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'Becoming the Breath of Rām':

The Life and Teachings of Neem Karoli Baba

Katya Langmuur

**Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
Theology and Religious Studies**

University of Kent

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Many devotees in India consider Maharaji [Neem Karoli Baba] to be an incarnation of Hanuman and a few have seen him turn into a huge monkey. Hanuman stands for simplicity, selfless service and total self-effacement. He inspires us with moral courage, removes all obstacles to spiritual growth and endows one with physical energy. He is known as the very breath of Ram.

Ram Dass*

* Ram Dass with Bo Lozoff comp. *Inside Out: A Spiritual Manual for Prison Life*. New York: Hanuman Foundation, 1976, p. 95

*Maharaji asks, who is Hanuman – he says, he is Ram's breath.
Then we sit.*

Girija Brilliant*

* Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*. Nainital & Vrindavan, India: Fall 1971. Entry for 9 November.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the life and teachings of twentieth-century northern Indian guru, Neem Karoli Baba. The guru was an exceptionally elusive character both in terms of temperament and of what may be established about him. Aside from hagiographical sources (almost all composed since his death in 1973), very little substantive evidence remains through which to evaluate him or his preceptorial career. This notwithstanding, certain aspects may be established with greater surety. Firstly, Neem Karoli Baba was a highly charismatic preceptor. Secondly, whilst standing apart from any acknowledged *vaiṣṇava* lineage, he was part of the Hindu *bhakti* guru tradition. Thirdly, as his community consistently assert, he displayed a clear predilection for stories of Rām and Hanumān. With so little that is known or knowable about Neem Karoli Baba, it proves fruitful to locate him within an awareness of these three factors and to appraise the motivations and workings of his satsang for promoting him in this light.

Following an introduction in Part One to the method and orientation employed here, the mythical figure of Hanumān is shown to represent the intermediary between the celestial and worldly realms. The Hindu guru tradition attributes a similar mediatory function to its human exemplars. Part Two assesses this convention, introduces Neem Karoli Baba as a proponent of it and evaluates the role(s) of the community that succeeds him in relation to it. Closer consideration of the guru is offered in Part Three in which a biographical study is followed by analysis of his disciplic interaction and pedagogic modalities. The thesis concludes with an examination of the Western satsang that arose in the final years of his life, whose members include Ram Dass and Larry Brilliant. In this thesis, the initial charisma of the guru and the community's attempts to concretise its force are observed as a dynamic interplay that continues to inform the current movement and that offers a contribution to the contemporary East-West religious dialogue.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The technical Indic terms that appear in this thesis are presented according to the standard conventions of transliteration. Accordingly, and with a number of exceptions that will be listed below, the great majority of common nouns and technical terms are here included in a diacritical format, italicised and presented in lower case, for example *śakti* (not shakti or Shakti) and *kṛpā* (not kripa or Kripa). For the sake of authenticity, however, certain deviations are made from this ruling, in particular in the material that directly relates to Neem Karoli Baba or to his satsang community. The devotees of this guru would never think to write *satsaṅga* (in place of satsang), *prasāda* (in place of prasad), *darśana* (in place of darshan), *sevā* (in place of seva) or *kīrtana* (in place of kirtan). The anglicised forms of these words (and a small numbers of others) have become so appropriated by his followers that it would seem highly artificial to reverse the practice in this study. For this reason, when employed in direct relation to this preceptor and his community, they shall be left without diacritical marking or italicisation. A further general exception concerns Indic words that have been become accepted in the English language in recent years – for example guru, swami, ashram and yoga – and consequently are to be found in dictionary listings. These words too will be written without italicisation or diacritics throughout.

The situation concerning the presentation of proper nouns is similar. The names of deities or of historical authors, figures and places associated with this material are presented in diacritical form, although not italicised: thus Kṛṣṇa (not Krishna), Viṣṇu (not Vishnu) and Gosvāmī Tulsīdās (not Goswami Tulsī Das). In line with how it is presented in most textual sources, the name of Rāma is given with the final ‘a’ when in relation to them. In relation to colloquial usage, it is presented as it would sound (Rām) and so without the final vowel. In connection with the Neem Karoli Baba movement, *Rām-nām* and *Rām-bhakti* are presented in contrast to *Rāma-kathā*. Further instances of variation may be seen in the case of contemporary figures who would not themselves use diacritical markings and so for whom it would be unnatural to insert diacritics. Their names are presented as they personally would seek to write them. Ram Dass does not sign his name Rām Dās or Rāmdās, for example. So whilst Kabīr signifies the poet, Kabir Das refers to the Canadian devotee of Neem Karoli Baba. Contemporary place names are given according to their commonly used form. Āgra becomes Agra and Banāres becomes Benares and so forth. Finally, in terms of the bibliography and for the purpose of citation, the names of authors and their works are reproduced as they appear in the publications cited.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Like his devotees, Hanuman stands in the middle of things – between heaven and the netherworld, divine and demonic realms – but unlike ordinary mortals, he moves easily and masterfully between them, carrying messages and performing mediation. A god who is more like us and less like the Holy Other, he becomes the surest and safest medium for the attainment of a dual plenitude, shakti and bhakti.

Philip Lutgendorf¹

You know it's far out: there's just nowhere to lock the door

Ram Dass²

1.I Introduction

1.I.i An Initial Approach to the Guru

By any measure, the principal protagonist with whom we are here concerned was a complex human being. Born in approximately 1900 in a small village not far from Agra, Neem Karoli Baba lived a simple life as a charismatic holy man and as a householder guru in and around the Northern Indian regions of his native Vraja and of Nainital during the first three quarters of the last century. As will be seen in this study, Neem Karoli Baba was known to possess a most elusive and rather unpredictable nature and his movements were not always easy to follow or to understand. For months on end, it would be impossible for his devotees to locate him as he moved freely from place to place – a propensity that only increased as he neared the end of his life. He did not seek to record or systematise his teachings in any obvious way and, aside from a number of temples, left behind him only a handful of diaries in which, on every day, he repeatedly inscribed the name of God, Rām.

The guru was known at different times under a variety of names. This included his birth name Lakshmi Narayan Sharma and, in subsequent years, also Lakshman Das (servant of Lakshman), Handi Walla Baba (“the baba with the broken clay pot”³), Tikonía Walla Baba (the baba from Tikonía, meaning “a triangular-shaped reservoir”⁴), Talaaya Baba (the baba from the lake), Baba Neebkarori (the baba from Neeb Karori), Neemkarori Walla Baba (the

¹ Lutgendorf, Philip. *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 376

² Ram Dass. *The Yogas of the Bhagavad Gita*. 18 Audio CDs. Naropa Institute, Boulder Colorado, June & July 1974. Ram Dass Tape Library, CD 12: Devotion and the Guru I, Track 14.

³ Ram Das comp. *Miracle of Love: Stories about Neem Karoli Baba*. Kainchi (Nainital): Sri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir & Ashram, 1995, p. 317

⁴ *ibid.*

baba from Neem Karoli), Baba Neemkaroli, Nim Karauli Baba, Nim Karoli Baba, Nimkaroli Baba, Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj, Sarkar (lord)⁵, Baba, Babaji, Maharaji and Maharaj-ji. Neem Karoli Baba was, however, supposedly entirely “indifferent to his fame [and so] never tried to get [any] distorted form of his name corrected”⁶. His various monikers either tell us more about where he was than who he was, or else are so ubiquitous in India as to lose most of their import altogether. The only name that does offer any insight into his nature is that of Chamatkari Baba, meaning baba of the miracles that Mukerjee reports in *By His Grace*⁷ and by which the guru was sometimes referred in the Vrindavan area. Yet, in essence, this too points only to an enigma. Therefore, albeit in possession of a considerable number of titles, he remains more or less unknowable through them.

Nor could it be said that, to the outside observer at least, Neem Karoli Baba had the traditional appearance of the saint that his hagiographers say that he was. Whilst a single early photo of the guru shows him looking like a young renunciant – sat cross-legged with an intense expression on his face, wearing shoulder length matted hair and a white robe thrown over a bare shoulder⁸ – by the time that he began to establish the temples and ashrams of his later life, he had long forgone any customary look of the holy man. He chose not to bear any identifying marks on his forehead or body nor to wear any of the beads, saffron robes or other clothing that might have immediately marked him out as a sadhu figure from a traditional lineage or as demonstrating a particular spiritual allegiance. The guru instead preferred to keep his hair closely clipped or shaved, sometimes wore a moustache or other facial hair, and would dress in a simple white *dhoti* most often accompanied by a tartan blanket and, in colder weather, a simple knitted sweater. It is conceivable that his garb would have marked him out as an Indian householder from this time, albeit potentially a rather unusual one, but probably not a holy man.

As this plain choice of attire would suggest, Neem Karoli Baba was a guru who stood outside the conventional *paramparās* of many of his peers. No line of succession can be traced in relation to this man, nor is it known with whom he took his own formative spiritual instruction. Not that this marks a situation unique to this guru, of course. Yet the authority that such a connection would automatically bestow upon any holy person in India is absent in this case. It might therefore be seen as a striking testimonial to the man and to the presence and powers

⁵ Pande, Ravi Prakash ‘Rajida’, *The Divine Reality of Sri Baba Neeb Karori Ji Maharaj*. Second Edition. Kainchi (Nainital Dist): Sri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir & Ashram, 2005, p. xvii

⁶ Josi, P.C. ‘Mukunda’. *Premavatar: Baba Neem Karoli Maharaj*. Kainchi Dham: Sri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir & Ashram, 2006, p. 5

⁷ Mukerjee, Dada. *By His Grace: A Devotee’s Story*. Santa Fe, NM: Hanuman Foundation, p. 31

⁸ See Photograph 1, Appendix 6

that others perceived him to be in possession of that, by the time he died on 11 September 1973, Neem Karoli Baba had created not just a thriving network of temples but had amassed a considerable following of loyal devotees, numbering into the many thousands. These followers were predominantly of Indian birth yet, from the mid 1960s onwards, also came from further afield – even though the guru never left his own country or chose to ‘missionise’ in the manner of some other teachers of his era. Amongst these Western *celās* may be counted influential spiritual teacher Ram Dass and social reformer and activist Larry Brilliant, both of whom continue to remain committed to their preceptor.

The question begs as to how a provincial holy man without the backing of an authorised lineage and without any apparent predisposition to surround himself with a community nonetheless proved so attractive to so many devotees. Nor is it clear why such numbers of them stayed affiliated with him as they did. It is apparent that Neem Karoli Baba did not profess to teach enlightenment, nor did he promise heightened states of consciousness through connection with his person. Instead this guru looked to engage his charges in communal *bhakti* practices that illustrated the more egalitarian values of compassion and service. One might justifiably speculate, however, that this pedagogic stance – noble as it was – was not the principal attractor to those who sought his guidance. Indeed, as all the hagiographic commentators concur, it was what was deemed to be the guru’s extraordinary and miraculous nature that proved to be so captivating, in combination with the fact that followers held him to be the very embodiment of love. Devotees are in no doubt that, whilst he did not teach enlightenment *per se*, he was a fully enlightened being himself and was in possession of all the *siddhis* potentially incumbent upon such a position. Conceivably, the fact that he chose not to focus overly on this aspect of his own being or behaviour only made him more alluring to his flock and so they attribute to him the miraculous powers of prophecy, of feeding, of healing, of shape-shifting, even of bi-location. With gifts such as these, it could be mooted that the guru did not need the establishment to support his legitimacy as a spiritual teacher. Through his perceived actions and abilities, he earned his own way in this respect.

The first chapter of *Miracle of Love* – a substantial collection of devotees’ experiences and stories compiled by Ram Dass in 1979 – opens with an aphorism attributed to Ramakrishna: “When the flower blooms, the bees come uninvited”⁹. With this inclusion, Ram Dass subtly encourages his readers to consider the status of Neem Karoli Baba to be comparable to that of the well-known Bengali saint. More than this though, he demonstrates the emic perspective of how and why his guru acquired such a following – as a natural response to the guru’s own

⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 1

charismatic force. So, he implies, how could it be otherwise? Some devotees regarded him as a divine manifestation, some viewed him as a teacher of divine purpose and others considered him a colourful and entertaining character who happened to display a distinct fondness for the stories of Rām. Neem Karoli Baba himself did not feel the need to comment on the matter and now, almost four decades since his death, his persona is increasingly shrouded in hagiographical story and legend.

1.I.ii An Initial Approach to the Community: A Question of Motivation

Whilst Neem Karoli Baba remains the focal point of this study, it is important to acknowledge the other main player in this matter: the community that surrounded him in the final decades of his life, that succeeded him and that remain active on his behalf to this day. The guru might be the subject at the very centre of every narrative exposition, yet (with the exception of the above mentioned diaries) he is the author of none of them. His voice is left unheard. The related roles of disseminator, commentator, biographer and legacy-maker remain the sole preserve of members of this satsang. Moreover as virtually nothing was recorded or captured during the years of the preceptor's lifetime¹⁰, the vast majority of the material that remains to document the life and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba has been recorded (possibly) in response to his absence and through the tinted lens that hindsight invariably provides.

Whilst, to this point, very little has been written on this guru from outside his community, written evaluations and first-hand reminiscences continue to be published inside the satsang. These publications seek to position him in an increasingly avatarial light. From the characterful holy man whose wants were few but who loved many, in most recent hands he has become a "Grand Master"¹¹ in the vein of "Jesus Christ, Prophet Mohammed, Buddha, Shankara Charya, [and] Zoroaster"¹² who has "influenced minds and hearts of countless persons, cutting across caste, creed, religion and nationalities"¹³ and who will "re-align the Yin and Yang of ailing humanity"¹⁴. Comments on the nature of hagiography as a genre and as illustrative of this guru in particular will be offered at greater length in 1.IV (pp. 44-62) and so will not be replicated here. Yet what deserves attention from the outset is the underlying motivation that has potentially inspired – and that continues to inspire – both first-generation

¹⁰ *Be Here Now*, published by Ram Dass in 1971, is one exception. There remain other unpublished sources, however, including a personal diary from the autumn of 1971 that was kept by Girija Brilliant and that has been lent for consultation for this study.

¹¹ Joshi, Rabboo. *I and My Father are One. The Grand Unification*. New Delhi: Rabindra Kumar Joshi, 2009, p. xiii

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.* pp. xiii-xiv

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. xiii

devotees and subsequent followers (who never met the guru 'in the body') to create and re-create facets of this man's life and his teachings for sharing with each other and for wider reception. Such scrutiny is significant in that it enables a clearer insight into the bond between devotees and their guru and questions how, as might be the case with any 'living relationship', it has been subject to the changing influences and demands of the decades since his death. What is it, therefore, that the community has held onto, has concretised into their own form of tradition that they seek to preserve, honour and uphold? In what ways, if any, have they moved on as a collective group since the death of their leader? What does this mean for the future prospects of this particular satsang?

Bearing in mind the sparsity of material from the guru himself and the abundance that has stemmed from the pens of community members, the matter of source materials becomes a core concern. With so little factual 'evidence' through which to recreate the life and personally held opinions of Neem Karoli Baba, it might justifiably be asked whether the body of material that currently exists is in fact predominantly a devotional construction? Consciously or otherwise, have the devotees' narratives sanitised, re-set or portrayed events and experiences, at least to some degree? Might it be that this has been executed with an eye to influence favourably the opinions of other readers, whether fellow-devotee or the (as yet) unconverted? It is clear that Neem Karoli Baba has no longer been physically present for comment upon the situation, or for instruction on how to handle publicly available material. At the same time, whilst what is presented is still more or less in his name, both the responsibility and the agenda have been removed into the hands of others – and so it becomes a question of motivation.

A clear illustration of the matter of communal orientation is to be found in the exceptionally strong connections that *celās* assert as having existed between Neem Karoli Baba and the Rāmāyaṇic tradition (in particular, to one sixteenth century devotional rendition of it); and to one of its principal players, Hanumān – the supreme servant, devotee and messenger of Rām. Like Neem Karoli Baba, this deity may be seen to be a character of many parts about whom many interpretations have been offered. Hanumān has found different representation in varying quarters: at times he is shown to be sublimely fierce, at other points he is exceptionally meek. Indian devotional tradition nonetheless maintains that Hanumān's foremost wish, in all that he does, says or thinks, is to become as close to Rām as his very breath. His purpose remains one of proximity and, in seeking to become his breath, he aspires towards a synthesis with, or communion with, Rām. Whatever guise his disposition assumes, therefore, the path that Hanumān illustrates *and* that he is shown to walk is one that leads straight to the heart of God.

The community is consistent in its promotion of a similar core motivation as having informed the life and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba. Whilst much about this guru necessarily remains nebulous, the fact that he strove to remain Rām-centric throughout his life is re-affirmed time and again. He is recorded as having pronounced, “Everywhere I look I see only Ram”¹⁵ and to have genuinely delighted in association with Rāmāyaṇic stories, themes, prayers and characters. Certainly by his later years, if not for many decades prior to this, the guru is shown to have engaged in an almost continual practice of *Rām-nām*, the repetition of the divine name. Whether murmured softly under his breath or recited out loud, the apparent ongoing absorption of Neem Karoli Baba’s *sādhana* could suggest that, like Hanumān, he too felt a desire to come as close to Rām as possible. A contemporary of Neem Karoli Baba, Swami Muktananda once remarked, “Just as man has a bloodline, so the divine principle has a lineage.”¹⁶ In the absence of any obvious human succession in operation here, a principal aim of the emic communal voice could be seen as establishing a suitable lineage of Rām, within which the life and preceptorial contributions of Neem Karoli Baba might be approached and appraised with greater surety. The unpredictable and elusive guru thus becomes located within a wider, deeply respected and time-honoured tradition and a link is concretised with a conventional *bhakti* lineage that would otherwise be absent.

None of this is to say that there did *not* exist a strong bond between the man and this tradition, of course. Indeed, there are a number of pointers that would suggest that there was a substantive connection: a clear predominance of temples and *mūrtis* dedicated to Hanumān were consecrated in Neem Karoli Baba’s name during his lifetime; Tulsīdās’ sixteenth century handling of the *Rāma-kathā* – the *Rāmacaritamānasa* – found frequent recitation within these temples, either in whole or in part; the *Hanumān Cālīsā* prayer may be seen inscribed into the marble walls of a number of the temples; independent sources outside the direct satsang have commented on the guru’s almost continual practice of *Rām-nām*¹⁷; the presence of the diary in the guru’s hand that is entirely dedicated to Rām. It is clear that the association was one with some significance. Yet, that is not the point here as much as the purpose that this affiliation might subsequently serve in insider hands, post September 1973 and the death of the leader.

In terms of presenting their guru and community in the manner in which has been done, it could be mooted that a number of important goals might subsequently be secured. Firstly,

¹⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 361

¹⁶ Swami Muktananda. *Play of Consciousness: A Spiritual Autobiography*. South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, 2000, p. 6

¹⁷ Rama, Swami. *Living With the Himalayan Masters: Spiritual Experiences of Swami Rama*. Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy of the USA, 1998, p. 109

within the satsang itself, these traditional connections could serve to establish an intended or allegedly ‘time-less’ more theologically-oriented aspect to the otherwise necessarily time-bound relationship that exists between any human guru and his spiritual charges. In other words, via these means, the formerly *saguna* dependence upon the preceptor could evolve into a position of *nirguna* understanding and the bond between players might remain extant, albeit altered. Secondly, on a more public stage, in asserting the legitimacy of the spiritual authority and standing of Neem Karoli Baba, the ongoing validity and status for the remaining spiritual community becomes automatically more stable – a not inconsequential objective for a suddenly rudderless vessel such as theirs. A further point for consideration is the changing nature of the guru’s acknowledged charismatic authority in all this. Indeed, should a primary purpose of the insider material be seen as conveying the spiritual legitimacy of the satsang left behind and as reinforcing the standing of the guru’s two direct successors, in what manner has Neem Karoli Baba’s spontaneous charismatic personality, in effect, become institutionalised? Bearing all of this in mind, the question must necessarily be asked: does the body of material that currently exists on Neem Karoli Baba directly serve those who have succeeded the guru more than it does even the preceptor himself?

