

# The Guiding Hand

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Abha Sah recalls her interactions with Sri Madhava Ashish, especially during the years that followed the sudden death of her husband. This exchange covers a period of about seven years, from June 1989 to December 1996.

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I first came to know Gopal Da and Ashish Da (Sri Krishna Prem and Sri Madhava Ashish) when they started to visit Naini Tal for dental check-ups – they ‘happened’ to stay at my parents’ place. To me as an eleven- or twelve-year-old they were objects of curiosity – tinged with some awe. I started writing to Gopal Da when I left home for the first time, to join college, in Lucknow. Gradually my letters petered out. I got married at the ‘mature’ age of twenty and sometimes I found my thoughts wandering to Ashish Da. But I did not write to him till I got widowed, when my husband passed away after one massive heart attack in October, 1988. Ashish Da wrote to me then – a letter telling me that he knew exactly how I felt, recalling the time when he had lost his own guru, Gopal Da, and how he had felt like someone enclosed in a glass bubble, who could see people around him, notice their efforts to reach out to him, but how none touched him. It was so true, that was exactly what I felt.

I wrote back saying that the event of my husband’s death was irreversible; that I had come to accept the event, but what I regretted was that I was not with him at the moment of death. His reply was:

**‘I dislike the modern ritual of dying in intensive care, with tubes and dials, doctors and nurses, all impersonal and scientific. But the fact is also there that when despite the doctors, the person has to go, it is often made easier by the absence of loving family members, all of whom are hanging on.’**

**‘No matter how many people may be around, one always dies alone. It is an inherently private and single event, even if there are people to greet one on the other side.**

**‘Though one appreciates and sympathizes with your feeling of regret at being excluded, this other side of the picture may help balance your regrets.’**

The truth of this hit. I remembered sitting in the hospital waiting room, oblivious of friends around me, praying that my husband would pull through – praying hard and long, and then from somewhere deep within came the words, ‘Thy will, not mine, be done!’ and with these words a deep calm and awareness of the surroundings. I opened my eyes to realize that almost simultaneous with the feeling, the monitor had fallen silent.

I am not a great believer in rituals, and an almost total non-practitioner. The rites after my husband’s death and those for the first death anniversary left me cold; I felt agitated and hypocritical.

My letter to Ashish Da must have mentioned my disturbance, for he goes on to say:

**‘As I see it, the rites are as much to help the survivor accept the fact of death, as to help the dead person. For the latter, it works only if the priest is truly capable of inwardly communicating the feelings of the dead person – a rare thing nowadays.**

**‘I remember a friend of Gopal Da – when he died, his wife wanted the rites performed in Benares, because she thought his happiest memories were there. But who was going to sit in the sun on the Benares ghats! So the family held the ceremony in Allahabad and it all ‘went very well’ – for the family. No one thought how it went for the man. The wife was dissatisfied.**

**‘Gopal Da told her to go to Benares, taking with her something personal belonging to him; to take a boat on the Ganga, and to throw the object in the Ganga with the feeling that she, while loving him, was letting him go. She felt his presence, felt that he was happy, and she felt happy in herself. The symbolic act (a ritual) was the vehicle for her feelings. But it did not require a priest and social gathering.**

**‘Grieving over or weeping about him will not help him. If he knows you have accepted his death, and are managing to face the practical and emotional difficulty of running your life and looking after your children without his active help, he will feel free to go and do whatever sort of experience life has prepared him for. It is important to appreciate that this is not a denial of love. It distinguishes between love and the ‘matlab’ [the hidden purpose] of security etc. which gets confused with love. If one can accept that one must make full use of the opportunity to grow, and particularly to accept that one’s security is fundamentally and practically in Thakur [The Lord] – and not just in bank accounts and earning capacity – then one finds the courage to overcome one’s tears and reluctance. ‘You should try to guard against the usual tendency to transfer your need for security from your husband, Kailash, onto your children. Again, love is one thing: the demands of worldly and emotional security are another. If you can give them the example of a person**

**who is sure in herself, the kids will go out into life with a greater chance of finding certainty in themselves – and so a greater chance of marrying well.’**

For my husband’s first death anniversary, I was still too uncertain of myself, so everything was done according to accepted ritual. For the second, I took strength from Ashish Da’s letter, and on the day, 25<sup>th</sup> October 1990, I made some ‘kheer’ [rice and milk pudding], lit a simple oil ‘diya’ and offered it at the temple on top of my fridge and mentally told Kailash he was free to move on – the feeling of release was incredible.

