and I was filled with love. I was home.