1.1.iii Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to establish the first scholarly portrait – one might more accurately say ‘silhouette’ or ‘sketch’ – of Neem Karoli Baba, his life and his teachings. Drawing upon insider and (where available) material less directly associated with his community, what is presented here is an evaluation of the guru as a *bhakti* preceptor operating within the unique parameters of his time. In an era of extraordinary change – politically, socio-culturally and in terms of the evolution of the emerging East-West popular spiritual dialogue of the 1960s and 1970s – this guru may be seen (at least through the hagiographical lens) to have straddled a sense of the traditional with a sense of the progressive. This thesis assays if this could be considered an accurate assessment of the man and his message and looks to bring to light any contributions that could be seen as particularly influential. Whilst most of the material that funds this research has been composed after Neem Karoli Baba’s death, the focal interest of this piece remains chronologically bound to what might be thought of as his life span. Thus, with a few exceptions, matters of the community post-1973 do not find lengthy inclusion here.

Three principal threads inform this research that are, in turn, contextual, theoretical and narrative. The first of these concerns the contextual twin-frameworks of the devotional Rāmāyaṇic tradition and of the *bhakti* guru tradition that may be considered connected with Neem Karoli Baba and that have found heavy promotion among his followers. As will be

evidenced in 1.II.i, this may be seen as representative of the permanent and unchanging 'canon' that the community continues to hold and to venerate. Indeed, the preceptor's links with both traditions have come to be viewed as a part of his intrinsic 'message'. This perspective succeeds in safeguarding his memory amongst *gurubhāi* and further afield, at the same time as providing a sense of core identity for his particular brand of spiritual leadership and, of course, for the movement that succeeds him.

The second of the three threads is connected with the first. It concerns the nature of charisma and charismatic authority and how this compelling and moving force plays out in relation to the sense of established 'canon' mentioned directly above. Heinrich von Stietencron determines this interplay to be the tension between the "dynamic and the static operating in religious communities"¹⁸. Following von Stietencron's directive, this thesis considers the relationship between spiritual legitimisation (represented by canon) and spiritual innovation (represented by charisma) in the portrayal of Neem Karoli Baba and his spiritual community. In the first instance, the role of charismatic agent (as defined by sociologist Max Weber) that is embodied by this guru is examined and how this, over time, has been translated – or has evolved – into a more institutionalised charisma that continues to underpin the community. Moreover this work evaluates to what extent the preceptor is shown to face backwards onto *bhakti* guru tradition and practice and yet, principally by virtue of the actions of some of his higher profile Western devotees, that his teachings may concurrently be seen to have been responsible for the introduction of new perspectives into contemporary Western spiritual practice of the 1960s and 1970s. Whether the notion that Neem Karoli Baba's movement can meaningfully and justifiably be described as a New Religious Movement will find critical attention also.

The last of the three threads is narrative, although it is still in part related to the first two. It concerns the central functioning(s) of insider hagiographical and sacred biographical sources, emic narratives and life histories within this study. In line with the predilections of the genre, certain hagiographical conceits and themes will emerge in relation to this guru's narrative depiction that may be seen to be equally applicable to the portraits of other Indian saints or holy men and women. At the same time, however, an aim in this research is to position our biographical inquiry within a greater socio-cultural awareness of twentieth century India that makes these aspects particular to this preceptor alone. It will become apparent that insider narratives – whether published or archival written materials or, indeed, also oral history

¹⁸ Von Stietencron, Heinrich. "Charisma and Canon: The Dynamics of Legitimization and Innovation in Indian Religions" in Dalmia, Vasudha, Angelica Malinar and Martin Christof eds. *Charisma and Canon. Essays on the Religious History of the Subcontinent*. New Delhi: OUP, 2001, p. 14

materials – feature as a principal source throughout the pages to follow. Part of the purpose of the thesis is to utilise the emic perspective, to question the instructional (as opposed to historiographical) nature of the view that is presented by devotees and to evaluate the roles of collective memory, life story and personal history within the community. Adopting a post-modernist approach, the interesting question here is not what is representative of ‘truth’ within this material as much as what is its meaning or function? Accordingly, the notion will be scrutinised whether the narratives that portray Neem Karoli Baba represent less of a construction on the part of his devotees, than document the evolution of the guru’s ‘pure’ spontaneous ‘time-bound’ charisma into an institutionalised and allegedly ‘time-less’ charisma. Ultimately, the yearning for proximity and union / synthesis that is expressed in the title of this thesis – ‘Becoming the Breath of Rām’ – and that is a common expression amongst this community (who attribute it to Neem Karoli Baba), may be seen to be as applicable to devotees’ responses to the absence of their guru as it might be of what theologically can be interpreted as both the preceptor’s and Hanumān’s pull towards the divine, Rām.

That this research finds itself at a particular and beneficial chronological juncture should be acknowledged from the start. Being located relatively close to the guru’s death, there remains a clear living link to Neem Karoli Baba in the form of two spiritual successors, a generation of direct devotees and a wealth of first-hand experience and narrative sources. Simultaneously, enough time has passed to enable something of an overview of the situation, of the guru’s life and of a legacy that could be seen to have unfolded over recent decades through the actions of a number of his devotees. It could be mooted, therefore, that this study is afforded a unique vantage point that simply would not be possible either twenty years before now or twenty years from now.

1.I.iv Overview of the Thesis and Structural Considerations

The thesis is arranged into three parts. This, the first, provides an introduction and also a background to the subject matter. This includes consideration of all three threads introduced above. 1.II provides explanation of the theories and methods that have been used in the compilation of this research, including an opening section on the interplay between canon and charisma. 1.III positions this work within the context of contemporary guru studies and offers an evaluation of the source materials utilised here, both written and oral. 1.IV investigates the related genres of hagiography, sacred biography and confessional biography and provides a critical look, in particular, at the body of work that relates to Neem Karoli Baba. Part One concludes with a chapter that seeks to provide a contextual framework for the devotional Rāmāyaṇic tradition that is positioned as being so close to the guru. 1.V thus provides an

introductory exposition on Gosvāmī Tulsīdās' *Rāmacaritamānasa* and examines the socio-cultural and textual emergence of Hanumān, known to be the foremost proponent of *Rāma-bhakti*.

The further two parts of this study are directly related to an appraisal of the life and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba. Tradition dictates that, within the acknowledged 'dual personality' of the human guru, the divine function must take priority over any human needs or inclinations. Part Two, therefore, evaluates at closer quarters the *śakti* function of the preceptor as an agent of the divine (2.II) and the *bhakti* responsibilities of the aspirant in relation to his guide (2.III), considers how these roles interrelate and introduces Neem Karoli Baba through the perspectival lens of this tradition (2.IV). Aspects concerning his apparent unknowability, his hidden nature and his *sahaja* nature are subsequently considered along with matters of conventional lineage.

Part Three proceeds with evaluation of Neem Karoli Baba within awareness of this wider context and yet as something *other* than merely an exemplar of tradition. In other words, the spiritualised approach is superseded by a more humanised course of investigation. Accordingly, a biographical study of him is undertaken (3.II), which is the first to appear outside the hagiography and the most comprehensive to date. Following this, he is increasingly shown in relation to other individuals in the form of his devotees, of both Indian and Western birth. What is professed to be his 'unknowable nature' is examined as a potential pedagogic modality (3.III). The manner in which he played the part of the guru role of his later years is considered (3.IV), in a chapter that also presents a practical picture of life within his ashram community when he was in residence. This line of investigation culminates in a study of his Western satsang in particular (3.V) and questions whether, in sending these non-native devotees back to their homelands as and when he did, he was in fact finding new ways in which to send Hanumān to the contemporary West in something of a quasi-Rāmāyaṇic full circle. The concluding chapter of the thesis (3.VI) questions once more what it meant for Neem Karoli Baba or for the commentators from his community to 'Become the Breath of Rām' and revisits the matter of the evolution of charismatic agency and authority. The proposed contributions of this study and suggested further avenues of research are positioned in this culminating chapter also (3.VI.ii and 3.VI.iii respectively).

We proceed, however, now with consideration of the theories and methods that have informed this research. As introduced in the pages above, the interdependent roles of charisma, of charismatic agency, of charismatic authority and charismatic community will feature prominently throughout this study. What receives attention at this point is consideration of the

interaction between the charismatic and what the community have established as being the canonical in relation to Neem Karoli Baba. This section seeks to provide an introductory foundation for discussion to come later in the thesis. We commence, in the first instance, with brief consideration of what is meant by charisma.

1.II Theory and Methods

1.II.i The Interplay between Charisma and Canon

The term charisma is a complicated one – at least, it is one with a multiplicity of parallels that span different religious traditions and (increasingly) within contemporary secular social constellations. Originally coming from the Greek word *charis* (meaning ‘grace, kindness and favour’), its presence in the Greek Bible “indicated a gift of grace, a spiritual gift with special endowments”¹⁹. The handling and evolution of this ancient term within Christian discourse is too long for discussion here²⁰; but according to John Potts in *A History of Charisma*, by the start of the twentieth century, Western usage of this word had dwindled to the point of it being virtually unknown. A secularised version in the form of ‘prestige’ is said to have supplanted it in general use relating, in particular, to the rise of the modern cult of celebrity²¹. The concept of charisma that nevertheless re-emerged in the twentieth century and that continues to retain relevance today is considered the result of its ‘reinvention’²² by sociologist Max Weber. It is apparent that the emergent Weberian (and post-Weberian²³) picture of charisma, charismatic agency and authority has gained appreciable currency in contemporary secular realms. Across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, it has been used freely in relation to political leaders (Gandhi to Hitler²⁴ to the Kennedys²⁵) as well as to actors, musicians and other individuals with a high public profile. This said, Weber’s use of the term – whilst sociological in intent – nevertheless acknowledges its earliest religious significance.

Weber’s most often cited definition of (modern) charisma comes from Part One of *Economy and Society*²⁶, first published posthumously as *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1922. He writes:

¹⁹ Parrinder, Geoffrey. “Charisma” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. (Mircea Eliade ed.) Vol 3. New York: Macmillan, 1987, p. 218

²⁰ See instead Parrinder, 1987, pp. 218-220 or Potts, John. *A History of Charisma*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 108-109

²¹ Potts, 2009, pp. 109-110

²² Potts entitles his sixth chapter “Weber Reinvents Charisma”, Potts, 2009, pp. 106ff

²³ *ibid.* pp. 126ff.

²⁴ See Ketola, Kimmo. *The Founder of the Hare Krishnas as Seen By Devotees: A Cognitive Study of Religious Charisma*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008, pp. 29-36

²⁵ Potts, 2009, p. 106

²⁶ Part One of *Economy and Society* was started in 1918 and remained unfinished at the time of Weber’s death in 1920. Part One was composed subsequent to Part Two, written between 1910 and 1914. Together, this uncompleted study comes to 1500 pages. The study has received criticism from some

The term “charisma” will be applied to a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as being endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader”²⁷.

In *Religionssoziologie (The Sociology of Religion)*, also first published soon after his death, Weber categorises different varieties of charismatic religious persons. His comparative scale spans between the professional magician, whose primary function rests in the ecstatic mediation of charisma to the ‘layperson’²⁸, and the (sometimes) vocational priest whose role is not necessarily dependent on personal charisma but whose function responds to the needs of a community²⁹. Between these two figures resides the ‘mystagogue’ (the performer of salvific sacrament) as well as the teacher of ethics or social reformer³⁰ and the prophet. Weber observes that the role of the Hindu guru is often that of ethicist in that s/he provides guidance to those who seek his or her counsel³¹. So he comments, this preceptor is not working from a place of personal revelation as much as communicating acquired knowledge. Whether his view of the institution would find agreement from those within the Indian traditions is dubitable. Yet Weber’s guru figure is, “after all, only a teacher who transmits acquired, not revealed, knowledge, and this by virtue of a commission and not on his own authority.”³² By Weber’s categorisation, it is the figure of the prophet who is the clearest bearer of personal charisma and whose authority lies in his or her own personal gifts or power. Two sub-categories may be distinguished here: the ethical prophet, who is held to be a charismatic vehicle for the pronouncement of divine will and law; and the exemplary prophet, a charismatic living example to others of how to exist in a religiously awakened state. Weber considers Zoroaster or Muhammad to exemplify the position of ethical prophet and the Buddha that of the exemplary prophet³³. In either case, however, neither category of prophet is led by concerns of economics or, indeed, the ‘professionalisation’ of their role. Instead, to return to *Economy and*

quarters for being an uneven, inconsistent and, at times, contradictory work (*ibid.* p. 117). Conceivably, the fact that the author did not live to refine or edit the completed monograph would account for such a situation.

²⁷ Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. 2 Volumes. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1978, Vol. 1, p. 241

²⁸ Weber, Max. (Ephraim Fischhoff trans.) *The Sociology of Religion*. London: Methuen, 1965, p. 3

²⁹ *ibid.* pp. 28-30

³⁰ For this category, Weber offers the illustration of Moses. *ibid.* p. 50

³¹ *ibid.* p. 52

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.* p. 55

Society, “Pure charisma... constitutes a ‘call’ in the most emphatic sense of the word, a ‘mission’ or a ‘spiritual duty’”³⁴.

Weber acknowledges that the true power of charisma (and, by extension, its legitimatised level of authority) lies in its reception by others, whose responsibility it becomes to “recognize its genuineness and to act accordingly”³⁵. With this consideration, the role of the receiver thus comes to the fore. Charles F. Keyes observes:

The perception by others that a person has been suffused with charisma depends upon their interpreting certain signs associated with the person as pointing to an association between the person and the sacred. The signs that people take to indicate that a person is charismatic will be shaped by ideas of how chaos has been domesticated by this person³⁶.

On what might enable the receiver of these signs to be adequately prepared to do so, Weber continues: “Psychologically this recognition is a matter of complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality, arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope”³⁷. The individual dynamic that ensues from a meeting between authentic charismatic agent and one ready and able to perceive the extent of his gifts creates the energy that underscores the guru-disciple relationship. Some commentators (Weber included³⁸) believe that the power of this is such as to have the potential to be dangerously revolutionary. Kramer and Alstad (1993), Storr (1997), Copley (2000) and Robbins (1988) would almost certainly agree. Others, including Broo (2003) and Ketola (2002)³⁹ – both of whose interests are specifically related to devotional Hindu studies – consider this stance to fail to take into account that not all charismatics / gurus have the same bedazzling effect on all whom they encounter⁴⁰. This notion is one with which the present author would likewise concur and to which we shall return in due course in Part Two.

What the energy from the point of meeting does produce is a forward-leaning impetus, a possibility for change and transformation that Heinrich von Stietencron has labelled the

³⁴ Weber, 1978, p. 242

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Keyes, Charles F. “Introduction. Charisma: From Social Life to Sacred Biography” in Williams, Michael A. ed. *Charisma and Sacred Biography*. Journal of the American Academy of Religion Studies, Vol XLVIII, Numbers 3 and 4, 1982, p. 2

³⁷ Weber, 1978, p. 242

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 244

³⁹ Broo, Måns. *As Good As God: The Guru in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2003, p. 5 and Ketola, 2002, p. 31

⁴⁰ The role that *adhikāra* plays in the founding of the guru-disciple relationship is a foundational concept in Indian religious studies and will be examined in this thesis in 2.III

“innovative impulse”⁴¹. Yet this potency has considerable temporal restrictions. However clearly the signs of charisma may be seen in any charismatic agent – including the guru here in question – however authoritative this person may be seen to become over time, such power may only exist whilst that individual is still alive. Upon his or her death, the chaos that Keyes refers to above is no longer ‘domesticated’, and the follower must find ways in which to adapt to the absence of the guru – or the relationship between them must be lost. Von Stietencron considers this to be the quest for ongoing legitimisation of the bond (whether on an individual basis or pertaining to an entire community) that may best be achieved through the encapsulation and preservation of the charismatic’s original message. He believes this to be a crucial step in the survival of any Indian religious movement or community. The question that lies at the heart of such investigation, so he says, is “What keeps religions alive?”⁴²

The communal canon, according to von Stietencron, is:

...the result of a deliberate attempt to collect, arrange and preserve the original message of a religious community, and to protect it against all corruption. It transforms haphazard individual recollection into authoritative tradition or sacred scripture... In contrast with the doctrines of other creeds, the canon is a continuous source of self-awareness and self-definition. It provides meaning and direction to the community as a whole and to each individual member by representing the ultimate truth and the means of attaining it⁴³.

The fact that this finds resonance within the material relating to Neem Karoli Baba is clear to see. After the death of their leader in 1973, the canon of that movement was created through the gradual establishment of the hagiographical corpus and the acknowledgement of traditional beliefs and practices that could be held to be an integral part of the community. Such action represented:

...a device to arrest time, or rather pick out and separate from the change-inducing flow of time a selected set of elements that are considered essential and eternally valid: values, guidelines, exemplary representations of true religion and wholesome conduct that together provide a lasting orientation for the community⁴⁴.

The intended permanence of the canon of Neem Karoli Baba, or any other guru, does appear reassuring in comparison with the transience of the charismatic agent, or agency – if less thrilling, of course: charisma will always take precedence over canon. However, that the charismatic community so eagerly engages in backwards-facing practices and rituals of past

⁴¹ Von Stietencron, 2001, p. 15

⁴² *ibid.* p. 14

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 15

remembrance is not surprising, it provides an ongoing link to what once existed in the form of the guru, a way of coming close to him or her once more. Simultaneously, it creates a way of life and establishes a code of insider ethics and theology that can be seen as authoritative in its own right⁴⁵. The apparent drawback of any canon, however, is that its inescapable historicity must also be what prevents it from finding new and vital ways to respond to the demands of the times and so retain its viability. The canon, in other words, remains static whilst those to whom it is directed cannot do the same. Change is inevitable after all – in any religious community.

It is at this juncture that the role of charisma must come into play once again. What von Stietencron describes as being the “repeated presence of charisma”⁴⁶ (and Weber as the attendance of the “renewer of religion”⁴⁷) is an essential element in the renewal of a community’s identity and authority. What might be seen to have turned the original Neem Karoli Baba community into a viable ongoing movement is the presence of new charismatic legitimisation coming in the form of two direct successors. Whilst they both continue to honour the memory and tradition of the former guru, they are now seen as charismatic preceptors in their own right. Matters of the routinisation of charisma and of succession will be examined more closely in 2.IV.i and so will not receive more attention at this juncture. The prime issue here remains the dynamic interplay between charisma and canon that exists as a core element of any religious community, including that of Neem Karoli Baba. Von Stietencron provides an appropriate summation:

...while canon stands for permanence, charisma stands for innovation. This leads us directly into the dialectics of timelessness versus time-governed life, of transcendence versus worldly existence, of permanence versus change. They are opposing yet interacting principles that are constitutive for all religions and, indeed, for all human effort at creating and implementing order in a cosmos that is materially and biologically constituted and, therefore, equally liable to chaotic growth and decay⁴⁸.

Having introduced certain matters of theory that inform this work, we proceed to matters of method. 1.II.ii presents an orientation of research methods; 1.II.iii appraises the specific demands of fieldwork, conducting interviews and participant observation.

⁴⁵ Broo, 2003, p. 7

⁴⁶ Von Stietencron, 2001, p. 17

⁴⁷ Weber, 1965, p. 46

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 15

1.II.ii An Orientation of Research Methods

Observations are all made from somewhere.

David J. Hufford⁴⁹

Richard King has remarked that, “understanding something implicitly involves the prejudices of one’s own ‘historical situatedness’; one simply cannot avoid having an agenda or a perspective upon things by virtue of one’s cultural and historical particularity”⁵⁰. Merely by virtue of the fact that this research has been performed by a scholar of British birth, it is clear that (colonial and) post-colonial resonances must be acknowledged as implicit. Even without the additional self-reflexive considerations of the present author, this project inevitably joins a long line of other Western academic ‘Orientalist’⁵¹ or Indological enterprises that stretch back as far as the seventeenth century⁵². The European (and seemingly very British) pre-occupation with all things Indian is enduring. What is proving to be more transient is the manner in which such exercises are being negotiated.