The next year I expected myself to go through the same agitation and worry as the date of his death neared, but nothing happened. I began to feel guilty and wrote to Ashish Da. His letter told me that it was stupid of me to have expected the same agitated feelings – ‘if the release is complete, it is forever’.

This experience was useful a few years later when a close friend of my daughter (about 23 years old) passed away. Tripti was unable to shake off the feeling that Moushumi was still around. I told her to

light a ‘diya’ and tell Moushumi that she was free to go. Tripti did so; in fact, she did more; she just visualized a lighted diya, concentrated on Moushumi’s memory and told her she was free to move on. It worked!

Sometime in 1990, my son wanted to join the Merchant Navy. He cleared the written exams and the interview, but at the medical test there was a hold-up requiring further investigation. I fretted: ‘What will happen if he doesn’t get in – he’s got his heart set on it, the boy will be shattered.’

Ashish Da’s answer was firm:

**‘Sooner or later everyone must learn that the world does not come to an end if one does not get what one wants. If one does not learn it, one never grows up. If you keep this in your own mind, you will be better able to help the boy get over his own disappointment if he does not get the job.’**

(Luckily, he got the job.)

About the same time, I must have been worrying about my children’s health, about death, and puzzling over why Ashish Da

described meditation as a ‘little death’. He wrote saying that my questions about death, worrying, and about meditation all come under one head:

**‘When talking about death, the first thing that people think of is death of the body ...’**

He continues by saying that people then naturally wonder whether ‘death of the body is also “my” death. Quite apart from what one has been taught to believe, one is to some extent aware that the body is **not** the same as **me** – I observe the sensations provided me by the body. But what is the nature of this “me”? I begin by thinking of myself as memories, thoughts, feelings – all of the characteristics that make up my personality. If my personality survives the death of the body then “I” survive.

However, I am, or ought to be, aware that I observe all these thoughts etc. What is the nature of this observing ‘I’? Is it identical with the personality or is it distinct?

He goes on to elaborate how the regular practice of meditation and watching ‘internal’ events makes the witnessing ‘I’ stronger and more ‘clearly distinct from the

thoughts and images it observes.’ He warns, though, that since identification with sensations is very strong, should they cease (during meditation), one would imagine himself dead as sense stimuli act as a constant reassurance of one’s existence. ‘I am – because I sense’.

‘So when I am trying to find that witnessing ‘I’, that centre of my conscious being, I have to reject all sensations, thoughts, visions. Anything I can see and hear is NOT me – not the essential awareness.

**‘Therefore, in seeking to pursue one’s awareness to its source one is “dying” to the temporary personality of this life, and again “dying” to that identification with this individuality of many lives which thinks itself separate from the Universal Awareness.’**

He cautions that the individual person who is identified with body and thoughts is never really strong, feeling constantly threatened by life, by love, by death, by meditation. He has to realise that his real strength is ‘Thakur’ who is the ‘root of all that one finds in this world and in man.

This is what one finds in meditation. This is what one feels one’s way towards by meditating. That is the core of strength and understanding and love which is unshaken by anything one can experience in life, which is unshakeable by its own nature. Often one can identify it only by virtue of its being the only thing that does not shake even while the whole world is crumbling.’

He says that continued awareness of the inner work and life will make us soon realise that our personality is made up of several ‘I’s’ and the next step is to work towards ‘reflecting the harmony of wholeness one begins to feel is associated with the True Self. One must, as it were, try to “unite the Above with the Below”.’

He says that wholeness demands we accept everything about ourselves, the ‘good’ as well as the ‘bad’, particularly the unpleasant things we do not want to see about ourselves, the ‘good’ things will look after themselves.