It is abundantly clear that times have moved on from the former Western colonial position (as presented in *Orientalism*⁵³) that the purpose of studying non-Western religious tradition was its use for a power that was, at that time, “engaged in trading with other countries, or in conquering them, or in keeping possession of them”⁵⁴. Richard King argues that, in post-colonial times, “modern scholarship should not be tarred with the same brush”⁵⁵. His request has been echoed by most – if not all – Western observers and naturally by this one too. What remains is to locate the manner with which to approach issues of Indian religious studies that is more appropriate to these twenty-first century times of enhanced cross-cultural sensitivity. A foremost criticism that has been levied at previous Orientalist scholarship has been its disregard for the exceptional heterogeneity that is evident within Indian culture in general. What has been overlooked (as a matter of scholarly convenience one could speculate) in many

⁴⁹ Hufford, David J. “The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies” in McCutcheon, Russell T. ed. *The Insider / Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion – A Reader*. London: Cassell, 1999, p. 294

⁵⁰ King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and ‘the mystic East’*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 95

⁵¹ Of this term, A.J. Arberry writes: “What is Orientalism, and what constitutes an Orientalist? ... like so many other branches of knowledge, Orientalism has come to lap over into territories by right belonging to other cognate but distinct sciences, so that in no-man’s-land – or, rather, every-man’s-land – the orientalist joins forces with the archaeologist, the historian, the etymologist, the phonetician, the philosopher, the theologian, the musician, the artist.” (Arberry, A.J. *British Orientalists*. London: William Collins & Co., 1943, p. 7)

⁵² For discussion of the history of the British Orientalist, see *ibid.* p. 8

⁵³ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 2003

⁵⁴ Maurice, Frederick Denison. *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity*. London: John W. Parker, 1847, p. 255. Also reproduced in Chichester, David. “Colonialism” in Braun, Willi & Russell T. McCutcheon. *Guide to the Study of Religion*. London and New York: Cassell, 2000, p. 423

⁵⁵ King, 1999, p. 4

earlier Western-authored studies is that these systems are fluid, complex and long-standing to a degree that defies singular definitive evaluation or categorisation. Indeed, bearing the subject matter(s) of Indian divinity and superconsciousness in mind, it may be seen to be nigh on impossible to make any claim at all that is not provisional and thus open to significant authorial distortion. The accusation of subjectivity that Ronald Inden levies at Edward Said⁵⁶ might be justified but, ultimately, the same could be said of any scholar in the field of Indological concern. It is clear that observance of this is not always maintained, yet it could be argued that it is the *awareness* of this provisional viewpoint that truly separates the contemporary scholar working with Indian religious fields from his former Orientalist peers.

In approaching the Hindu *bhakti* tradition(s), as we do in this study, the circumstance of multiplicity is no different. If anything, the situation is magnified: the extent of the popularity of *bhakti* within Indian culture ensures vast variation within it. It could be maintained that a particular demand that the wider devotional tradition makes of those who study its contemporary workings is one of personal engagement. The heart of devotion that lies at the core of *bhakti* thought and practice is, by its nature, exceptionally subjective. The subject-object issues of how to relate to the divine in these traditions ensure all manner of personal filters are in operation and such an observation is equally as applicable to the practitioner as to the observer of *bhakti*⁵⁷. The traditional *bhakti* image of the *gopī* is useful in this respect: each of the infatuated dairymaids who dance in the arms of Kṛṣṇa consider their love to be unique and, of course, it is – except that there are sixteen thousand dairymaids who sport with the divine at the same time. The same relative picture that each of these *gopīs* experiences might be held to be true for the devotees of Neem Karoli Baba who freely acknowledge that their experiences remain theirs alone. The same might also be applied to the observer to *bhakti* tradition. There is no singular picture to be seen; ergo, no definitive claims may truly be made – either by any individual devotee, this thesis or, indeed, any other commentative work in this field.

Rather than see this as a failing, however, appropriate awareness of the multiplicity of Indian *bhakti* might be seen as a movement away from the traditional binary interpretations of former Indological inquiry. After all, the over-simplified view of ‘them’ and ‘us’ cannot be maintained when one perceives so many different subjective narratives simultaneously at play.

⁵⁶ Inden claims that, in Said’s work, “the knowledge of the Orientals, by contrast [to that of the Occidentals], often seems irrational, illogical, unscientific, unrealistic and subjective.” (Inden, Ronald. *Imagining India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, p. 38)

⁵⁷ It could be posited that it is precisely this call for intimacy that has ensured that *bhakti* has received less attention from Orientalists and from modern Indologists than other areas of Indian religious study, such as the *advaita* or yoga schools of philosophy.

In order to appreciate the different strands that are in operation here, however, the outsider observer needs to adopt a less patriarchal mien than was often the case in former scholarship and to learn to *listen* to the insider devotional voice with considerable attention. A dogged promotion of a particular agenda (for example King 1999⁵⁸) merely obfuscates engagement with *bhakti*: the more concepts one applies to the definition of the *bhakti* notion of divinity, so it might be argued, the further removed from a true understanding of it one becomes. To allow the *bhakti* sacred to speak, and then really to hear this voice, requires a proximity, a receptivity and a fluid field engagement with the subject.

The present inquiry has proceeded with just this aim in terms of its orientation and its research methods. The study assumes a predominantly historical perspective on the guru and his life and teachings combined with a heavily ethnographic approach to the compilation of materials. Accordingly, between 2005–2009, the present author was engaged in a significant amount of fieldwork in India, in the USA, in Germany and in the UK. The following section examines the forms that the fieldwork has taken and considers any circumstances of particular note.

1.II.iii Issues of Fieldwork: Conducting Interviews and Participant Observation

The markedly ethnographic approach to the study of this guru and his followers is, as Fiona Bowie points out, a very different exercise than the “data gathering of earlier ‘armchair anthropologists’ or survey ethnographers”⁵⁹. Yet, so one might speculate, how else might information be acquired about a subject matter that has to date remained removed from scholarly attention? Or about something that is so subjectively slippery? Concerning matters of guru practice, it has already been established that it is not adequate merely to look from the outside in: by its esoteric nature little will be forthcoming in response to what is perceived by insiders as a removed stance. Rather than approach the Neem Karoli Baba movement in a manner that anthropologist Clifford Geertz would describe as ‘experience-distant’ (as a non-participating observer), therefore, this researcher has attempted to become as integrated as possible with her subject/s during the course of periods of fieldwork in India (and to a lesser extent the USA and Europe) in what Geertz would term an ‘experience-near’ fashion (as a participating observer)⁶⁰.

⁵⁸ Arguing strenuously against the former stereotyping of non-Western religious practice and culture by Western observers, King positions the development of Hinduism in India during the British Administrative Regime as being indicative of a complex hegemonic agenda to exert control over the populace. In this light he dismisses Vedanta and aspects of Hindu mysticism and calls instead to redefine India’s traditions through its connection with the tribal people and their practices.

⁵⁹ Bowie, Fiona. *The Anthropology of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, p. 10

⁶⁰ Geertz, Clifford. “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding” in McCutcheon ed. 1999, p. 51

This approach has not been without its challenges; the main ones being an initial matter of gaining access and geographical logistics. During the preparatory stages of research (2004-6), the present author resolved upon conducting a series of interviews with devotees in order to gain an insider perspective on how these individuals remembered their guru and how they felt about the ongoing nature of the community. The interviews (and, somewhat later, a series of less formalised 'meetings' in India) took place first in London, then the USA, then in Germany and finally in India. Some particularly prominent prospective interviewees were identified and contacted well in advance in order to arrange interview sessions. This included devotees Bhagavan Das, Ram Dass, Larry and Girija Brilliant, Krishna Das and Jai Uttal and, subsequently, Indian devotee K.K. Sah all of whom seemed rather intrigued by this project and open to be consulted on its behalf. The arrangement of this was not always straightforward, however. Ram Dass, for example, was experiencing a period of ill health at the time of first approach (in 2004) and his secretaries felt bound to reject the request for an interview to be held in San Francisco, where he was living at the time. By the following year, Ram Dass had moved to the island of Maui for purposes of his well-being and a five day retreat had been organised in which he was to play a central teaching role. The present author attended the retreat, with the additional understanding that she would also have the opportunity to conduct a number of interviews, including one with Ram Dass. In the event, the interviews were all conducted, but not without difficulty: the organiser of the retreat, who also served as the co-ordinator of Ram Dass' schedule for the week, seemed unwilling to assist in the matter. The interview was postponed and re-postponed for several days after the end of the retreat and finally only happened a short number of hours before the present author's flight was due to leave back to the mainland.

Other interviewees (for example at the Neem Karoli Baba ashram in Taos, New Mexico) were selected on the basis of availability, accessibility and the author's *ad hoc* introduction from one to another. Some people were contacted early on yet refused to meet for interview or to speak on the matter at all for reasons that they chose not to divulge. After an interview with Bhagavan Das in London in early autumn 2005, the initial US interview 'tour' commenced in New Mexico in late autumn 2005 at the Neem Karoli Baba ashram in Taos, New Mexico, proceeded to Maui, Hawaii and culminated in and around the San Francisco area. Subsequent to that period, interviews were arranged in Germany at the ashram of Durgamayi Ma, a first-generation former devotee of Neem Karoli Baba who now has her own spiritual community. It was here that the first interview was held with K.K.Sah, then visiting from India in the spring of 2006. This proved to be the first of many meetings with Sah to take place later in India. The interview with Durgamayi Ma that was originally scheduled for that visit was not conducted

for reasons that were not entirely clear. At the last minute, access to the German teacher was denied. Subsequent to a further research trip to the United States in the summer of 2006, that autumn the present author made the first of several visits to India.

Interview questions were loosely structured, so that the devotee could have at least as much influence over the direction of the conversation as could the interviewer. Nevertheless, an opening question to almost every session concerned the personal story of how the *celā* had been ‘pulled under the blanket’, as insiders refer to the point of conversion. Other key topics to be introduced were the role of *seva* within the community and the connections that might be perceived to link the guru with Hanumān. Conversations were kept informal and as flowing as possible in order that the subject would feel comfortable to reveal information about him- or herself. For the most part, this line of investigation proved very fruitful with conversations lasting, on average, between two and three hours. These were recorded with a minidisk player and were later transcribed back in the UK (by a number of volunteers). The information was then compared for common themes and concerns⁶¹ in a manner that might loosely be considered qualitative (rather than in any way quantitative). On the one occasion that the technology failed (India 2006, talking to Shyamdas) and the conversation did not record, the present author wrote by hand the proceedings of the session as soon after it had taken place as possible. As this was then supplemented with further meetings and conversations with the same devotee over the next three years, the first omission grew less significant. Indeed, it proved fortuitous: on hearing that the opening interview had been lost, a different devotee (Rameshwar Das) saw fit to send an audio copy of an interview he had recently recorded with Shyamdas. Having access to the recording of these two old friends discussing Neem Karoli Baba in depth was a very interesting additional piece of oral history to appraise. Aspects of it find inclusion within both Parts Two and Three.

For the most part, the more formal format of the oral history interview was changed in the context of India. This was less as a reaction to losing the recording of the Shyamdas interview (although this was the first to take place on Indian soil) than as a response to the culture of the temple environment. In the West, the interview purpose served as a form of introduction into the ‘inner circle’ of first generation devotees, in a manner that had not previously been anticipated. In that sense, it succeeded in diminishing certain barriers between the interviewer and the subjects she studied and was a positive method of facilitating help and assistance (as in the instance of the Rameshwar Das-Shyamdas interview). The same was not felt to be identical

⁶¹ Common themes included conversion stories, miraculous occurrences including Neem Karoli Baba, the elusive nature of the preceptor, perceiving the guru to be an embodiment or expression of divine love, viewing the guru as Hanumān, thoughts on *seva* and memories of living with the holy man in India and also the compilation of *Be Here Now*.

in the Indian context. Interviewing devotees or approaching the community as an outsider-observer felt overly formalised and not conducive to the integration that was experienced as having been achieved, in particular, in America. For example, upon arrival at one of the Indian temples bearing a letter of introduction from a well-known devotee, the present author was most politely welcomed and shown round by the manager but the presentation was most definitely that of the 'public face' of the establishment. No true connection was established and an elder devotee with whom she spoke at length during that visit had no recollection of that meeting when they subsequently met again three years later.

The interview method, therefore, found translation into that of participant observation. Anthropologist Raymond Firth has remarked, "Complete access is impossible"⁶², by which he means that we can never have a direct experience of another person's thoughts and emotions. Of these, so he continues, "one can only infer them"⁶³. This said, it proved an effective course of action through which to gain closer access to the workings of this community and to receive information in a more fluid 'lunar' fashion. Accordingly, and like the majority of the other Western devotees, the author started to wear Indian clothes (generally a woman's *kurta pajama*) and to cover her head with a long *duppata* scarf within temple environs. This action was met with an appreciable difference in how other devotees interacted with her. She committed the forty verses of the *Hanumān Cālīsā* prayer (alongside *guru āratī* arguably the principal prayer of the community) to memory and began to recite it alongside other *celās*. As she began to look like them, to eat food with her fingers in the same manner, to observe the same forms of etiquette in the temples, to become engaged in the same day-to-day spiritual activities as the rest of the community, and to return more than once to India to co-exist with them in this manner, it could be sensed that the satsang began to 'let her in'. In *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass describes himself as having been contented to take the role of the 'novice' in the first months of connection with the Neem Karoli Baba community⁶⁴. In many ways, a parallel situation could be observed with this author who was more than happy to be shown how to act and to be taken around and taught as a 'beginner' in the community. A considerable amount can be learned from such a position and the satsang seemed willing to take her on as something of their own project. Potentially the fact that the researcher was a Western woman proved contributory here. On the one hand, she was allowed access to the women's 'realms' in the temples and was able to converse freely with the Indian women present; on the other hand, she was often treated as an honorary male by male Indian devotees and engaged in discussions

⁶² Firth, Raymond. "An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Religion" in McCutcheon ed. 1999, p. 117

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Ram Dass, *Be Here Now*. Kingsport, Tennessee: Hanuman Foundation, 1978, unnumbered page in chapter entitled 'Ashtanga Yoga'

and escorted to a number of sites and events that would have conceivably been seen as less culturally acceptable had she been of Indian birth.

The sense of integration felt complete when, as an act of seva, the present author persuaded K.K. Sah to allow her to create a digital archive of over a thousand letters, photographs, telegrams and other assorted documents that were in his possession. These included very many original (and frail) letters from Ram Dass to him from the late 1960s onwards. As carbon copies of his own replies to the American were in the collection, a complete correspondence was present. For some years, members of the Western satsang in particular had been concerned about the preservation of these documents that were being stored in a number of plastic bags in a cupboard in Sah's house in Nainital. The present author copied the documents onto her computer with a borrowed scanner and, once back in the UK, collated and categorised the material over the course of several months. The completed archive was put onto disk and copies were returned to India and to a number of designated recipients in America. In truth, this act was one of gratitude to K.K. Sah for his kindness in helping with arrangements and connections. In effect, however, it appeared to prove to other devotees that the author was to be trusted and certainly, afterwards, access was never an issue. Conversely, many devotees went out of their way to be as helpful as possible in the procuring of material and information or the making of arrangements.

The issue of objectivity is, of course, a pertinent consideration for any academic who engages with a community in this way and this research has proven no exception in this regard. With the passing of time and repeated visits, it is inescapable that friendships will form, experiences will be had and the fine line that distinguishes the etic from the emic perspective may become blurred. It could be argued that to become accepted into a satsang one needs to release oneself into its 'embrace' and to be open to any outcomes that the process brings about. Broo considers the researcher's path in this respect as progressing "from interloper, to novice and finally to marginal member."⁶⁵ He continues that the scholar will rarely ever become a fully accepted, participating member into the communal fold but, as Charles Brooks also points out⁶⁶, this might be seen to be advantageous to the researcher in that it assists in the objectivity necessary for the compilation of academic work⁶⁷. How the participant observer comes to balance of the subjective experience and the objectifying analysis of this experience is the crux of the matter.

⁶⁵ Broo, 2003, p. 17

⁶⁶ Brooks, Charles R. *The Hare Krishnas in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 236

⁶⁷ Broo, 2003, p. 17

Writing on a devotional lineage that closely parallels his own, Broo admits a committed ten-year association with ISKCON and so the issue of his own objectivity must have been a prevailing one. In this study too, it has been a consideration. Contrary to Broo and Brooks' experiences, this author felt that she became fully accepted into the community as a result of her efforts to study it. This was an unforeseen circumstance: prior to the commencement of research, she had had no direct dealings with the community in any way nor had she had other spiritual affiliations that could be held as connected in any way. Her manner of addressing this situation was two-fold. At the most basic level, she sought to remove herself from being around the community at the culmination of the information gathering aspect of the research. Secondly, whilst a fair portion of the experiential reportage in this thesis was written *in situ* in India, almost all of the conceptual analysis was composed in an academic Western setting back in the UK and away from the Neem Karoli Baba satsang. Moreover, a significant proportion of time was allowed to elapse between the last research visit and the completion of this study in order to readjust the insider-outsider balance to a more appropriate level for the academic medium represented by this study.

With consideration of theory and method in mind, we move to an evaluation of the source materials employed on this thesis's behalf. 1.III.i appraises the growing field of guru studies within which this study is located; 1.III.ii reviews the source materials that were utilised for Part One; 1.III.iii reviews the source materials employed on behalf of Parts Two and Three including some further evaluation of interview and other oral source materials.

1.III An Evaluation of Source Materials

1.III.i The Guru: A Growing Field

The study of Hindu gurus and their followers is an emerging field within Indian religious studies. Charles White's 1972 paper for *The Journal of Asian Studies* on how to approach the study of Indian saints marks one of the earlier contributions and remains significant. He focuses in particular on the Sai Baba movement and the trend to examine individual 'lineages' within such a potentially vast field is understandable. When one takes an overview of contemporary guru studies, it is apparent that certain movements have received a considerable amount of attention whilst others remain less charted, if documented at all. The Neem Karoli Baba movement falls into the last category: until this thesis no scholarly work on the preceptor had been undertaken. A major contributory aim of this study has been to rectify the situation and to introduce the holy man for the analysis that some of his peers have received in recent years.

A modern example of an area within this field of study that has received greater attention would be the extended Ramakrishna movement, including Vivekananda and matters of service within the mission. Early contributions to this arena of interest included biographical portraits of Ramakrishna by Max Müller in 1898 and of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda by Romain Rolland in 1929 and 1930, respectively. In more recent years there has been a flurry of interest with commentators including Jeffrey Kripal (1990 and 1998), who has written controversially on the nature of Ramakrishna's sexuality; Narasingha Sil (1997 and 1998), who has published and subsequently revised biographical interpretations of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda; and Gwilym Beckerlegge (2000 and 2006), who has been concerned with the movement in special relation to service. Matters concerning the preceptor Prabhupada and the ISKCON movement in India and abroad have also proven popular amongst contemporary scholarship. Kimmo Ketola (2008) has offered an insightful cognitive portrait of Prabhupada as seen through the eyes of his devotees in a study that focuses heavily on a consideration of the mechanics of charisma. This work has been of particular interest in the context of the compilation of this thesis. Charles Brooks (1989) and Måns Broo (2003) have also written on this or on closely-linked themes. Since Charles White wrote on Sai Baba in 1972, Smriti Srinivas (2008) has considered the growth in the movement, which may now be seen to have taken on global dimensions. Alexander Lipski has written on Ananadamayi Ma (1969 and 1977), as has June McDaniel (1989) in a consideration of Bengali holy women. This forms part of her monograph on ecstatic religious persons and practices in Bengal and, in the same chapter, she provides further appraisal of Ramakrishna's wife, Sarada Devi. Of a more recent holy woman, Maya Warrior (2004 and 2005) has published consideration of matters of faith and devotion in relation to Amritanandamayi Ma.

The above inclusions should not be seen to represent an exhaustive account of academics and their research projects engaged in this field as much an illustration of some of the varied interests that have reached publication in recent times. It is additionally apparent from the sources mentioned here that material has stemmed from scholars of different nationalities and of both male and female gender. Thus, whilst work on Hindu gurus remains a relatively compact field of study, it is nevertheless one that has had an outreach across an interesting number of countries, indeed continents. Where inquiry within this field will proceed next is also of interest. One might hope that, with continuing contributions (such as this thesis) on as yet uncharted and related areas of the field, the next forty years will prove to be at least as fruitful as the last. We proceed now with a review of source materials that were consulted on behalf of Part One.

1.III.ii A Review of Source Materials for Part One

Texts consulted on behalf of issues of method and theory for this study, or in relation to the Rāmāyaṇic background material (to feature most prominently in 1.V), were sourced from publishing houses, ashram libraries and antiquarian book retailers on the subcontinent and in America and some via the extensive collections of the British Library and India Office collections housed in London. Whilst this study is located within the field of Hindu guru studies, it has been informed by research from a variety of related arenas of interest within Indian religious studies, Christian studies, literary studies and beyond. This includes work on charisma, miracles, hagiography and sacred biography, literary biography, narratology, the nature of ‘devotional memory’⁶⁸, collective memory and self-creation. It has also involved a considerable amount of background investigation into the Rāmāyaṇic tradition, in particular into Tulsīdās’ *Rāmacaritamānasa* and within Hanumān studies. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of materials consulted on behalf of Part One, some of which find inclusion later in Parts Two and Three also.

Commencing with material on charisma and charismatic authority that is introduced in Part One, the principal source of reference has been the two works of sociologist Max Weber included here - *The Sociology of Religion* (1965) and *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1978). This has been complemented with reference to Geoffrey Parrinder’s essay (1987) on charisma for the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, John Potts’ *History of Charisma* (2009), Charles F. Keyes’ paper on *Charisma and Sacred Biography* (1982), Christensen (2005) and, in particular, two contributions from the Dalmia, Malinor and Christof collection of essays on *Charisma and Canon* (2001): that of Heinrich von Stietencron and Monika Horstmann. The work of Ketola (2008) and Broo (2003) have been drawn upon here also. Ketola’s monograph is of considerable interest in that it connects considerations of charisma (albeit executed via a strictly cognitive approach) with a twentieth century guru, Prabhupada.

Study into the nature of hagiography has demanded use of a wider range of sources: material relating to the genre of hagiography and sacred biography and also material from further afield that concerns the manner(s) in which to analyse its narrative interpretation(s). The study of hagiography is originally of Christian origin and interest. The thoughts of one of the earlier Christian apologetic commentators on the genre, Hippolyte Delahaye (1907) finds appraisal here alongside material from a wider, more Indian-oriented perspective including Binfield

⁶⁸ Srinivas, Smriti. *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City and Memory in a Global Religious Movement*. Leiden: Brill, 2008, p. 21

(1995), Smith (2000), Reynold and Capps (1976), Schober (1997) and Stewart (1991). Two sources have been of specific assistance here: Rupert Snell's introductory paper "Themes in Indian Hagiography" in Callewaert and Snell's *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India* (1994) and Robin Rinehart's *One Lifetime, Many Lives. The Experience of Modern Hindu Hagiography* (1999) have given rise to a number of questions that find inclusion in 1.IV, both in relation to hagiography as a genre and to that relating to Neem Karoli Baba in particular.

A number of texts and sources that have been utilised concern narratology, life story / history and related narrative theory, methods of discourse and memory. A small number of these have had direct Indian connections, for example Arnold and Blackburn's *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (1997) and Panniker's *Indian Narratology* (2003). For the most part, however, the majority of this material has not been subject-specific to Indian studies, religious or otherwise. Fluddernik (2009) and Tolmie (1999) have provided texts on narratology and narratology in relation to biblical narratives, respectively, that have been useful in terms of background studies. Randall (1995), Neisser and Firush (1994), and Hardcastle (2008) have published on the nature of self-creation, self-remembrance and self-construction and Halbwachs (1992) on the issue of collective memory. The opinions of these scholars have been of interest here in the evaluation of both the individual and collective devotional narratives that make up the hagiographical canon of the Neem Karoli Baba movement. Almost all of this material was created in hindsight and after the death of the guru. As will be evidenced in 1.IV, much of the purpose of what devotees have written about their preceptor could be held to be in their function as exercises in self-definition and self-identity.

What remains for evaluation for Part One, is the material that relates to the Rāmāyaṇic Tradition and to the rise of the cult of Hanumān. The broadest selection of texts consulted (certainly in chronological terms) concerns the overview of Rāmāyaṇic scholarship that spans a region of one hundred and fifty years. With the exception of Romesh Dutta⁶⁹, the early commentators to publish on this legend (in the English language at least) were primarily Western Orientalists. This includes Weber (writing in 1873), Pargiter (1884) and Oman (1894). The influential voice of Max Müller does not feature here as he performed no studies of Rāmāyaṇic material. It is, nevertheless, incontrovertible that his work would have been known to each of these writers and possibly informed their opinion also. In more recent years, Western scholars have published less widely on the *Rāma-kathā*. Wurm (1976), Khan (1965), and Richman (1991) have proved noteworthy exceptions, although each has continued to

⁶⁹ R.C. Dutta published a condensed translated version of the Rāmāyaṇa in 1899.

display a predominantly textualist bias. Of these publications, the evaluation of the role of *dharma* in relation to the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, positions Khan's contribution as being of note. It is conceivable that a recent major exhibition curated by Jeremy Losty at the British Library – entitled “The Ramayana: Love and Valour in India's Great Epic” (2008) – has brought new impetus to this field; although the results of this exposure are yet to be seen.

What could be perceived as a dwindling of interest in the West is not to be found on the subcontinent. Perhaps it is socio-politically significant that more Indian-authored work has been produced in the post-colonial decades than was the case in pre-Partition times. Conceivably the supplanting of the old colonial era with the Indian nationalist movement has (re-)awakened greater indigenous enthusiasm in Indian mythology and tradition. Certainly, native scholarship has found new impetus and a new voice in this field. Sastri (1977), L.K. Misra (1966), R.N. Misra (1979), Sircar (1979), Vyas (1992), Singh (1993 and 1994), Yardi (1994), Nagar (1999 and 2006), Sukhadeva (2002) and Bose (2004) have all published on the development of the early Rāmāyaṇic tradition, including the Vālmīki handling.

Of the many handlings of the Rāmāyaṇic story that remain, the one that concerns us most closely in this study is the sixteenth century *Rāmacaritamānasa*. This was said to have been Neem Karoli Baba's favoured version of the legend and it has since taken on the status of canonical scripture within the community. As it was the edition that found use within his temple setting – and that is still evident today – the Gita Press translation of Tulsīdās' oeuvre has been selected for the purpose of this study. Following citation herein, the title of the text becomes abbreviated to RCM. Other primary material, in particular the poetry of Tulsīdās, is offered in the Allchin translations (1964 and 1966). On the matter of secondary texts, material to have been consulted includes Babineau's *Love of God and Social Duty in the Ramcaritmanas* (1979) and publications from Allchin (1964 and 1966), Gupta (1946), Bulcke (1950), Bahadur (1976) and Lutgendorf (1991) and also by Ludvik (1997), whose analysis of the presentation of Hanumān (*Hanuman in the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki and the Rāmacaritamānasa of Tulsī Dāsa*), has been of use in this section as well as in that more specifically related to this deity that concludes Part One.

The final category of textual materials consulted for this part relates to the development of the character of Hanumān both outside and within the Rāmāyaṇic tradition and, in particular, in relation to Tulsīdās. Possibly in line with the ongoing popularity of this figure within Indian culture and the newly burgeoning interest in him further afield, there is a fair amount of material of a scholarly and of a popular nature available – although, only the former has been utilised for the purpose of this thesis. As already mentioned, the work of Catherine Ludvik has

been of interest. Lutgendorf's study (2007) has also been referred to with some regularity. It is from this author that suggestion has been taken that the *śakti* and the *bhakti* elements that he discusses in relation to Hanumān might be a manner in which to approach Neem Karoli Baba also. Moreover, prior to the publication of this book, Philip Lutgendorf was kind enough to supply his most recent translation of the *Hanumān Cālīsā* prayer for consultation. This translation now forms an appendix in *Hanumān's Tale* as it does at the end of this study. Finally, the work of Joginder (2005) and Nagar (2006) have provided information elsewhere unavailable. For example, Joginder's work (although not lengthy) offers a comprehensive survey of Sanskrit texts that feature Hanumān. This has, in part, been incorporated here.

1.III.iii A Review of Source Materials for Parts Two and Three

On the whole, the collation of materials required for the appraisal of Neem Karoli Baba has demanded a more eclectic system than have considerations of method, theory and background for Part One or, indeed, for their inclusion in Parts Two or Three. Conventionally published sources have, of course, been consulted here. Of these texts, a proportion has proven relatively straightforward to obtain – for example the writings of Ram Dass (1974, 1976, 1978, 1987, 1990, 1995, 2001, 2004, 2005) or the memoirs of Bhagavan Das (1997). This notwithstanding, the location of certain other publications has proven more challenging. Indeed, much existing work in this field has found less wide-spread distribution, often only in very limited print runs or available directly from ashram and temple premises. A study of gurus that includes a brief portrait of Neem Karoli Baba (Williams, Nair and Osborne 2005), for example, was only located after its authors sent an unsolicited copy to the temple at Kainchi Dham. Whilst not representative of usual practice, the temple kindly loaned this book (and two further volumes relating to Hanumān⁷⁰) in support of this research. Other rare hagiographical publications (that specifically relate to Neem Karoli Baba) have found self-publication in India (Ganda 2002), or have been released and distributed directly through Kainchi Dham or the ashram at Rishikesh (Pande 2003 and 2005, Joshi 2006 and Joshi 2009) or through the Hanuman Foundation in New Mexico (Mukerjee 1996 and 2001). These have been acquired through personal contacts⁷¹ or through visits in person to the ashrams in New Mexico and in India.

Of matters directly pertaining to the contemporary preceptorial voice (that finds predominant inclusion in Part Two), the majority of the selected sources have been insider commentaries

⁷⁰ Both publications edited by Suneel Gomber had been presented as a gift to the ashram trust. They were *The World of Lord Hanuman*. Lucknow: J.B. Charitable Trust (Regd), 2005 and *The Visual Encyclopaedia of Lord Hanuman*. Lucknow: J.B. Charitable Trust (Regd), 2006.

⁷¹ Guddu Sah of Nainital sourced and provided the text by Ganda. He also sent to the UK the 2005 edition of Ram Dass ed. *Miracle of Love* that was used for purposes of textual comparison with the earlier edition (1995) of the same publication, referred to throughout this study.

written during the twentieth century. As Neem Karoli Baba left behind him no written legacy, the publications of his peers might be seen to provide expression for the concerns and considerations that he too might have shared or, at the least, have been aware of. With the exception of Swami Atmaswarupananda (2001) who was born in the West, the contributors at this juncture are of Indian descent. All speak as preceptors from within the Hindu guru tradition. Of these, the opinions of Muktananda (1974, 1981, 1982 and 2000), Swami Rama (1996), Ramana Maharshi (in Godman ed. 1985 and Cohen 1998), Satyasangananda (1984) and Satchidananda (in Mandelkorn ed. 2003) represent the most significant contributions. Whilst these publications stem from different philosophical quarters – and so do not just offer a *bhakti* perspective – the obvious commonality is their observance of an emic perspective.

Acting as counter-balance, therefore, other commentative material is employed in this discourse. Bharati (1976) and Feuerstein (1996) appear qualified to comment upon the guru tradition as well as its practice: both have had ongoing and active involvement in the institution whilst simultaneously maintaining a professional involvement in the Western academy. Bharati, in particular, is an anthropologist and so his material is of specific relevance for this study⁷². Further etic materials that have been referred to include McLeod (1996), Copley (2000), Mehta (1993), McMullen (1982) and Narayan (1989). A further source is representative of a staunchly outsider view. In their portrayal of the guru-disciple relationship as “a quintessential example of mental authoritarianism”⁷³, Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad offer a perspective that is not shared by other contributions to this thesis and so their work is engaged with as a counterpart to the material presented in these pages. Finally, on the nature of the miraculous, publications from Brown (1984) and Korte (2001) supplement referral to David Hume’s essay “Of Miracles”, originally published in 1748 but here presented in an edition from 1998.

We proceed to consideration of the historical matters that inform 3.I and, to a lesser extent, 3.II. The majority of this material was obtained through the British Library in three different formats. The first was contemporary comment upon the political situation in twentieth century

⁷² Born Leopold Fischer, Aghananda Bharati was a professor of anthropology at Syracuse University for many years before his death in 1991. He taught on many aspects of South Asian cultural and anthropological studies as well as in comparative philosophy. Simultaneously, however, Bharati was ordained as a Hindu monk of the Dasanami Sannyasi order. As part of his personal commitment, he undertook a 1500-mile pilgrimage on foot across India as a mendicant. Georg Feuerstein is a yoga scholar who has published and taught extensively on yoga philosophy and traditional practice. Feuerstein was involved as a serious student of controversial American guru Da Free John for five years before the composition of his book *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus* in 1996.

⁷³ Kramer, Joel & Diana Alstad. *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*. Berkeley, CA: Frog Ltd., 1993, p. xiii

India (for example Hyndman, 1907 and 1911). The second came from the India Office's extensive collection of *District Gazeteers*, copies of which are held in London and that provided unparalleled insight into the contemporary India of Neem Karoli Baba. The third came from the *Indian Army Lists*, also held in London. This was used in investigation into the case of Colonel McKenna (3.II.iii), on behalf of which the British Army Personnel Office also provided assistance with access to their records.

Having assayed the literature consulted in Parts Two and Three that supports the evaluation of our principal protagonist, we may now review the source materials directly related to Neem Karoli Baba. Of anything that might with justification be termed commentative – that is, not written by a direct devotee of the Neem Karoli Baba – only a small number of published texts are available and none of these is dedicated solely to him. The contributions of Marshall (1963), Swamis Chidananda (1976), Rama (1978) and Vijayananda (1978), Feuerstein (1996) and Williams, Nair and Osborne (2005) will be discussed below. In recent years, there have been an additional number of magazine and online articles written on the guru (for example Catalfo 2001). However, these are generally short, non-scholarly pieces that have originated by virtue of the guru's connection to well-known Western figures such as Ram Dass or kirtan performers Krishna Das, Jai Uttal and Bhagavan Das.

The earliest account of the guru published in book form – at least as far as is known and certainly in English – appears with Anne Marshall's autobiographical description of her travels through India (1963). Marshall does not succeed in her quest to meet with Neem Karoli Baba in person, however, and her response to this failure is sardonic. Combined with the fact that (as will be examined in 3.V.ii, pp. 220-221) she appears to have erroneous information on the guru and his connections, the reliability of this text is questionable. The guru finds his way into print again with a pamphlet by Swami Chidananda entitled "Baba Neem Karoli – A Wonder Mystic of Northern India" (1976) and two single chapters included in the memoirs of Swamis Rama and Vijayananda (both 1978). Although all three are emic commentaries, none of these publications was composed by a direct devotee. As a result, they provide insight into how the guru was perceived by those not directly associated with him or his satsang. After this, nothing more was added until 1996 when a two page inclusion of the guru appeared in Feuerstein's *Holy Madness* and then not again until Williams, Nair and Osborne (2005). This last text includes a nine-page portrait of the guru, whom the authors describe rather simplistically as "tubby and humorous"⁷⁴ and, unfortunately, also as dying a year before he actually did⁷⁵. With

⁷⁴ Williams, Norman, K.K. Nair and Barry Osborne comp. *Beyond Duality – Biographical Sketches of Saints & Enlightened Spiritual Teachers of the 20th Century*. Chennai: Sudhamayi Prakashan Trust, 2005, p. 139

this in mind, therefore, this resource is not overly useful. This said, the Williams, Nair and Osborne report does mark the only inclusion of the guru into a book of collected hagiographies, the significance of which will be examined further in 1.IV. Finally, Lutgendorf provides mention of Neem Karoli Baba in *Hanuman's Tale* (2007). Whilst his inclusions are brief and add little new in terms of factual information about the guru, his contribution is nevertheless significant; indeed, he positions Neem Karoli Baba as a direct representation of Hanumān. This material has been drawn upon, in particular, in the concluding chapter of this thesis, 3.VI.i (pp. 255-259).

When one considers that the devotees of this guru numbered into the many thousands, fewer insider texts than one might imagine exist that relate to (either wholly or in part) or that refer to Neem Karoli Baba. Of particular interest, however, is the publication that first brought the guru to wider attention. *Be Here Now* was published in America by Ram Dass in 1971 and is a volume of such significance in terms of the modern integration of Eastern spiritual concerns into Western spiritual culture, that its compilation is considered separately in 3.V.ix. Most if not all of Ram Dass' subsequent solo and collaborative publications (listed in the bibliography as being released in 1974, 1976, 1978, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1995, 2000 and 2004) also contain varying degrees of information about Neem Karoli Baba and form an important resource for this thesis. Moreover, as a spiritual teacher in the oral story telling tradition, Ram Dass' extensive archive of audio (and, more recently, audio visual) recordings have further offered a significant contribution. This has particularly been the case with a set of 18 CDs, recently re-mastered and released as *The Yogas of the Bhagavad Gita*. This month-long lecture programme formed part of the inaugural season at the Naropa Institute in 1974, and so the information that it contains is presented less than a year after the guru died in 1973. Offering material personal to the relationship between Ram Dass and Neem Karoli Baba, this series of recordings contains information on the practice of *guru-kṛpā* and on the wider guru tradition also.

Other than *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass' major contribution to published source materials on Neem Karoli Baba must be considered to be as the compiling editor of *Miracle of Love*, first published in 1979 by the Hanuman Foundation. This book contains around a thousand different stories about the guru collected from over a hundred devotees⁷⁶, despite the fact that

⁷⁵ The authors rather carelessly state, "Maharajji died in 1972" on p. 144; although, in only the second line of their chapter, they correctly state that he "died in 1973". (*ibid.* p. 137)

⁷⁶ The stories in *Miracle of Love* are loosely arranged into twenty five chapters under a number of themes. These include how devotees came to meet Neem Karoli Baba, their experiences during darshan, attitudes towards faith and surrender and matters relating to attachment, truth, money, drugs, anger,

many, “felt that no book could or should be written about a being with qualities as vast, formless and subtle as Maharajji’s, and yet they contributed their stories nonetheless”⁷⁷. Such a project was undertaken, says Ram Dass, over the course of five years⁷⁸ “as an act of love”⁷⁹ towards his guru. Together with Rameshwar Das and others, Ram Dass is currently involved in a project that involves the collection of the diaries of devotees from when they were in their guru’s presence. There is, as yet, no known date for the completion or publication of this.

Material from other Western insider authors includes a portrait of the guru in Bhagavan Das’ spiritual memoirs (1997); a short book entitled *Flow of Grace: Chanting the Hanuman Chalisa* by Krishna Das (2007), written to accompany a double CD recording; Krishna Das’ memoirs of the years spent with the guru (2010); and a doctoral thesis completed in 1995 by devotee Ram Giri (Andreas Braun). Entitled “Breaking the Cup: Taking the Guru Path to the End”, this is structured around an autobiographical account of the author’s relationship first with Neem Karoli Baba and then, after the preceptor’s death, with Ma Joya Sati Bhagavati at whose ashram in Florida he subsequently lived for twenty-five years. This work is unapologetically presented as insider and experiential material.

Remaining with the Western voice, several further books include interviews with devotees of Neem Karoli Baba in which they discuss their relationship with their guru at some length: Caplan (2002); Parker (2000); Johnsen and Jacobus (2007) and Rosen (2008). These texts have each been cited from in this study. Rosen’s conversations with devotees Shyamdas and Krishna Das are particularly revealing of their relationships with the guru. The newsletters from the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple in Taos, New Mexico (early 1980s onwards) and those from the Hanuman Foundation (from roughly the same period) offer an additional resource in terms of providing a platform for the Western devotional voice in the years after the death of their guru. Unpublished letters between devotees – in particular between Ram Dass and K.K. Sah – have been invaluable as has been the diary kept by Girija Brilliant in 1971. The diary offers considerable insight into how the guru was received by those around him, into daily life at the temples, and into other (in particular Western) devotees.

From the perspective of the Indian born devotee, a number of titles have emerged. The first book in Hindi was published by Pande (1983) under the title *Alokik Yathartha*, and later

love, grace, spiritual practice and Hanumān also. For the purposes of this study, selections for inclusion were made on the basis of their thematic content and what that might serve to illustrate in the thesis.