**‘As one moves towards one’s centre, one feels more self-confidence, because one begins to get more of the sense that these features of one’s personality are not me.’**



**‘In seeking to pursue one’s awareness to its source one is “dying” to the temporary personality of this life, and again “dying” to that identification with this individuality of many lives which thinks itself separate from the Universal Awareness.’**

His assurance that this has never been an easy task for anyone was hardly encouraging, I took it as an indication of the challenge and hard work that lay ahead. My guilt that I had not acted promptly enough to save my husband's life must have resurfaced, for in March 1992 he wrote:

**'Grief over someone's death is a very primitive reaction and one can always find incidents on which to hang one's primitive feelings of guilt. So the age at which anyone goes, and the idea that had one taken more care he might have lived longer have nothing to do with it. People go when they have to go. And if one rushes them to intensive care, forcing them past the natural moment, it usually results in a prolonged state of becoming an invalid, with additional worry and anxiety.'**

**'I am not a fatalist, but in respect of death, there is usually a very definite time beyond which a person cannot go on. Sometimes, this is preceded by a series – one or more – of crises when a person can go – if he is ready, and the doctors do not force him past them.'**

**'When people close to me have died, I have noticed that a few hours before, there was a curious detachment from the intense concern one had for the sick person, as if the last process of leaving had begun and one was instinctively relaxing from the care directed to tomorrow's needs. That did not reduce the grief. And it could obviously have provided ample scope for guilt, had one not been aware of what was happening...'**

**'It is natural to have regrets, because one can so often spot the fact that the lack of attention was due to selfish concern with one's own affairs. But guilt implies that the person would not have died, had one not been selfish. And that is ridiculous. He had to go when he did. One may even say "Thank God he went when he did" for if one had done all that one now thinks one ought to have done, and if it had had the effect of postponing his death so that he survived for prolonged suffering, might one not have felt more guilty? So one comes back to the point that I wanted him to live, irrespective of what was best for him. Also selfish! And one must also avoid the equally self-centred idea that**

**Thakur has punished me by taking him away. There is no end to the wanting it my way – as if one was such an important person that God kills or saves everyone dear to me on my account. Kailash went because it was his time to go and nothing you could have done would have materially altered the fact. I don't belittle grief. And I appreciate the difficulty of facing life without him! But there is no reason for you to complicate your life further by harbouring feelings of guilt. Those feelings are groundless.'**

My daughter was 22 years old then and I faced the problem of a conventional arranged marriage, or allowing her to choose her own mate. Ashish Da said rather than deciding for her, wouldn't it be better to find out her preferences. More and more in modern India marriages are between boy and girl and not between their parents. However, being in the modern world it is important for Tripti to get some qualification.

**'Yashoda Ma appears not to have fussed over marriages. Your children have brought their karma with them which has nothing to do with you.'**

**‘You have given them the best guarantee for a happy marriage, which is the example of your own marriage. You cannot be responsible for more than that. If you help Tripti find a husband and you let yourself be guided by what you feel to be highest in yourself, and in the light of your own marriage, you cannot be responsible for what she and her husband make of their marriage together.’**

**‘In regard to marriage out of the community, you must not let yourself be influenced by traditionalists who treat marital problems as quite personal in a community marriage, but blame them entirely on the inter-community aspect of a mixed marriage.’**

**‘My point in all this is to emphasize that it is the boy’s nature and character that matter, not his caste, community and income.’**

**‘As for Tripti falling in love, one may hope for it, but there is very little you can do about it, other than encouraging her friendships. Anyone can get sexually**

**attracted and think that is all there is to love. It is a crucial component of the whole, but the capacity to experience love and to have the intelligence and the dedication to follow it through after the initial excitement, is rather rare. And to find two people with these qualities is rarer still.’**

Talking about how marriages needed to be worked at in order to succeed, he mentioned that ‘people are always marrying their mothers and fathers – the cause of most marriage failures.’ Was that a warning about how to choose one’s partner, about avoiding the parent fixation?