⁷⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. xxi

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush. *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service*. New York: Bell Tower, 1992, p. 39

translated and published as *The Divine Reality of Sri Baba Neeb Karori ji Maharaj* (2003) by the Sri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir and Ashram. Now in its second edition (2005), this newly revised translation contains additional editing from a number of Western devotees⁸⁰. In many ways the Indian-authored counterpart to *Miracle of Love*, this text offers significant biographical analysis and groups devotees' memories thematically. The ashram at Kainchi has since sponsored a further, albeit less substantial, publication by Josi (2006) which also finds inclusion here. Four other publications need be acknowledged. Elder Indian devotee Dada Mukerjee has provided two books of his reminiscences and those of other devotees (1996 and 2001). More properly known as Professor Sudhir Mukerjee, a professor of economics at Allahabad University, Mukerjee is in a unique position in that he writes as a devotee very closely connected to Neem Karoli Baba and yet his narrative voice appears arguably more measured (conceivably by virtue of his academic training) than is found in some other hagiographical sources. As such, these two texts represent important contributions. The most recent monograph to have found (self-)publication was released by Rabboo Joshi to celebrate Guru Poomima on 7 July 2009. *I and My Father Are One. The Grand Unification* is particularly interesting from the perspective of the development of the hagiographical canon. Its significance will be evaluated in 1.IV. A final textual work from an Indian devotee is *Hanuman Vistas*, self-published by S.D. Ganda in 2002, although it offers little of use for the purposes of this study.

Having reviewed the source materials of Part One and that of Parts Two and Three, 1.IV appraises aspects of the tradition of Indian religious biography and devotional writing and locates within it the canonical material of the Neem Karoli Baba movement. In a greater understanding of the workings and functions of these sources, their use for the purposes of this study becomes significantly enhanced. 1.IV.i examines the genre of hagiography and considers it in relation to sacred biography. 1.IV.ii considers the tension between the historical and the mythical within hagiographical sources. 1.IV.iii assays both the purpose and some of the principal themes that are to be found within and across the field. 1.IV.iv investigates the material most closely related to this Neem Karoli Baba. Looking at issues of narrative and editorial responsibility, we question both the purpose(s) of the available texts and also for whom they were intended in the first instance.

⁸⁰ The 2005 edition was translated by Vidhu Bushan Pant and Jaya Prasada. Jaya is principal attendant and translator for Siddhi Ma, one of the two successors to Neem Karoli Baba. The text has received further editing from Cher and Craig Mather (known as Tara and Bali), devotees who currently live in Wales and from New Yorker Prema Michau, also an attendant to Siddhi Ma.

1.IV Narratives on the Guru: The Hagiographical Canon

1.IV.i Approaching Hagiography and Sacred Biography

Hagiography is an inextricable blend of statements about the zero-experience and of the legends superimposed by his audience.

Agehananda Bharati⁸¹

My problem was that Maharaji had no handles. Your hands would just slip off his blanket, which filled the whole universe.

Bhagavan Das⁸²

Of Neem Karoli Baba it has justifiably been remarked that, “Facts are few, stories many”⁸³. With opacity obscuring much of the situation (and for much of the time) in relation to this man, to attempt a study of his life and teachings could be seen to represent a methodological challenge. After all where does one begin in the evaluation of a being who has been described as “the saint called nobody”⁸⁴ and about whom even those who spent considerable amounts of time with him nonetheless claim to know nothing of any substance⁸⁵? As documented immediately above, materials do exist that have been published on this North Indian guru, the great majority of which are insider hagiographical accounts. Written by different devotees and over the course of four decades, these sources appear to share a commonality of purpose: they tell and re-tell stories of, and personal experiences with, Neem Karoli Baba that depict the guru in a number of different roles (often miraculous or compassionate); they seek to position the preceptor as being highly charismatic and as extraordinarily spiritually illumined; and they reinforce the image of the community as being closely linked to the holy man and as continuing to remain loyal to his memory. These emic commentaries have a tendency to rhapsodise about their subject and offer little reflective comment upon the pedagogic and other behavioural modalities that they observe. Moreover, the material that is offered here has seemingly very few chronological or socio-political anchors. As such it appears as a ‘time-less’ presentation of themes and ideas that is orientated to face backwards considerably more than it does forwards.

In their study of the biographical process in the context of Indian religious persons,

⁸¹ Bharati, Agehananda. *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism*. London and the Hague: East-west Publications, 1976, p. 110

⁸² Bhagavan Das. *It's Here Now (Are You?): A Spiritual Memoir*. New York: Broadway Books, 1997, p. 14

⁸³ Ram Dass with Bo Lozoff. comp. 1976. p. 93

⁸⁴ Unattributed. “The Saint Called Nobody”. *Life Positive* (November 1999). Accessed at < <http://www.lifepositive.com/Spirit/masters/neem-karoli-baba/saint-neemkaroli.asp> > (8 April 2007)

⁸⁵ Mukerjee has commented on this, “We used to see Neem Karoli Baba from very close quarters, but still he was a mystery all the time” (Mukerjee, 2001, p. 171).

Reynolds and Capps have distinguished between what might be termed sacred biography and what should be called hagiography. The first “refers to accounts written by followers or devotees of a founder or religious saviour”⁸⁶ and has the potential to offer extraordinary insight into the creation of new religious ideals and forms of expression. In contrast, hagiographies “present their subject as one who has realized, perhaps in a distinctive way, an image, an ideal, or attainment already recognized by his religious community”⁸⁷. Which category of writing the devotees of Neem Karoli Baba were subscribing to in their narrative efforts presents as an interesting question. Upon immediate inspection, the overwhelming majority of material may be categorised as being clearly hagiographical. Following the distinctions laid out by Reynolds and Capps, scant attention is paid to the chronological rendering of the guru’s life and the “narrative is organized to emphasize the virtues or attainments manifested in the subject’s life”⁸⁸. For the most part, the devotional voice portrays the guru as being intrinsically linked to greater theological and socio-cultural traditions than he could represent on his own (or than they would wish him to). He is displayed throughout as a shining exemplar of *bhakti* guru practice and as devoted to the Rāmāyaṇic devotional lineage but not as the founder of his own movement.

Having said this, one must question the perspective of all the Western devotees who arrived at the preceptor’s door and who, conceivably, were not as versed in the ways of Indian tradition(s). Potentially, for a small minority of these *celās* at least, what they perceived him to be was a religious saviour who stood at the head of an entirely new form of religious movement. But would this stance necessarily be incongruous? It is clear that, through the words and actions of a number of the Western satsang and in particular through those of Ram Dass, this preceptor’s message was (later) brought to a new demographic. Depending upon one’s personal view of the American devotee and his teaching career in the years since Neem Karoli Baba’s death, it could be argued that the Indian holy man does represent the founder of a New Religious Movement that was later spear-headed by Ram Dass. The present author would not share this opinion – and, probably, neither would Ram Dass. However, it is interesting to consider some of the Western-authored narrative offerings in this light. Whilst never made explicit, the viewpoint that some of the community’s textual commentary might be considered sacred biographical in nature and not just hagiographical is plausible.

Moving away from the implications of the translation of this medium into a Western twentieth century setting for the time being, it should be acknowledged that the sacred narratives of the

⁸⁶ Reynolds, Frank E. and Donald Capps eds. *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1976, p. 3

⁸⁷ *ibid.* p. 4

⁸⁸ *ibid.* p. 5

type we are concerned with here have an exceptionally long history in India that continues to flourish today “with undiminished exuberance”⁸⁹. W.L. Smith observes that the form has been described as being ‘endless’ and adds, “Certainly no other genre of Indian literature can rival it in sheer bulk”⁹⁰. It is a predominantly textual tradition (although also, to a lesser extent, iconographic) that finds ample evidence in ancient, medieval and modern eras and amongst the Jainas, Buddhists and Muslims as well as amongst the Hindus⁹¹. Rare, therefore, is the Indian holy person about whom similar legend and myth has not been created: Neem Karoli Baba in no way stands on his own in this respect. Across the centuries hagiographies have been composed in poetic form as well as in prose and have been written from a variety of different points of view. Yet, as finds illustration in the materials relating to this guru, a prevalent generic characteristic is, firstly, “to praise their subjects and to place the narrative within a mythic framework that is explanatory and not merely ornamental”⁹² and, secondly, both to canonise and anthologise the subject at hand⁹³. Furthermore, as Smith comments, “even the most casual reader of the hagiographical literatures... cannot fail to notice that Hindu saints tend to lead very similar lives and that the same anecdotes appear in one biography after another”⁹⁴.

Thematic prevalence within the genre is of considerable interest when approaching the collected works relating to a single guru – especially if a foremost purpose in doing so is to establish material through which to make a ‘sketch’ of the preceptor’s life and teachings. Before we turn to consideration of such matters, however, we examine more closely the view of “biography as the complex interweaving of myth and history [in which] myth and history are not discontinuous... but manifest a complex interaction”⁹⁵.

1.IV.ii The Tension Between the Historical and the Mythical

The study of hagiography has not always been a popular one. Originally the term was used in relation to a Christian context and, even amongst Christian apologists such as Hippolyte Delehaye (writing in 1907), the genre was considered overly subjective, overly accepting of all things miraculous and generally unreliable as a source with any sense of historical accuracy. In *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*, the Bollandist monk assesses the

⁸⁹ Smith, W.L. *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography*. Stockholm: Department of Indology, University of Stockholm, 2000, p. i

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² Arnold, David and Stuart Blackburn eds. *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*. Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 7

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Smith, 2000, p. i

⁹⁵ Reynolds and Capps eds. 1976, p. 2

purpose of hagiography: “The term may only be applied therefore to writings inspired by devotion and intended to promote it”⁹⁶. This may appear to be a straightforward working ‘definition’ but, as Delehayé measures hagiographical accounts by the verifiability of their historical accuracy, his estimation of the genre may be seen to be guarded. As Robin Rinehart points out, through the use of headings such as “Unconscious distortion of truth by the individual – By the people – Level of popular intelligence – Tendency to simplification – Ignorance”⁹⁷ and so on, Delehayé demonstrates the previously popularly held view that hagiography was a simplistic and unimaginative form of writing composed by unsophisticated writers for an unsophisticated audience that “shamelessly borrow[s] from the lives and legends of other saints”⁹⁸. For Delehayé, and for others like him, hagiography appeared to represent a “substandard genre of historical writing”⁹⁹. In holding this view, what is now held to be the essential instructional function of this narrative form was overlooked, as was its foremost aim “for religious edification, not historical documentation”¹⁰⁰.

In writing on medieval Indian religious biography, Edward C. Dimock considers the historical biographical approach of which Delehayé approves to be an anathema to Indian literary convention. He reasons that the cyclical notions of the passing of time that find prevalence within Indian thought and writing¹⁰¹ diminish Western concepts of linear plot development to the point of their losing much of their meaning. After all, so he says, “human personality is irrelevant in the working out of the repeated patterns of the cosmic order”¹⁰², although he does concede that the lives of ‘great individuals’ have attracted much attention nevertheless. Instead, writing about such beings becomes an act of devotion¹⁰³. In a parallel observation, Rupert Snell notes the critical *referential* approach of the scholar, who looks to “dissect the available data and show how the various parts relate to each other in a strictly chronological time-frame”¹⁰⁴ and contrasts it with the *reverential* approach of the pandit. Unlike his academic peer, he intends “to locate the life-stories of its subjects in a sweep of time knowing

⁹⁶ Delehayé, H. (V.M. Crawford trans.) *The Legends of the Saints. An Introduction to Hagiography*. Norwood, PA: Norwood editions, 1974 (first published 1907), p. 2

⁹⁷ *ibid.* p. 12

⁹⁸ Rinehart, Robin. *One Lifetime, Many Lives. The Experience of Modern Hindu Hagiography*. Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1999, p. 6

⁹⁹ *ibid.* p. 7

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ For discussion of ‘cyclicalisation’ in Indian writing, see Paniker, K. Ayyappa. *Indian Narratology*. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 2003, pp. 10-12

¹⁰² Dimock, Edward .C. “Religious Biography in India: The ‘Nectar of the Acts’ of Caitanya” in Reynolds and Capps eds. 1976, p. 109

¹⁰³ *ibid.* p. 114

¹⁰⁴ Snell, Rupert. “Introduction: Themes in Indian Hagiography” in Callewaert, Winand M and Rupert Snell eds. *According to Tradition. Hagiographical Writing in India*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994, p. 1-2

no boundaries between the contemporary and the ahistorical”¹⁰⁵. The conflicting perspective between the two points of view ensures that “the devotee will see the process as one of revelation, while the critic will see it as a process of invention”¹⁰⁶. From this, it would seem that the proponent of historically oriented biography and the advocate of mythically aware narrative must remain diametrically opposed. Charles S.J. White acknowledges that in the study of modern Indian saints, the need to develop a third position “that will make it possible to describe our understanding of these individuals in language other than that of the adoring devotee or the hostile sceptic”¹⁰⁷ is of vital importance.

Conceivably a key to this lies in the awareness of the many agendas that are potentially at play here. This includes the motivation of the compiler, the reader and, at times, even the subject of the report in question if he or she is party to the creation of his or her own hagiographical canon. A further point of access rests in the recognition that the experiential / reverential and the factual / referential need not stand as entirely oppositional to each other. Dialogue between both stances may, indeed should, be initiated. Rinehart, for example, positions the concepts of *bios* (the life that was actually lived) and *hagios* (that which is recognisable as being sacred or holy about the subject) in tension with each other and describes the interplay between them as an important rhetorical strategy through which the hagiographer attempts to describe “something that may not be fully expressible in language” – in other words, the effect that the holy person has had on another’s life¹⁰⁸. Reynolds and Capps have identified this approach as being “mythohistoric”¹⁰⁹ in that both aspects are to be considered. Sometimes greater weight is lent to one perspective than to the other, of course. In particular when more than one hagiographer has commented on the same subject, or even on the same event¹¹⁰, a difference may be seen between those commentators who primarily seek to ‘humanise’ their protagonist and those who look to ‘spiritualise’ him or her. In the first instance, biographers specifically include episodes that “reflect his common humanity”¹¹¹; in the case of the latter, commentators actively remove “references to his human weakness, mental lapses, signs of occasional cruelty, and so on”¹¹². The nature of authorial and editorial responsibility is of great significance to our considerations and will be examined in relation to Neem Karoli Baba in 1.IV.iv.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* p. 1

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* p. 2

¹⁰⁷ White, Charles S.J. “The Sāi Bābā Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints” *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol XXXI, No. 4 (August 1972), p. 878

¹⁰⁸ Rinehart, 1999, p. 12

¹⁰⁹ Reynolds and Capps eds. 1976, p. 1

¹¹⁰ For consideration of the multiple accounts of the relationship between Neem Karoli Baba and Colonel McKenna, see 3.II.iii

¹¹¹ Reynolds and Capps eds. 1976. p. 3

¹¹² *ibid.*

Returning to the matter of the balance of *bios* with *hagios*, the reward for the adoption of such a dual perspective is that, in return, an expanded array of interpretive options may be identified. On the one hand, certain historically verifiable features become more apparent. At the same time, additional information comes to the fore that relates to the “political, social, and religious concerns of the communities who produced them and read them”¹¹³. Aghenanda Bharati’s comment that, “Hagiography is compiled and intended as reportage about saints, but in truth it is reportage about the reporter”¹¹⁴ may be seen to hold some truth. Writing of an entirely different sort of preceptor in a monograph on Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, Christensen concurs that hagiography represents a social and textual construction that “present[s] a certain intention, such as to legitimise a religious tradition and / or the genuineness of a religious revelation”¹¹⁵. With adherence to this twin view, the stories and life stories that make up the hagiography may be seen to be about much more than their primary subject focus.

1.IV.iii Indian Hagiographical Functions and Themes

It has been said that the hagiographer’s principal purpose of writing about the lives of saints is to attain their *satsaṅga*¹¹⁶. Whilst Rupert Snell acknowledges this function of “retrospective *darśana*”¹¹⁷ to be a part of the narrative agenda of the genre, he refutes the contention that it should represent a primary purpose for hagiographers. Instead, so he maintains, biographers’ claims to this end are as much part of the convention as anything else, “‘Seeking company’ is itself an activity with a specific purpose: it serves to erode the distinction between the puranic and the contemporary”¹¹⁸. This may well be true of devotees who look back to holy men and women of different eras and previous centuries and to whom there can be no living connection. Yet, in the case of the community that grew around Neem Karoli Baba – indeed, with any guru who has existed within what might be termed ‘living memory’ – surely a different situation might be seen to be the case. As will be examined later in Parts Two and Three, a considerable emotional and personal attachment may be evidenced between first-generation devotees and their preceptor. Again as will be developed in these parts, a principal purpose of creating hagiographical offerings for them at least was what they saw to be the maintenance and the honouring of a proximity to their guru. In many ways, the material came as a response to the

¹¹³ Rinehart, 1999, p. 8

¹¹⁴ Bharati, 1976, p. 106

¹¹⁵ Christensen, Dorthe Refslund. “Inventing L. Ron Hubbard: On the Construction and Maintenance of the Hagiographic Mythology of Scientology’s Founder” in Lewis, James R. and Jesper Aargaard Petersen eds. *Controversial New Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 233-4

¹¹⁶ Reported in Snell, 1994, p. 2

¹¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 3

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

preceptor's absence – certainly not despite it. Thus whilst Snell's observation may be accurate for general practice, it is not necessarily true for this satsang. Other functioning features might be at work in the hagiographical creation process but the quest for proximity remains at the forefront throughout.

Snell reports other traditionally acknowledged functions of the genre: as a didactic instrument; to promote the benefits of a spiritual life; to advocate charity; to acknowledge God's grace; to demonstrate the merit of praise; to provide examples of conversion stories; to illustrate the rewards that are earned by pious service and endowment; and to show the efficacy of composing and reciting hagiographical works¹¹⁹. To this collection, Smith considers a number of additional purposes of the format that are of interest. The first of these is the creation of lineage, an establishment of which not only legitimises the spiritual authority of the holy person in question but also, in turn, their community. Indeed, so he observes in detail, hagiographic conventions seek to link saints and teachers in a "line of pupillary succession which was seen as extending uninterruptedly backwards to the time when the first of the human teachers of the sect was taught by the deity himself"¹²⁰. Even when no direct 'evidence' for this may be found, links are established if at all possible. For example, Tulsīdās (who is clearly positioned by the Neem Karoli Baba community as representing a spiritual forefather of the guru) may be seen to be linked through his own guru Naraharidās, to his guru before him, Anantānanda, and onwards back in a direct line to Rāmānanda. Rāmānanda has been associated with Kabīr through an association within the same *paramparā*. Various hagiographers have placed alternatively three, twelve, thirteen or nineteen teachers between Rāmānanda back to Rāmānuja, the founder of the *Śrīvaiṣṇava* sect¹²¹. The Neem Karoli Baba satsang do not make explicit any links prior to Tulsīdās – except to Hanumān, of course – but here, as much as in the context of any other conventional community, the observance of lineage is significant. It locates their peripatetic guru, whose own *paramparā* (if he even had one) remains unknown, within a wider theological and historical setting. In the concretisation of such lofty connections, the status of the satsang is concurrently enhanced and the ongoing religious movement receives the justification it desires.

A further traditional function that Smith observes is the hagiographic demonstration of a saint's or a sect's superiority¹²². In her studies of Jaina monastic lineages, Phyllis Granhoff has reported that each of these *gacchas*, "commissioned biographies of the saints associated with

¹¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 2

¹²⁰ Smith, 2000, p. 16

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² Snell, 1994, p. 5

them in order to demonstrate to the laity that it was they and not their rivals who were the faithful custodians of the Jaina teaching”¹²³. To a similar promotional end, holy persons could be associated with certain sacred places, temples or images through appropriate representation within this medium¹²⁴. There are two further principal purposes of hagiography that Smith identifies. The first is what he describes as being its homiletic role: “The saint is an exemplar and the events of his life are selected, manipulated or invented in order to illustrate devotion in action and provide the faithful a model to emulate”¹²⁵. The second function rests less with the protagonists within the stories themselves and more in the hagiographic ability to suggest to devotees how to live their lives¹²⁶.

It is clearly arguable that different religious communities should have differing needs in relation to hagiography and that this should determine a difference in the functioning of their particular canon. Chronological distance between followers (or the observers of them) and the leader would have a significant impact. In the study of living saints, Charles S.J. White considers it necessary to observe a saint’s behaviour first hand, in order to clarify the biographical details and to investigate this person’s religious activities¹²⁷. If a holy person is still living, much of the direct hagiographical commentary upon him or her may well contain at least fragments of this information even if it is embedded in more thematic commentary. At the same time, if the hagiographical canon is being amassed and formulated even while the subject remains ‘in the body’, how active or passive the guru appears to be about the process is significant. It could be held to represent a calculated moulding or legitimising process by the religious institution and / or by the holy man or woman at its centre. Christensen certainly sees the hagiographic material promoted through the Church of Scientology during L. Ron Hubbard’s lifetime to be directly issued by the founder for the specific purpose of the creation and maintenance of his own mythology¹²⁸.

A further example of a guru who is aware (at the very least) of the hagiographical construction about her is Mata Amritananadamayi Ma. Currently, on her enormous world *darśana* tours, it is possible to purchase a variety of hagiographical literature and iconographic representations of Amma. Portraits are available that show her as if rising from the cosmic flames with the symbols of the *cakras* superimposed over her white-clad body. More than this, dress-up dolls of the guru are on sale so that followers may ‘care’ for her and clothe her in a variety of

¹²³ Reported in Smith, 2000, p. 17. Also in Snell, 1994, pp. 5-6

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *ibid.* p. 18

¹²⁷ White, 1972, p. 863

¹²⁸ See Christensen, 2005, pp. 227ff

(separately available) outfits and garments. The official purpose of the spiritual money-making bazaars at these events is purportedly the raising of funds for Amma's many humanitarian projects. That this is on behalf of an obviously worthy cause is beside the point: whether passively or otherwise, Amritananadamayi Ma has been party to the creation of her own hagiography. How she, or any other guru, can remain entirely removed – and therefore motivationally pure – from the vast industry that has been built up around her is difficult to say. As Bharati speculates, "The question now arises why the mystic should want to be the center of the legend, the subject of the hagiography?"¹²⁹

Such a situation is not to be evidenced concerning Neem Karoli Baba who did not permit the creation of hagiography relating to him during the course of his lifetime. Bharati describes the hagiography of Ramana Maharshi as having "been steadily augmented since his death"¹³⁰. In the case of our principal protagonist one might also add 'solely' since his death. The hagiographers of Neem Karoli Baba maintain that he actively avoided publicity, did not teach at large spiritual gatherings (indeed to more than a few people concurrently), forbade his followers from publishing his name whilst he was still alive¹³¹ or from disseminating stories about him, and was better known for sending aspirants *away* than for encouraging them to come to him¹³². One could speculate from this behaviour that he was at least partially aware of the mythologising (conceivably de-humanising) nature of hagiography. Possibly he tried not to involve himself or his followers in it for the purpose of maintaining motivational purity in his dealings with his *celās*. As an alternate view altogether, maybe he saw that the greatest way of adding to the aura of mystery was to act in this elusive way that would, ultimately, only increase curiosity in him further. Without any 'proof' of his inner feelings on the matter, his opinions on the function of his own hagiography may not be known. That almost nothing emerged in this vein about him until five years after his death is interesting nonetheless.

Before we turn to closer analysis of the material relating to Neem Karoli Baba, a final aspect of the genre is presented for consideration: the thematic content that appears to find near identical replication in the biographies of so many traditional and modern holy persons in

¹²⁹ Bharati, 1976, p. 106

¹³⁰ *ibid.* p. 110

¹³¹ Whilst he gave his direct *āśīrvāda* for Ram Dass to write and publish *Be Here Now*, Neem Karoli Baba forbade him to disclose his name or whereabouts whilst he was still alive. See 3.V.iii

¹³² Devotee Dada Mukerjee – maintaining that any information that one would glean from him entirely, "depended on Babaji"¹³² – remembers how the guru would sometimes berate followers who shared miraculous tales of him with each other, "Whenever such a person would come and try to tell stories, Babaji would say, 'If you talk about me, I shall go away.'" (Mukerjee, 2001, p. 23) Mukerjee then describes the guru sending a devotee on an eighty mile round trip back to his house to gather up all the stories that he had collected and written down about him. When the devotee returned that same night, Neem Karoli Baba ordered that the papers be torn up and thrown in the fire.

India. A number of scholars have noted thematic prevalences within hagiography and sacred biography¹³³. Rinehart considers the sources of commonly found themes potentially to stem from a number of traditional materials including the lives of the gods and goddesses as well as the charted biographies of other saints¹³⁴. She acknowledges, however, that attempting to locate these sources with more precision proves problematic in that it “often hypothesize[s] a common source for life patterns and motifs (e.g. the collective unconscious, the storehouse of folk memories)... that cannot be conclusively characterized or proven”¹³⁵. Moreover, she continues, this approach can detract attention away from the individual hagiographer and the specific context in which he or she is writing¹³⁶. Ultimately, the themes must stand on their own – the questions of where they have come from and their commonality across the genre and between individual subjects must remain unanswerable.

In his study of patterning across traditional North Indian hagiography, Smith observes a number of recurrent themes that he feels are obligatory to the genre:

...stories which illustrate incompetence of the saint in worldly affairs, his indifference to money and his fearlessness in the face of bandits and wild beasts; saints were expected to perform miracles, convert heretics and mockers, confound critical Brahmans and receive visits from deferential emperors. The end result of these processes is a portrait of a saint, but one without very much individuality. Saints tend to be cast in the same mold: they possess identical virtues, lack vices and perform similar exemplary deeds¹³⁷.

It is clear from this list that, emperors apart, these thematic considerations appear within the hagiography relating to Neem Karoli Baba. As he is reported to have given darshan to a number of prominent visitors – including Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of Independent India in 1947 – it is conceivable that the matter of the emperor’s visit is included also. Snell too notes a number of hagiographic predilections:

Of the many connections between them [hagiographical traditions], the formulae through which the narratives are told are particularly evident: miracle stories (including miraculous births...), dream interventions, precocious erudition, conquests in debate with established scholars, conversions, adventurous journeys, credence-stretching longevity, formulaic sacred numbers and other such themes

¹³³ See Rinehart, 1999, pp. 8-9

¹³⁴ *ibid.* pp. 9-10 Rinehart also comments that the situation within the Hindu tradition is more complex than that within the Christian context in which hagiographical modelling is based upon the acts of Jesus or other biblical sources.

¹³⁵ *ibid.* p. 9

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Smith, 2000, p. 15

occur time and time again, inviting recourse to a system of motif classification such as is applied to folk narrative and oral epic¹³⁸.

Again, the material relating to Neem Karoli Baba appears to abide by the convention rather closely. Where matters do differ however is in the issue of the physical presentation of this holy man. Smith remarks upon the lack of personal description of traditional saintly figures commenting upon the general absence of physical individuation or information as to “whether a saint was short or tall, fat or thin, bearded or clean shaven”¹³⁹. Here we find ourselves at last in direct contrast to the hagiography relating to Neem Karoli Baba. Again and again, the sources delight in painting the guru in terms of his physicality and (admittedly sometimes changing) appearance. He was said to be the possessor of *anima siddhi*, and had a fondness for shape shifting. With such an unusual gift, maybe it is unsurprising that its depiction finds inclusion in the narratives with some regularity. Moreover, devotees describe their points of conversion as being ‘pulled under his blanket’. This rhetorical device positions how he looked and what he wore very much in the forefront of the minds (and thereby hearts?) of his followers.

It is conceivable that the discrepancy between convention and contemporary practice in relation to this guru could be attributed to the era in which these biographical and experiential materials have been composed. Our modern filmic times are undoubtedly more concerned with how things ‘look’ than those of the traditional sources with which Smith is concerned. Yet it marks a departure from convention that is interesting nonetheless. With this in mind, we proceed to closer examination of some of the hagiographical material of this guru and consider the role of authorial and editorial motivation and responsibility.

1.IV.iv Further Thoughts on the Hagiography of Neem Karoli Baba

*In many cases ‘lives’ can be generated only through the musings and recollections of somebody else – the chronicler and the poet, the biographer and the bureaucrat, the oral historian and the anthropologist... Even when presented in written and published form, the... life of an individual is still capable of multiple interpretations and appropriations*¹⁴⁰.

*What I want to suggest is that biography... is essentially, and by its very origins, disreputable*¹⁴¹.

¹³⁸ Snell, 1994, p. 12

¹³⁹ Smith, 2000, p. 15

¹⁴⁰ Arnold and Blackburn eds. 1997, p. 12

¹⁴¹ Holmes, Richard. “Biography: Inventing the Truth” in Batchelor, John ed. *The Art of Literary Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 15

Other than *Be Here Now*, published by Ram Dass in 1971, the hagiography of the Neem Karoli Baba community only began to come to public light in 1979, some six years after the guru died, and then not again until 1983. The reason for the rather slow start is interesting and not entirely clear. After the shock of the preceptor's passing, it is conceivable that most devotees lost the heart to celebrate the holy man's life and teachings in the way that may be seen in the narratives that finally emerged. Equally possible is that, in the years immediately succeeding his death, the community was more concerned with matters of succession and the continuity of their own existence and so thought less about the public portrayal of the man. A third option might be that, with the passing of some years, satsang members observed a dwindling of connections between the wider community and felt moved to re-establish the sense of spiritual kinship that comes from sharing a guru. A fourth proposal is that, again with the passing of time and the natural falling away of a proportion of former community members that surely occurs in the years following any acknowledged charismatic person's death, hagiographical expositions were seen to have the power of conversion. Thus the material was to assume the responsibility for the renewal of interest that is necessary for the survival of a religious group. A final (maybe simpler) proposition is that, with devotees scattered across India and the West, the early gathering of materials for the purpose of hagiographical compilation proved lengthy and time-consuming. In defence of the last, Ram Dass has commented that it took five years to prepare *Miracle of Love*, the first edition of which appeared in 1979¹⁴².

Of the hagiographical texts that have now been published about this preceptor – from 1979 to the most recent offering in 2010 – interesting developments may be seen to have emerged in terms of the critical positioning of the guru as the focal point of the text and, in turn, the prominence (or otherwise) of the authorial voice. Speaking here in the broadest terms, the earliest publications presented the 'collective voice' of the community rather than that of the individual person within it. Many contributors offer memories that are presented anonymously or at least as part of the communal experience within the metanarrative of the wider satsang. One function of this could be seen to tie the individual to his or her spiritual community; a second purpose might be that these stories offer a sense of continuity that supersedes issues of time. In examining the functions of similar personal narratives, Valerie Hardcastle has observed that this aspect is significant: "It allows us both to understand ourselves and to experience ourselves as a dynamic entity that is unified from the past and into the future"¹⁴³.

¹⁴² Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. xxi

¹⁴³ Hardcastle, Valerie Gray. *Constructing the Self*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008, pp. 48-49

Before analysing the first two of these texts in greater depth it is of interest to consider the two most recent publications on the guru. The authorial stance that these works occupy might be seen to be in contrast to that described immediately above. In place of the ‘hidden’ or ‘embedded’ contributor, two individual devotees Rabboo Joshi (2009) and Krishna Das (2010) offer their own personal stories through their own eyes in a manner that Genette would describe as being homodiegetic¹⁴⁴. Neem Karoli Baba continues to be positioned as a principal protagonist in both publications but the focal subject becomes that of the author as he steps forward to take centre stage¹⁴⁵. Indeed in Krishna Das’ memoirs, he rarely mentions any other people by their names at all. The entire book is about his own life story, including the time he spent with his guru and how he adapted to his loss in the years following Neem Karoli Baba’s death. Released by an influential Western publishing house (that specialises in New Age material) and accompanied by a CD recording of Krishna Das’ own kirtan, the purpose of *Chants of a Lifetime. Searching for a Heart of Gold* may justifiably be seen to be as much about the forwarding of this well-known singer’s career as it is an honouring of his relationship with his guru. Not that the two elements are necessarily incompatible, of course. The purpose of Joshi’s material is altogether simpler. Self-published and available only through the temples connected with Neem Karoli Baba, this text has been written for his fellow devotees – not his ‘fans’. The dedication page of *I and My Father are One. The Grand Unification* acknowledges that its purpose is to “describe the indescribable”¹⁴⁶ and that it is offered to believers and non-believers alike.

We return to appraisal of the first texts to emerge: *Miracle of Love: Stories About Neem Karoli Baba* (1979) and *Alokik Yatharta* (1983), which arguably continue to represent the two most significant texts of this community. They both remain in circulation from the temples associated with the guru and are both referred to with regularity in Parts Two and Three. Material for *Miracle of Love* was “culled from over two thousand stories about Maharajji”¹⁴⁷ via an oral history route. The recordings were later transcribed before being edited and organised thematically under clear headings such as “About Truth”, “About Money”, “Sadhana”, “Hanuman” and so on. In each chapter, after an explicatory editorial introduction

¹⁴⁴ Fludernik, Monica. *An Introduction to Narratology*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 31

¹⁴⁵ Houtmann notes that, “This shift in the toward the author, which Foucault dubbed the ‘author’ function, would appear to have marked a change in Western biography... In other words, here the distinction between biography and autobiography was less the result of an increased interest in the individual subject than in the author who wrote it.” This might be seen to be applicable here. Houtmann, G. “The Biography of Master U Ba Khin” in Schober, Juliane ed. *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997, p. 327

¹⁴⁶ Joshi, Rabboo. *I and My Father are One. The Grand Unification*. New Delhi: Rabindra Kumar Joshi, 2009, unnumbered page

¹⁴⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. xxi

of the theme concerned that serves to frame the following narratives¹⁴⁸, the only true subject is Neem Karoli Baba. Thus, whilst the material stems from a considerable number of sources and includes personal life stories, reminiscences and autobiographical ‘turning points’¹⁴⁹ from a great number of contributors, the (sometimes very) short to medium length inclusions remain anonymous throughout. The initial devotee’s gender, age, nationality or status within the community is never revealed¹⁵⁰. The only narrative voice that is highlighted as being in any way different is found in the selections from Ram Dass – at least the ones that he chooses to identify as being his – that are followed by his initials in parentheses. Ram Dass’ editorial motivations and functions will be evaluated more closely shortly. For now the principal consideration is that the individual voice is subsumed by the authority (and contiguity) of the collective that, “present the life of the individual in active conjunction with the lives of others”¹⁵¹. Hardcastle has commented that, “any sort of communal sharing increases the emotional impact”¹⁵². This may well be the case here too but a plausible purpose of presenting the material in this anonymous fashion must surely be to keep all the reader’s focus upon the guru. The individual devotees, meanwhile, remain hidden to a greater extent in the background.

How Neem Karoli Baba is positioned in *Alokik Yatharta* (1983) – later translated from the Hindi into English as *The Divine Reality of Sri Baba Neeb Karori Ji Maharaj* in 2003 and again in 2005 – is similar to how he is portrayed in *Miracle of Love* and yet a development is observable. The primary source material for this text has once more been collected through the process of interviewing hundreds of devotees. Where the interviews for *Miracle of Love* were conducted as something of a group project, of which Ram Dass was the acknowledged compiler, the materials necessary for this text were acquired solely by the efforts of its author, Ravi Prakash Pande¹⁵³. After an opening section that focuses on the guru’s biography, on his ‘divine nature’ and on what Pande tellingly describes as his ‘durbar’ (his court), the text is again arranged thematically. On this occasion, however, the subheadings are more substantial than those of *Miracle of Love*. They include lengthy sections under the titles “Omniscience”,

¹⁴⁸ For more on how narratives are framed in this way, see Fludernik, 2009, p. 48

¹⁴⁹ See Bruner, Jerome. “The ‘remembered’ self” in Neisser, Ulric and Robyn Fivush eds. *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 50

¹⁵⁰ With some knowledge of the community, however, it is possible to identify a number of individual devotees’ stories through their content. Similarly, in a pre-publication working copy of *Miracle of Love*, certain stories exist that do not subsequently appear in the first edition. As before, they are unattributed; yet, as Ram Dass’ long time secretary, Marlene Roeder, notes of a “strange, rambling musing I can’t quite figure out”, she recognises Ram Dass: “it sounds like Ram Dass sitting with Maharajji while on acid, and recording his fast-flowing passing thoughts.” (Marlene Roeder, *Email Correspondence*, 22 September 2010)

¹⁵¹ Arnold and Blackburn eds. 1997, p. 20

¹⁵² Hardcastle, 2008, p. 64

¹⁵³ See “Editors’ Note”, Pande, 2005, no page number given

“Omnipresence” and “Omnipotence”. The reader is left in no doubt as to the supposedly elevated nature, even avatarial function, of this guru.

As before, Neem Karoli Baba remains the focus of (and the reason behind) every story that finds inclusion in the collection. In *The Divine Reality*, however, a great many of the contributors are named and dates, locations and details are likewise provided in a manner that is not seen in *Miracle of Love*. Arnold and Blackburn note that one of the possibilities of working with Indian life histories is that it sheds fresh light on how we might view and analyse Indian society¹⁵⁴. The practical information that finds inclusion in this slightly later publication certainly offers some insight into the cultural framework in which these narratives have been offered and are located. Whilst the guru remains entirely at the fore, the devotional voice is revealed in a manner not previously employed. Moreover, this tack lends an aura of enhanced reliability to the text. Conceivably, this was one of the intentions behind such a narrative ploy. By providing us with the names of those to whom these extraordinary events are supposed to have occurred, Pande finds a way in which to “straddle the elusive divide between personal narrative and objective truth”¹⁵⁵.

Whether Ram Dass’ or Pande’s respective nationalities and / or professional status influenced (either consciously or otherwise) these two publications makes for interesting speculation. To be accountable for the handling and presenting of so many other people’s cherished memories brings with it considerable responsibility. It makes one wonder for whom these books were published and how each man must have felt during the process of collation and preparation for the public arena? That Ram Dass wrote in English and Pande in Hindi would suggest that their imagined audiences were also those who communicated in those languages. It is irrefutable that Ram Dass would have a found an English-speaking Indian audience for *Miracle of Love* amongst the devotees of Neem Karoli Baba and amongst those interested in the mechanics of the guru-disciple phenomenon. Whether Pande was writing for anyone other than native Hindi speakers is doubtful. Certainly, his text would not have been intended for the international market in the way in which *Miracle of Love* – first published in New York by a mainstream Western publisher – would have been.

At the time of this last text’s first release, Ram Dass was becoming ever more established as a spiritual teacher figure in his own right. Perhaps then it was with sales figures in mind that the E.P. Dutton publishing house chose to determine that *Miracle of Love* was ‘by’ Ram Dass and not as being ‘compiled by’ him, as the subsequent Indian editions have stated. Published in the

¹⁵⁴ Arnold and Blackburn eds. 1997, p. 3

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 4

West – and similarly to the very recent situation with Krishna Das discussed directly above – one would imagine that the target market was also for the West and was aimed at precisely the demographic of Ram Dass’ usual audience: young, alternative, subscribers to the American ‘counterculture’ of the mid to late 1960s onwards. This was not a conventional Western biographical readership. As Robbins has commented, one “dimension of the countercultural ferment”¹⁵⁶ was an increase in interest in Hindu and Buddhist mysticism; a further aspect “centred around the use and mystique of psychedelic drugs”¹⁵⁷. At the centre of this emerging scene were “psychedelic popularizers, psychologists Richard Alpert and Timothy Leary [who] linked psychedelic experiences to Hindu-Buddhist symbols; indeed, Dr Alpert was eventually apotheosized as the Guru, Baba Ram Dass”¹⁵⁸. Whether Ram Dass saw himself as the guru is a moot point to which we shall return in 3.V.ix. That others might have seen him in the role as Robbins paints him to be is a clear possibility. Certainly his name upon the front cover of *Miracle of Love* would have served as an attractor to a whole level of readership that Neem Karoli Baba would otherwise not have had in 1979 America. It would also have added an additional level of editorial responsibility for the man.

Quite how this text was originally received is not known. What is nevertheless revealing is that, after this first (and only) American edition, *Miracle of Love* went through a process of selective re-editing. Presumably this was either in response to its earlier readers – whether in America or in India – or came about through the call of Ram Dass’ own conscience. Whichever the case, *Miracle of Love* was subsequently removed from its secular Western publishing house, printed in India and its copyright and publishing rights lodged with the Sri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir and Ashram – Neem Karoli Baba’s principal temple site in the Nainital region. In effect, the text was ‘brought home’. Between the American edition and the first Indian edition, Ram Dass saw fit to remove a single rather controversial story showing the guru engaging in sexually-oriented activity with a female devotee, one suspects a Western woman. This initially formed a short chapter tellingly called ‘Krishna Play’. In the latest edition of *Miracle of Love* (2005), it is interesting that the entire chapter has been excised. The photographs that were previously at the rear of the text have been moved forward to take its place¹⁵⁹. What might be perceived as salacious content is not the issue at this juncture¹⁶⁰ so

¹⁵⁶ Robbins, Thomas. *Cults, Converts and Charisma*. London: SAGE Publications, 1988, p. 2

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ This is with the addition of a single photograph at the start of the selection. This picture shows the guru seated, wearing a white *kurta* and a knitted woollen hat. Looking downwards to the right and smiling, he is reaching up with his left hand to scratch or hold his head. The choice of this particular photograph is interesting. It portrays the holy man in a rather humble light. Whether this has been a conscious inclusion is unknown.