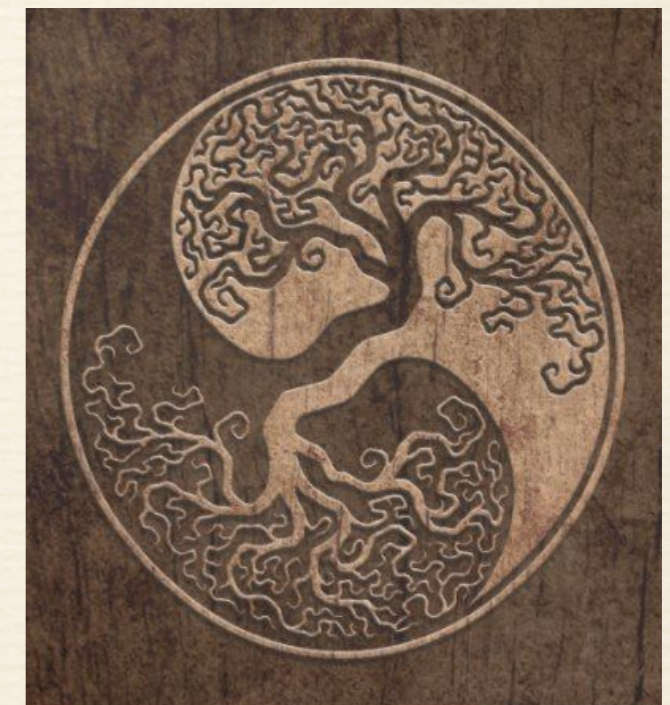
**‘What is really fascinating is how the human psyche carries this image of a perfect relationship, when there are so few examples of it around. But so few people have any idea of how much hard work, restraint and suffering it takes to keep love alive in even a good relationship. Love itself just happens. Keeping it going through a life-time is a sadhana.’**

The next extract is stolen – it was sent to me by my father as a quote from one of Ashish

Da’s letters to a friend:

**‘When people do not live up to one’s expectations, one has to ask whether one was right to expect. When one is hurt, one must consider that the liability to hurt is in oneself. One must see where one is sensitive, and work to remove the cause. Protecting oneself by attacking, by cutting off from others, by acting aloof, or by taking refuge in secrecy, all tend to aggravate the situation.’**

**‘Love is open, giving, forgiving.’**



By now, 1993 onwards, I was in some ferment, wanted to give up my job as a teacher, but what else could I do?

I think the unwillingness to continue with my job, the lack of a satisfying alternative and a feeling of haze and turbulence within, made me write to Ashish Da that I had not achieved much in life. He felt that I was **‘confused over worry about lack of achievement in life, and there is something else which you feel in your moments of quiet. But for God’s sake, don’t take this to yourself as an ego-achievement or you will spoil it all.’**

About this time I had two dreams which I wrote to him. I am in a fair with two friends. We’re sitting in a tent and having some eats. I spill something on my dress (white in colour), and try to wash it off. Then one friend and I decide to walk up the hill just outside the tent. It starts to rain and the friend manages to get some ‘keechad’ (Hindi for wet mud) on her sandal. As she bends down to scrape it off, I tell her not to worry as there would be clean water at the top.

His answer was that I felt there was some

stain or mud in my life which I want to wash off.

**‘You rightly tell yourself not to worry. You will get clean water at the top of the climb. The main thing is to get to the top.’**

In the other dream I saw a large group of people, two or three abreast, making their way along a forest road in a long file, singing bhajans, clapping their hands. I may have been part of that group. Somewhere I strike out on my own and then I find myself in slushy ground, and alone; I look at the group and am filled with the desire to turn back and join it. However, I decided to trudge on and suddenly find myself on firmer ground and after a small climb reach a cemented platform on which is a small Ganesha temple. Next to this platform are steps leading down. I do not descend but know with certainty that there was a Shiva temple below. About this time, part of the group of bhajan singers came near the place, but they fail to see it and wend their way beyond. Ashish Da’s interpretation was that **‘people find it difficult to “go it alone”. They want the support of the company of others, they**

**want the “togetherness” of group activity. They don’t feel strong enough to go their own way. But the inner work is essentially lonely, in the same sense that death is lonely – no matter how many people there may be sitting on the bed holding one’s hand. Also, to find one’s True Self, a whole lot of self-identification with family and culture, and all the things that tie one into a group, like shared customs, how you eat, what you wear, etc. have to be dropped. Religious groups also expect conformity with behavioural rules. Ganesha is a god of learning, of beginnings, of Siddhi. That is very good. Then, there will be the question of going down to the Shiva Lingam, the source of Siddhi. By the time you reach this place you have got past the slushy bog of emotion and desire to reach a “dry” place.’**

In another dream, a fraction of a dream really, I sensed myself standing somewhere in the open; it is pitch dark, but there is one long strip of light (something like a lighted runway) and walking down that lighted strip is a man in a dark overcoat, collar

turned up and a hat on his head. His back is to me, and I hear the words, ‘O these denizens of planet length’ – there seems to be a contemptuous tone to the remark. In my dream I recognized that figure as Ashish Da.

Ashish Da’s reading:

**‘What does it matter if there is nothing other than the reality of the path of light?’**

(When I read this a dark, heavy cloud lifted off me.)

In spite of realizing the importance of focusing on the path of light I must have been worried if I was doing right by my children though they were in their early twenties by now. Ashish Da replies: ‘Children? If a mother is too soft and loving and caring and protective, she sucks the backbone out of her sons. Then, when the son fails to break away, she despises him. This is why the shadow side of the loving mother is symbolized by a spider or an octopus.

**‘This is particularly difficult for a widow, who instinctively wants, vicariously, the sort of satisfaction from her sons which her husband gave her. So there is need for a greater effort to push the sons off her lap.’**

I can’t recall what brought on the following but it must have been a feeling about how I seemed to be doing nothing (about the inner work perhaps?).

**‘You don’t think, do you, that the inner path consists of saying “ratey gandh pusphpey” (रते गंध पुष्पे : fragrance dwells in the flower) etc. day after day. Once you have learned to keep your mind on the root of the mystery, then reduce your dependence on supports. And don’t ask me how. Apply your mind. Think, meditate, imagine, stir up feelings, watch dreams ...’**

(What an outburst! After the initial shock, I loved it.)

I remember once I wrote and asked what was the correct option: ‘Nisargadatta Maharaj said, “don’t act!” You say, “act!” and Ramana

Maharshi says, “just shrug!” Ashish Da replied succinctly, ‘**Just shrug is like our friend Kala’s “just be!” It is as easy as that – if you can do it.**’

The idea of donating eyes and other organs had been occurring to me off and on and then I remembered having heard about Ma’s disciple, Mrs Webb. Ma had seen Mrs Webb’s helpless, silent despair when she saw the villagers cremating her body. That is what brought on Ashish Da’s answer:

**‘The dead and how they feel about organ transplants? For the ordinary person, it usually takes several days to a week or two to accept that death has come to separate them from the body. So there is quite a probability that people will feel the pain of the surgery – no anaesthetics of course – just as many people feel the pain of cremation, and the suffering involved in seeing one’s near and dear ones calmly burning the body while one screams to them to stop. The common exception to this is that a short period of coma normally comes between leaving the body and waking up to what is going**



on. That might allow organs to be surgically removed without the dead person knowing about it. Again, after some ten to fifteen days and up to a month or so, the person will normally stop concerning himself with the body and what is happening to it. (Almost every doctor regards this sort of thing as fantasy, if not madness.)