¹⁶⁰ For further discussion of this guru’s sexual interactions, see 3.III.i (pp. 182-183).

much as the fact that, upon reflection, Ram Dass felt it apposite to remove it from the collection. He thus exercised his editorial right to filter that material within his control. Across the hagiographical corpus, the sources that remain for consultation are now entirely positive of its subject: no mention is made elsewhere of any potential 'scandal'. The question thereby arises as to whether this was because devotees only ever had entirely positive experiences with their preceptor (sexual activity included) or because the image of Neem Karoli Baba has subsequently been sanitised over the years and the truth of the situation manipulated to the point that the understanding of who Neem Karoli Baba truly was must remain further out of reach.

Whilst this might appear as disappointment at Ram Dass's actions, the fact that he felt the need to protect his guru's reputation after his death is understandable. At least, it is defensible. In the story that he initially removes, the woman has a rather reluctant sexual encounter with the guru, following which she is violently sick for three days. Yet, over the course of the coming two years she continues to engage with the guru in this intimate way. Ram Dass was aware that this particular woman felt herself positively transformed by the interaction ("It was a beautiful transformation"¹⁶¹) and that she remained a devotee long past the guru's death. Moreover, with his 'experience-near' awareness of the sometimes unconventional nature of spiritual transmission (that must precede any transformation), the extreme purgative physical response that she undergoes following the guru's opening advances would undoubtedly also have carried some potential salvific significance for Ram Dass. At the same time, however, he would have been further aware that, for most experience-distant readers (without either his personal acquaintance of this particular devotee or of the wilder workings of the *bhakti* guru traditions), the lack of contextual awareness could give rise to a further and perhaps insurmountable barrier between audience and subject matter. The fact that many readers (in particular Western) would be coming to *Miracle of Love* as a result of having read one of his books or heard one of his lectures would undoubtedly have added to the sense of responsibility in this respect. The fact that, in later editions, *Miracle of Love* was directly accountable to the saint's own temple – and under the auspices of his most respectable female successor, Siddhi Ma – could also have led to the American's re-thinking of the original 1970s content. As Arnold and Blackburn write, "like the more formal texts of the historian or the literary scholar, modes of self-representation also have their cultural models and their self-imposed or authorial silences and omissions"¹⁶². Whatever the complex workings of his motivation might have

¹⁶¹ Ram Dass. *Miracle of Love: Stories about Neem Karoli Baba*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979, pp. 292-293

¹⁶² Arnold and Blackburn eds. 1997, p. 10

been, Ram Dass removed the story (ultimately the entire chapter) and, in doing so, the issue from any future potential reader distortion or discussion¹⁶³.

In comparison, it may be appreciated that Pande had a clearer remit for his work. Also published in association with the Sri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir and Ashram, *The Divine Reality* makes no illusion about being anything other than an ‘official’ authorised telling of the legend of this saint. There are no stories that could be considered scandalous in any way and no hints of the mishandling of authority between guru and his subjects. The ‘tellability’ factor that Hardcastle refers to in *Constructing the Self* that determines whether an event or experience becomes a ‘functional unit’ within a wider (self-)narrative¹⁶⁴ is evident in the stories of *The Divine Reality*, just as it is in *Miracle of Love* – or, indeed, any of the subsequent hagiographical expositions relating to this guru. As elsewhere within the canon, mundane events do not feature in this material to the extent that the extra-ordinary becomes the norm. Accordingly, the life stories and interactive experiences of the devotees featured here might be seen to resemble parables, in that they emphasise their links to “the exemplars passed down by culture”¹⁶⁵. In this instance, the culture in question is most certainly that established by the hagiographical tradition.

As so much of this material follows the conventions of its genre, the role of memory – both individual and collective needs be touched upon here at least. Ross and Buehler note that “such context-specific recollections can also be the product of rememberers’ deliberate efforts to tailor recall for their listeners”¹⁶⁶. They consider that narrators offer their stories with the wish to be “comprehensive, relevant, inoffensive and interesting to their audiences”¹⁶⁷. This has understandable connotations for telling stories of a person’s past. In order that the recollection is suitably entertaining or ‘tellable’, rememberers sometimes offer, “embellished or exaggerated accounts of their adventures. In this case, the goal of telling a good story supersedes the goal of providing an accurate account”¹⁶⁸. That the offering of autobiographical memory becomes a process of personal construction more than it does of faithful reconstruction¹⁶⁹ becomes understandable. As discussed above, the sharing of episodic

¹⁶³ This has not quite been the case, however, for Feuerstein also cites this instance in *Holy Madness*. Unfortunately the guru’s unconventional dealings of this nature are all that he truly engages with and in only two pages so, again, a very biased distortion in the representation of Neem Karoli Baba occurs in this text. Feuerstein, 1992, pp. 23-25

¹⁶⁴ See Hardcastle, 2008, p. 38

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.* p. 47

¹⁶⁶ Ross, M. and R. Buehler. “Creative remembering” in Neisser and Fivush eds. 1994, p. 213

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ See Neimeyer, Greg J. and April E. Metzler. “Personal identity and autobiographical recall”, *ibid.* p. 105

memory is one way of creating a sense of identity – both as an individual and as a member of a collective group. In a post-modern approach, therefore, “reality is not so much something against which memories can be checked as something established by those memories themselves”¹⁷⁰.

It is clear that Pande was not embarking upon an international teaching career during the creation of *The Divine Reality*, nor was he writing on the back of a groundbreaking spiritual best seller (as Ram Dass was in the case of *Be Here Now*). Pande writes as a devotee for his fellow devotees. In *The Stories We Are: An Essay in Self-Creation*, W.L. Randall describes his own work not just as “having a story but being a story as well... about self-creation through self-storying”¹⁷¹. The same might be said of Pande’s book. In particular through his presentation of individual personal voices, the reader gets the sense that Pande (like his contributors) is seeking to understand his relationship with the guru through the presentation of it to others. As the mediator of his work, he is, “simultaneously its narrator, protagonist and reader – making it up as we go, so to speak, even authoring ourselves into being”¹⁷².

Having considered the genre of hagiography and the material relating to Neem Karoli Baba at somewhat closer quarters, we proceed with the final chapter of Part One. Offering a framework of tradition 1.V approaches the Rāmāyaṇic lineage that has found discussion already in these pages. 1.V.i provides a brief introduction to what is an enormous tradition and to the first handling of the material, the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. Further attention is given to Tulsīdās and the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, which was the version of the legend most favoured by the guru: 1.V.ii examines this ‘flowering of *bhakti*’ and considers the philosophical positioning of the text as an exposition on the nature of devotion. 1.V.iii observes the rise of the cult of Hanumān, and locates this in particular in relation to the Rāmāyaṇic tradition. 1.V.iv examines what are held to be the chief attributes of the simian deity: firstly in the role of the *śakta* and, secondly, portrayed as the embodiment of the ideal *bhakta*.

¹⁷⁰ Neisser, Ulric. “Self-Narratives: True and false”, *ibid.* p. 2

¹⁷¹ Randall, W.L. *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1995, p. 4

¹⁷² *ibid.*

1.V A Framework of Tradition

1.V.i A Brief Introduction to the Rāmāyaṇic Tradition and the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa

Ram nam karne se sab pura ho jata
[Everything is accomplished by taking the name of Ram]

Neem Karoli Baba¹⁷³

The legend of Rāma, or put more correctly the *Rāma-kathā*, holds a rare place in the canon of world literature in that it has remained consistent in its widespread popularity for over two and a half thousand years. The fact that the material has continued to inspire successive re-workings in a variety of literary forms both scholarly and popular in nature, in multiple Asian languages and – increasingly in contemporary India – in different multimedia formats earns it a special position indeed. Somehow, the Rāma myth has succeeded in capturing the Indian imagination in a way that, possibly with the exception of the *Bhāgavad Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, has not been repeated over the course of recorded history within the Indian subcontinent. Today, over two hundred different literary handlings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* remain in existence. Whilst considerable variation may be seen in matters of format, theme, the prominence and positioning of certain characters over others (including the development of the divinity of their birth), the role(s) of the principal narrative voice(s), and the philosophical orientation of the texts, the central premise remains extant: together with his faithful cohorts, Rāma fights for good over evil and rescues his abducted bride Sītā from the clutches of the demonic *rākṣasa* king, Rāvaṇa. Apart from the traditional Sanskrit, other languages to have been utilised in Rāmāyaṇic composition include Urdu, Gujurati, Malayam, Kannada, Telugu, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Assamese, Japanese, Chinese, Nepalese, Javanese, and Thai¹⁷⁴. In light of the enthusiasm that continues to be displayed towards this legend, it is then not so surprising that the *Rāma-kathā* might have exerted an influence upon Neem Karoli Baba, as his hagiographers purport to be the case.

As acknowledged already, of all the textual handlings, Neem Karoli Baba is said to have favoured the *Rāmācaritamānasa*. Certainly, to this day, this rendering finds both ongoing recitation and discussion in the temples that are associated with him¹⁷⁵. It is with Tulsīdās' sixteenth century devotional version, therefore, that we are most concerned in this study. In the

¹⁷³ Reproduced in Mukerjee, 2001, p. 38

¹⁷⁴ Yardi, M. R. *The Rāmāyaṇa, Its Origin and Growth – A Statistical Study*. Poona: Bhandakar Oriental Research Institute, 1994, pp. 281–286

¹⁷⁵ The *Rāmācaritamānasa* continues to be recited in its entirety at the guru's temples. In Rishikesh for example, in both December 2008 and December 2009, the nine-day recitation (led by a team of eight or nine pandits) was attended by the local community and by devotees from across India and from abroad. It culminated on both occasions with a large public *bhaṇḍārā*, *kīrtana* and prayers. The fifth book of this work, the *Sundara kāṇḍa*, may be recited in a matter of a few hours and plays a regular part in temple activities, often on a weekly basis.

years since its composition, the *Rāmacaritamānasa* has become an exceptionally influential *vaiṣṇava* text that is held both to represent the flowering of *Rāma-bhakti* within the tradition and also as signifying a new prominence in the portrayal of the character Hanumān, of whom many devotees consider Neem Karoli Baba to have been an incarnation and so with whom we are particularly interested here¹⁷⁶. Yet, the roots of this textual lineage stretch back somewhere close to two millennia prior to Tulsīdās with the original Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, still widely held to represent the most significant version of all.

No records today remain of the ancient ballads thought to have illustrated the *Rāma-kathā*, which would take its origins back *past* Vālmīki's initial treatment of the material. As is typical of the nature of the oral tradition, only scraps remain. Scholars have therefore long debated issues of dating, origination and even the setting location of the early handling of the legend. In line with the dictates of tradition that it was composed in the *trētā-yuga*¹⁷⁷, some emic commentators have placed the date of its composition as far back as a million years. Others have been far more conservative, bringing the date as far forwards as the first century C.E.¹⁷⁸. General consensus, however, has concentrated on the five hundred years before the start of the Common Era¹⁷⁹. Concerning its origination, a number of scholars have published their views that the Rāmāyaṇic legend should be seen as having connections with historical fact or events. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, J.C. Oman illustrates this stance¹⁸⁰. Nor is he alone in his theory of historicity. Writing precisely one hundred years later, R.N. Dandekar of the Bhandakar Oriental Research Institute in Poona concurs with Oman when he describes the legend as having grown from a "slender, presumably historical, episode"¹⁸¹. Furthermore, writing in 1999, Shantilal Nagar goes to considerable lengths to establish the historical origins of the *Rāma-kathā*. It is, however, challenging that he chooses to commence his argument with the 'evidence' that, "Rama declared himself to be a human being and the son of Dasaratha, in Yuddhakanda¹⁸² of *Valmiki Ramayana*"¹⁸³.

¹⁷⁶ Of this connection, Lutgendorf remarks that the guru was "a quixotic and highly charismatic sadhu or 'baba', Neem Karoli, whose disciples sometimes experienced him as a literal embodiment of Rama's faithful servant" (Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 271).

¹⁷⁷ Reported in Khan, Benjamin. *The Concept of Dharma in Valmiki Ramayana*. Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1965, p. 16

¹⁷⁸ Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 107

¹⁷⁹ For further information on this debate, see Yardi, 1994, p. 54

¹⁸⁰ Oman, J.C. *The Stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata*. London: George Bell & Son, 1894, p. 8

¹⁸¹ Yardi, 1994, Foreword, p. vi

¹⁸² The sixth of the seven *kāṇḍas* of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*

¹⁸³ Nagar, Shantilal. *Genesis and Evolution of the Rama Katha in Indian Thought, Literature and Culture (from the Earliest Period to the Modern Times)* 3 Volumes. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1999, p. xxvi

Other speculation about the origins of the *Rāma-kathā* stems not from historical events but revolves instead around the potential influences of other pre-existing textual sources. That a Pali Buddhist legend, the *Daśaratha Jātaka*, might have served as the seed of the *Rāma-kathā* has found support from a variety of sources¹⁸⁴ including Dinesh Chandra Sen¹⁸⁵ and early Orientalist A. Weber who also furthers an unlikely suggestion that Homer might have acted as a potential source¹⁸⁶. Jacobi has noted that the roots of the material stretches back to the Vedic stories of the *devas*, a theory that has found supporters from scholars such as S.K. Belvalkar and Romesh Dutta¹⁸⁷.

Finally, on a more explicitly political front, far-fetched speculations have been raised that are supported with little or no evidence. Talboys Wheeler credits the origin of the *Rāma-kathā* as a playing out of political hostilities between high-caste Indian brahminical society and Sri Lankan Buddhists, who are represented by the demon characters of the *rākṣasas*¹⁸⁸. M. Venkata Ratanam goes further still: in his 1934 study, *Rama, the Greatest Pharaoh of Egypt, Volume 1*, he refutes that the *Rāma-kathā* is indigenous to India but instead represents a relation of the exploits of the Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses II and that it was imported through the fireside narrations of merchants and travellers coming from Egypt¹⁸⁹.

Whatever its origination, the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* must be acknowledged as one of the most extensive handlings of the legend. Consisting of nearly twenty-four thousand *ślokas*, there are seven individual *kāṇḍas* (books) of Vālmīki's work. These are composed in poetic form and in Sanskrit. The earliest versions of the text, however, remain in three separate recensions: one that has been found as being active in both the North and the South of India; one from the East; and one from the North-West. These three recensions differ slightly from each other and, accordingly, make it difficult to speak definitively about the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* at all – or, indeed, of Vālmīki either. What does remain consistent throughout all three is the basic structure, as well as the principal thematic content. A further commonality is the fact that the central five *kāṇḍas* – *Ayodhyā*, *Ayaṇaka*, *Kiṣkindhā*, *Sundara* and *Yuddha* – are considered a

¹⁸⁴ Although, as D.C. Sircar speculates in *Problems of the Rāmāyaṇa*, there are doubts amongst scholars as to which text is indebted to which source. He describes the use of the, to his mind, subsequently written *Daśaratha Jātaka* as being, "...one of the instances of the usual distortion of a Brahmanical legend by the non-Brahmanists" (Sircar, D.C. *Problems of the Rāmāyaṇa*. Hyderabad: Govt. of Andhra Pradesh, 1979, p. 5).

¹⁸⁵ Reported in Khan, 1965, p. 15

¹⁸⁶ "In addition to this Buddhist legend, it is beyond question that Valmiki must have had access to other materials for his work... Let me say at once that the rape of Helen and the siege of Troy have served as a model for the corresponding incidents in the poem of Valmiki" (Weber, A. *On the Ramayana*. Bombay: Thaker, Vining & Co., 1873, pp. 13 & 23).

¹⁸⁷ Khan, 1965, p. 15

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.* p. 16

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

compact interior whole that were written by a single hand at some point. That these *kāṇḍas* form such a recognisable unit is very much characterised by the consistent portrayal within them of Rāma as a human being (albeit one of ideal dimensions¹⁹⁰) rather than as a godly figure. What then makes the single *kāṇḍa* lying on either side of this body remarkable is the recognisably later Purāṇic style of the inclusion of legends that depict Rāma far more in the guise of an incarnation of the supreme god Viṣṇu. These two *kāṇḍas* – (*Ādi*¹⁹¹) or *Bāla* and *Uttara* – are considered a later addition, probably dating from the first and third century C.E. respectively¹⁹². The span of Vālmīki’s work, in whichever of the three recensions, is therefore thought to have extended over the best part of five hundred years. Identifying who Vālmīki was is understandably impossible.

In many ways, the principal purpose of the Vālmīki poem could be, and has been, viewed as a detailed exposition on the concept of *dharma*¹⁹³. In a similar manner to how the *Purāṇas* served as moral teaching tales, so this first *Rāmāyaṇa* has functioned through its use of the life of Rāma. Through this text, generations of readers have been provided with traditional guidance in the modelling of righteous, conscious living practices according to Vedic orthodox belief¹⁹⁴. Observance of convention, familial duties, the sublimation of individual will in order to serve society and the practice of strict caste distinction are all given prominent position in Vālmīki’s work. Whilst Rāma’s convoluted succession to the throne takes many thousands of *ślokas* to achieve, he nonetheless proves himself again and again to be the perfect son and heir. This he achieves through his absolute obedience both to his father’s will and to the prescribed dictates of social law and order. Similarly, once the ordeal of recovering his wife and all the battles dependent upon that rescue are over and he is finally established as the true King of Ayodhyā, he nonetheless still adheres first and foremost to what he perceives as being the social obligations dependent upon his noble birth. Indeed, at the Ayodhyān people’s murmuring speculation about Sītā’s chastity (having been held captive for so long by the demon king Rāvaṇa), he goes so far as to cast her off altogether, thereby necessitating her gruesome ‘trial of fire’ and subsequent lonely exile.

As Rāma, as well as his gathered forces, have expended a great deal of time and energy in pursuit of his bride’s rescue over several preceding *kāṇḍas*, the final pages of the Vālmīki

¹⁹⁰ Also referred to as the *purushottoma*, Misra, L.K., *The Dynamics of the Ramayana*. Bihar: Self-Published, 1966, p. 10

¹⁹¹ Meaning first

¹⁹² Babineau, Edmour J. *Love of God and Social Duty in The Rāmcaritmānas*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1979, p. 38

¹⁹³ See Khan’s 1965 study, *The Concept of Dharma in Valmiki Ramayana*

¹⁹⁴ “‘Vedic Orthodoxy’... gives a low place to the love of God and relies heavily on traditional regulations to define behaviour in terms of duty” (Babineau, 1979, p. 23)

Rāmāyaṇa represent an extraordinary, and rather unsatisfactory, conclusion to the preceding saga. Moreover, from a human perspective at least, this late episode in the poem also turns it into something of a tragedy. That unsubstantiated rumours amongst the populace should spur Rāma into such extreme action seems altogether wrong considering all that has gone before. Yet, for Vālmīki, if personal sacrifice is required in order to bow to the authority of social order and tradition, then it is a price that simply needs to be paid.

The character of Rāma is idolised and revered by everyone in Vālmīki's poem. Indeed his portrayal is so dominant within the text that most other characters (including Hanumān) are here seen at best as accessory to the main narrative thrust. As Sastri proposes of the hero, "The man had imposed himself so irrevocably on all that came near him that what he said was law unto everyone, what he decreed was to be obeyed in every particular without question and without demur"¹⁹⁵. The overflowing of personal love and attachment that finds such expression in later handlings of the material, including that of Tulsīdās is not overtly apparent here; instead, relations with him centre on matters of respect and honour. Having said this, and in accord with Vedic orthodox beliefs, Rāma is never allowed to rise to a position of importance that appears greater than the concepts and practices that he so expertly illustrates through his actions. The dictates of the tradition remain the voice of ultimate authority here and not the pull of the human hero, no matter how charismatic he might be portrayed as being. Thus unlike in later handlings of the legend in which the hero is shown to be of divine birth, even as being *parabrahman* itself¹⁹⁶, Rāma is here the perfect human being to whose standards of conduct and righteousness all other incarnated beings should aspire.