**‘In general, I thoroughly dislike the organ transplant business. The emphasis on the importance of the body is all wrong. Things like dentures and spectacles are useful/helpful irrespective of expectations of death. But hearts and kidneys? The body itself is saying that it is time to go: what is wrong with going? As with a car, when the state of wear and tear reaches the point where spares are going to cost more than a new vehicle, one gets a new one. But unlike a car, we are not capable of producing new parts. We can only cannibalize.**

**‘One of the most crucial things in the muddle is the motive for living. What need is there for an extended life-span merely to spend more years saving to buy**

**a house or to expand a business? People say they *must* earn to maintain a wife and children – just so the children can grow to have a wife and children? And when one has got past that problem, the “need” for extra time for sadhana is a confusion.’**

By this time, a change had come about in my meditation – instead of thoughts crowding, there were faces – all kinds of faces – vile, repulsive, ancient, saintly, familiar, kind, strange. Therefore Ashish Da says **‘Faces? Is there any point in suggesting the message that all sorts of people – nice, nasty, good, bad – are included in the unity of being. Don’t look only for “good” or “saintly” people. What we call “evil” is often like the pike in the fishpond – necessary to frighten the fish and stop them from falling into a torpor.’**

I had never felt the urge to ask for ‘diksha’ (initiation) but was told off and on that perhaps I should. I mentioned this and asked Ashish Da what I should do.

**‘Don’t let anyone push you into asking for diksha. The intention must come from you. If you look at those people who ask**

**you, I suspect you may find they suffer from ‘dal barhana’ [increasing the group] syndrome. They have doubts and if they can get others to join, they feel more secure.’**

A dream I had, which surprisingly I do not recall, made Ashish Da feel that I was harbouring a death wish (I didn’t see it that way, but as an inner shift), so he wrote:

**‘Perhaps it is not the physical pain you are really worried about, but the emotional pain. Or is it what they now call “soul pain”, the emptiness of life without meaning. To handle this, one has to begin by accepting that one is suffering. Only then can one begin to search for meaning.**

**‘Suffering has to be there. It teaches one that mere happiness and contentment will never bring fulfillment. But if one does not accept the suffering, life goes flat and one cannot understand why.**

**‘So do something that amounts to a statement that you want to live, and to live in order to get some of these pains**

and reluctances sorted out.

**‘Do you remember my going to the cinema in Naini Tal with all the family in 1966? You and I came back together in a rickshaw. I was ill after Gopalda’s death. That was my statement that I agreed to live and to face my reluctance to take on the responsibility of handling all the disciples Gopalda had left. For a sadhu to go to the cinema was curious. But that is what it meant for me.’**

This letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> December 1996 was the last he wrote to me. He did send me a message saying that he had received my later letter, but he was too ill to reply.

...

He hand-held me through a very delicate period of my life even though I was not an integral part of the Mirtola Ashram, and I owe this privilege, for which I am soulfully grateful, to my parents’ devotion to both Gopal Da and Ashish Da. His passing in April 1997 meant he was no longer physically available, but his warmth lingers. I have been wayward, delinquent, in my practice but the two Gurus are a constant fixture of my consciousness.



*Sri Krishna Prem (Gopal Da) and Sri Madhava Ashish (Ashish Da) in Mirtola.*

### Notes:

*Mirtola is the place where Sri Yashoda Ma started her ashram and where she and her first disciple, Sri Krishna Prem, affectionately called Gopal Da, lived. Later they were joined by Sri Madhava Ashish, lovingly Ashish Da. This is near Almora. Ma, Gopal Da and Ashish Da were all sanyasis. To most of us it has come to mean a way of life, an attitude ...*

*‘Thakur’ is the preferred Mirtola name for The Lord; gives Him a more emotional, personal connotation.*

*Sri Nisargadatta is the name of another great being, a Maharashtrian bidi-maker by trade who ‘realized’. He is no longer in the body.*

*‘dal barhana’, दल बढ़ाना is ‘increasing the group’, ‘dal’ being group or gang and ‘barhana’ to increase.*

*And Mrs Lillian Webb was a disciple of Ma and used to live in Mirtola. The evening she died it was raining heavily and the cremation could not take place early, as it should have ... and when it did happen, ‘Lillian’ must have come out of her stupor ... so Ma saw ‘Lillian’ following her body...*

*You might be interested in reading ‘Initiation into Yoga’ by Sri Krishna Prem (Gopal Da). An easy, insightful introduction to what Mirtola and the spiritual life could mean.*