¹⁹⁵ Sastri, V.S. Srinivasa. *Lectures on the Rāmāyaṇa*. Madras: Madras Samskrit Academy, 1977, p. 56

¹⁹⁶ For example, in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (composed approximately one hundred years before the *Rāmācaritamānasa*), Rāma is described by the narrator, Śiva, to be, "the Supreme Self, distinct from Prakṛiti. He is the all-comprehending Being, who is pure Bliss itself and the Supreme Spirit over all entities. Having projected this entire universe by His Power, Maya-sakti, He dwells within and without the universe like the element ether. Though He is the resident in all beings, He is completely hidden from their vision, as He is their innermost Self. He is the ultimate Seer and Witness of all this universe of His Maya's creation. Before Him the whole universe whirls as iron filings around a magnet" (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 1.1.17-20).

1.V.ii A Flowering of *Bhakti*: Gosvāmi Tulsīdās and the *Rāmacaritamānasa*

The narrative of Rāma is a lovely wish-yielding gem, and a graceful ornament for saintly wisdom. The hosts of virtues possessed by Śrī Rāma are a blessing to the world and the bestowers of liberation, riches, religious merit and the divine abode.

(RCM 1.31.1)

If the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* might be held to be an exposition on the nature of *dharma* and the sublimation of personal sentiment to the upholding of one's duty, the *Rāmacaritamānasa* ('Holy Lake of the Deeds of Rāma') could be considered to represent the devotional flowering of the *Rāma-kathā* and to illustrate the salvific potential of the love of God – and, by extension, of guru too. Enthusiastically described as being the “most popular and world renowned holy book in India”¹⁹⁷, this text may at the least be seen to be second only to Vālmīki in terms of its contribution to the Rāmāyaṇic tradition and it continues to be acknowledged as one of the principal texts of the Hindu *bhakti* movement in general¹⁹⁸.

Unlike the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, the exact authorship and the dating of this text are not in doubt. Indeed, Tulsīdās even offers the day and location on which he begins his composition, “I commence this story in the Saṃvat year 1631 (1574 A.D.). On Tuesday, the ninth of the lunar month of Caitra, this story shed its luster at Ayodhyā” (RCM 1.33.2). The duration of this process is said to have taken a mere two years and seven months. Whilst removing much of the scholarly speculation necessarily attendant upon evaluation of the earlier poem, the ability to position this text with such accuracy brings with it notably different considerations but different possibilities also. Of these, the foremost is that the potential exists to contextualise the *Rāmacaritamānasa* in a manner that has not previously been possible. This contextualisation may be to compare the text with the other remaining oeuvres of Tulsīdās. Simultaneously, and on a wider scale, it could also be to position the work within and against the socio-political and / or theological dictates of its era. The opportunity that this exercise provides is the ability to establish with considerably greater clarity the contributions of this material both to the Rāmāyaṇic tradition and to the greater *bhakti* tradition.

Again unlike the poet Vālmīki's mysterious identity, Tulsīdās' own origins are easier to trace. This is due to both his own writing, as well as to the commentaries on his life and work that

¹⁹⁷ Prof H.S. Adesh in Vyas, Lallan Prasad ed. *Ramayana – Its Universal Appeal and Global Role*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1992, p. 10

¹⁹⁸ See Tulsīdās, Goswami. (S.P. Bahadur trans.) *Complete Works of Goswami Tulsīdās, Volume I: Ramacharitamānasa*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1994, pp. x–xi

feature in the work of his (near) contemporaries¹⁹⁹. The *Gautamacandrikā* for example, composed by Kṛṣṇa Datta circa 1624 and only relatively recently brought to light, offers a significant amount of biographical information concerning Tulsīdās and his written oeuvre. This includes the reference that Tulsīdās went on an extensive pilgrimage that lasted for over ten years and ended in Banāres where Tulsīdās would spend the remainder of his life and the fact that the poet was born in 1543. Whilst other dates offered for his birth include 1523, 1527 and 1532²⁰⁰, the date of his death finds more agreement and it is generally accepted that Tulsīdās died in Banāres in 1623. As his bequest, he left behind him fourteen works (composed between 1564 and 1616) which have been accepted as authentic by Allchin amongst others. The *Rāmacaritamānasa* stands sixth in the list which, considering its composition date of 1574, demonstrates the prolific nature of the poet's early career. This poem indubitably represents his masterwork and it is primarily on its strength that Tulsīdās is still remembered so fondly in modern times. Writing in 1940, Hazari Prasad Dvivedi summarises Tulsīdās and his contribution:

Tulsī Dās was a poet, devotee, learned reformer, popular leader and creator of the future. Among these features no one is less important than the others. Hence he was able to keep the balance in all directions and to create an epic without peer which till today remains the guide of north India.²⁰¹

Dvivedi refers to the *Rāmacaritamānasa* as an epic in terms of its literary genre but there has been debate amongst scholars as to whether this is really the case or whether it should be regarded primarily as a devotional poem. This is an interesting question that proves revealing. Tulsīdās has chosen as his subject matter an exceptionally well-known epic upon a socio-moral theme that centres on a hero whose primary motivation in life is to abide by the *dharma* and to behave with an impeccable sense of morality and righteousness. In many ways, nothing has drastically altered in the structure of this version: with the exception of changing the name of the sixth *kāṇḍa* from the traditional *Yuddha Kāṇḍa* to the newly titled *Laṅkā Kāṇḍa*, even the dividing of the story remains unaltered from before. With so little apparent change of the traditional Hindu myth, it is then not so surprising that some, such as Ramachandra Shukla, have opted for the epic as the literary form most representative of the *Rāmacaritamānasa*.

However, what should not be overlooked here is the fundamental change of narrative perspective within this poem that irrevocably moves it away from the form of the Vālmīki

¹⁹⁹ For more on the biographical sources relating to Tulsīdās, see Lutgendorf, Philip. "The Quest for the Legendary Tulsīdās" in Callewaert and Snell eds. 1994, pp. 65-85

²⁰⁰ Grierson, G. "Notes on Tulsī Das" *Indian Antiquary* XXII (1893): 264-274

²⁰¹ Tulsī Dās (F.R. Allchin trans.) *The Petition to Rām – Hindi Devotional Hymns of the Seventeenth Century*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966, p.19

Rāmāyaṇa. Indeed, whilst contemporaries such as poet Nābhādās may have been likening him to the *ādi-kavi* Vālmīki²⁰², Tulsīdās sees himself not as a poet but primarily as a *devotee* and this marks a crucial shift in narrative stance. Furthermore, Tulsīdās represents the servile type of devotee known as a *dāsya bhakta*, described by Vivekananda as “servantship [that] comes when a man thinks he is the servant of the Lord. The attachment of the faithful servant unto the master is his ideal”²⁰³. The importance of this lies in that, whilst the basic structure of the material in the *Rāmacaritamānasa* is laid out in a similar fashion to how it was previously, the viewpoint from which it is presented is radically altered and, with that, the entire axis on which the poem turns is also changed.

With this change in perspective, the main theme of the *Rāmacaritamānasa* thus moves away from admiring and learning from the *deeds* of Rāma, to focusing instead on devotion to the *name* of Rāma, to worship of him rather than of his actions. Moreover, as it is presented here, such devotion is not just an ideal to which to aspire but indeed has powers of deliverance in its own right (*RCM* 1.10.3). From the opening invocations to the final conclusion, Tulsīdās calls upon the grace of Rāma, reminding his readers at every opportunity that complete service and devotion to God – here in manifest or *saguna* form – is the definitive goal both in terms of the poem itself as much as in terms of our own lives. In a manner similar to how Neem Karoli Baba’s devotees are called upon to act in relation to their guru, the reader is encouraged to approach the poem through the devotional funnel of the author, whose very individual voice here comes to represent that of the ultimate devotee. Vitally, what results from this strong narrative perspective is the creation of a new subject matter to share centre stage with Rāma: that being the very process of devotion itself. This is pure *bhakti* of course and, as such, indelibly marks the *Rāmacaritamānasa* as a poem with exceptionally strong devotional undercurrents.

From the evidence above, Tulsīdās may be seen to have composed both an epic and a devotional poem, for both elements incontrovertibly exist. Importantly, it is the possibility of a synthesis between the two literary forms that singles out the *Rāmacaritamānasa* as a major development not just in terms of the *Rāma-kathā* but also in wider Indological, even theological, terms. Tulsīdās makes a very important statement when he chooses as the object of his absolute devotion a figure that traditionally represents the very highest social and moral ideals. Unlike the popular character of the god Kṛṣṇa who traditionally encourages his

²⁰² In the *Bhakta Mālā*, Nābhādās (who was a direct contemporary of Tulsīdās) writes: “For the salvation of beings in this perverse Dark Age, Vālmīki has become Tulsī” (Reproduced in Tulsī Dās (F.R. Allchin trans.), 1966, p. 34)

²⁰³ Vivekananda. *Bhakti Yoga: The Yoga of Love and Devotion*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002, p. 102

devotees to lose all sense of moral propriety in their intoxication by him and who was a favourite focal point of much of the contemporary popular *bhakti* movement in general, Rāma represents a far more sober and socially acceptable form of a personal God. In choosing him as the fulcrum of his own work, and in attaching such fervid devotional practices to the traditional epic that accompanies him, Tulsīdās promotes a new form of devotional practice: the essence of *bhakti* is expanded from a heartfelt emotion to include an ethical value also. In this way, the *Rāmacaritamānasa* marks a viable alternative to the *śṛṅgāra bhakti* of the earlier *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that had, by Tulsīdās' time, achieved a following of cult proportions.

There are some further differences that separate Tulsīdās' work from previous versions of the Rāma legend (and from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* too in this respect) in that the traditional use of Sanskrit is abandoned by the poet in favour of the Avadhi Hindi dialect²⁰⁴ common in the Uttar Pradesh region. This seems to represent an important decision in terms of the narrative slant for, in the opening of the *Bāla kāṇḍa*, the author goes to some length to explain that the poem is written in accord with scriptural tradition, despite it not being in Sanskrit. Why Tulsīdās chooses to make such a statement is interesting: it might be assumed from it that, in choosing to write in the vernacular here, he is writing in fact for a different audience, possibly less well-educated, than for whom previous versions of the *Rāma-kathā* were written. And yet, rather than aligning himself with other devotional poets of his time who also wrote in the vernacular and who possibly embraced ways of more radical philosophies such as antinomian theism, Tulsīdās is eager here to emphasise his reliance upon and subservience to scriptural authority. In essence, he seems to attempt to reassure his readers from the outset that he is *following* rather than *breaking* new theological ground. This, in itself, is a deceptively clever narrative technique when one considers the deeper message that is to follow.

Indeed, whilst Tulsīdās continues to offer his assurances to his readership by noting his own personal inadequacy at relaying properly the story of the *Rāma-kathā* (for example, *RCM* 1.9.1-2) he then immediately proceeds to reveal that it is the *name* of Rāma that possesses greater spiritual importance, indeed power, than either the impersonal absolute or also the manifest form in the figure of Rāma himself ("The glory of the Name is thus infinitely greater than that of the Absolute; I shall show below how in my judgement the name is superior even to Śri Rāma" *RCM* 1.23). As Tulsīdās explains, it is only through the utterance of the *name* of Rāma that the *nirguṇa* form is made manifest and thus finally accessible; whilst the *sagūṇa* form can remain physically only limited in his actions until his devotees call upon him by name, at which point he may finally reach them. Allchin comments: "For him [Tulsīdās] all

²⁰⁴ Tulsīdās wrote in both Braj and Avadhi *bhāṣā*, which were the two major forms of Hindi in use during his day. It is worth noting here that Neem Karoli Baba's native tongue was Braj *bhāṣā*.

*sādhana*s are no more than ways leading to the single goal of love for the lotus-feet of the Lord, and the Name is the supreme key”²⁰⁵. As will be seen in Part Three, the very same might be said in relation to the guru with whom we are here concerned. In this manner, at the very least, Neem Karoli Baba may be seen to have been directly inspired by Tulsīdās’ position and by his practice also.

Returning to Tulsīdās, from the Prologue of the first *kāṇḍa*, he announces his intention to dismiss the long held theological debate over the importance of choosing either a *nirguṇa* or *saguṇa* Rāma. Instead he proclaims the *name* of Rāma – a synonym here for the word ‘love’ as Allchin’s comment above points to also – as the superior object for our worship and attention. Interestingly, for the greater part of the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, the hero takes the form of *saguṇa* Rāma. Tulsīdās’ devotion to the ‘name’ is abiding, as is amply illustrated in the devotional hymns to Rām, the *Vinaya-Patrikā*, written later in his life. In these petitions he utters over and over his allegiance to the name, for example, “My vow of love for the Name of Rām is my unswerving treasure”²⁰⁶ and “In Rām’s Name alone be your understanding, in Rām’s Name alone your devotion”²⁰⁷. The point of Tulsīdās’ opening comments upon the *nirguṇa - saguṇa* debate seems to be to establish himself as an independent thinker motivated more by devotion than by philosophical consistency. Furthermore, through his stance on the importance of the role of love – in the guise of the name – the role and practice of devotion, *bhakti*, takes centre stage in the story alongside Rāma himself and from the outset.

Tulsīdās’ promotion of the role of *bhakti* in the *Rāmacaritamānasa* is further emphasised by his employment of florid description and free use of metaphors and simile in accessible and popular forms of poetic metre. As mentioned above, what is clear is that Tulsīdās’ projected audience was not the highbrow Sanskrit readers of previous versions, but much more the everyday man. Throughout the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, Tulsīdās’ writes in a most egalitarian fashion *as* a meek devotee *for* the devotee using the literary stance *of* the devotee and, through such a perspective, is thus able to introduce a great deal of instructional material as to the preferable ways in which such devotees should lead their lives. Far from the antinomian theistic stream of philosophy adopted by writers such as Kabīr that wished to do away with social dictates and distinctions²⁰⁸, in this work Tulsīdās positively encourages his readers /

²⁰⁵ Tulsī Dās (F.R. Allchin trans.), 1966, p. 62

²⁰⁶ *ibid.* Hymn 254, p. 248

²⁰⁷ *ibid.* Hymn 184, p. 206

²⁰⁸ It should be noted that this is not entirely true of Tulsī’s later handling of the material from the Rāma legend. In a late section of the *Kavitāvalī*, the poet paints a dark picture of the current *Kali-yuga*. In this, he promotes the name of Rām as the only salvific hope in a world now devoid of the “holy law of the castes” (VII.84). In this bleak landscape, so says Tulsī, “I have no caste or family, I desire of none caste or family” (VII.107).

fellow-devotees to abide by such rules: to observe caste distinctions (interestingly in this version, Hanumān, who after all is portrayed as being the *perfect* devotee, is represented as being low born and especially humble towards his master); to acknowledge the importance of the family unit and the duties of the eldest son; for women to know their particular roles in life; and for the authoritative position of the guru (here idealised by Tulsīdās in the form of Rāma as well as finding representation in other acknowledged 'guru' characters in the poem) to be venerated above all.

What sets this handling further apart from the previous workings, though, is that all of this, whilst representing an instructional map to conscious socially ordered living, *also* represents a map to personal liberation. This is achieved through the salvific quality of love, of service and of surrender to the divine and to divine will (as will be seen, these paths may be seen to find replication amongst the Neem Karoli Baba community). Again, this map is not prescribed to its readers by a self-acknowledged spiritual superior but rather by a 'spiritual friend'. Tulsīdās' own conscious self-effacement and ever-effusive style of delivery creates a work of enticing and encouraging accessibility, hitherto not found in the *Rāma-kathā*. Having considered these two texts of the tradition, we proceed to consideration of Hanumān who, by the time of Tulsīdās, was known to be the dearest and most loyal of Rāma's devotees and who many followers of Neem Karoli Baba see him to have been an incarnation of. 1.V.iii considers his originations as a folk deity and how his popularity grew to make him the foremost proponent of *Rāma-bhakti*. 1.V.iv appraises some of his characteristics both as a *śakta* and as *bhakta* also.

1.V.iii The Rise of the Cult of Hanumān

Hanuman is characterized as a wise and rascally monkey whose joy is found in serving Ram. He is so close to Ram, serving him so intimately, that he is known as the 'breath of Ram'.

Ram Dass²⁰⁹

Who is this monkey Hanuman? Rama let him loose in the world. He knows Rama and Rama knows him.

William Buck²¹⁰

Hanumān is now recognised as being such an integral part of the Rāmāyaṇic lineage that it is easy to overlook the fact of his existence prior even to the creation of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. Nor has the inclusion of Hanumān within this initial Rāmāyaṇic composition generated an

²⁰⁹ Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush, 1992, p. 55

²¹⁰ Buck, William. *Ramayana*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2000, p. 427. Also reproduced in Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 356

exclusivity for him with the legend. So popular has this character become in India that he has found his way into many texts and scriptures not directly associated with the Rāmāyaṇic tradition at all. It is widely concurred that the figure of Hanumān was of *yakṣa* and therefore non-Aryan origination. As early folk gods of Hindu mythology, *yakṣas* were immortal nature spirits that were often originally worshipped either in the form of a lump of clay or a mound of earth, both of which methods have found representation in the worship of Hanumān over the centuries. This theory of Hanumān’s origination from a folk god source is a rational one and a premise that, as mentioned above, has found widespread support amongst scholars including Ludvik²¹¹, R.N. Misra, J.N. Banerjee, Joginder Narula and V.S. Aggarwal. Unsurprisingly, considering the circumstances of the distance of time and the prevalence of orally transmitted customs within very early Indian spiritual culture, no records as such remain that directly link Hanumān with the *yakṣa* folk culture.

The earliest recorded *potential* textual incidences of the figure of a “proto-Hanuman”²¹² come from a small number of references in the hymns of the *Rgveda*²¹³ from within the *śruti* canon²¹⁴. Without a doubt, however, the overwhelming majority of inclusions of Hanumān are to be found in later works and from the extensive *smṛti* Purāṇic tradition. There are many inclusions of the figure of Hanumān within this material, in particular ones that associate him with the gods, Śiva, Rudra (an early form of Śiva) and Vāyu (god of the wind). Considering his prominence within the collection, it is interesting that he does not have a Purāṇic work dedicated to him alone. A probable reason for this omission is that, as a deity of a somewhat questionable descent – being conceived through the coupling of a god and an *apsarā*, or celestial nature spirit – he becomes a god of the minor pantheon and so there is no obvious place for him within the Purāṇic lineage. This notwithstanding, Hanumān still features in a considerable amount of Purāṇic material including: *Nara Singh Purāṇa* (c. 400-500 C.E.) in which both Hanumān’s character as well as the nature of his divine birth are discussed; *Viṣṇudharmotra Purāṇa* (c. 500-800 C.E.) in which Hanumān is synonymously associated with the white bull Nandī, the mount of Śiva; *Bhavisya Purāṇa* (c. 700 C.E.) in which Hanumān is seen as being *Rudrāvatāra* and also, for the first time in Purāṇic material, explicitly as Rāma’s devotee; *Skanda Purāṇa* (c. 800 C.E.) in which Hanumān is seen as being *Rudrāvatāra*; *Nārada Purāṇa* (c. 800-1000 C.E.) in which Hanumān’s character is discussed as well as the fact that he is considered to be an incarnation of Śiva, furthermore that he

²¹¹ See Ludvik, Catherine. *Hanuman in the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki and the Rāmācaritamānasa of Tulsī Dāsa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1997, p. 4

²¹² Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 39

²¹³ Nagar, 1999, p. 32

²¹⁴ Philip Lutgendorf describes these inclusions as, “a double coup, since this is the venerated *ur*-text of both the Brahmanical and Orientalist traditions” (Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 39)

engages in tantric practices; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (c. 1000-1100 C.E.) in which Hanumān is considered to be an incarnation of Śiva; *Bṛhḍharma Purāṇa* (c. 1300 C.E.) in which Hanumān is considered to be an incarnation of Śiva as well as being the executor of extraordinary feats; *Śiva Purāṇa* (c. 1400 C.E.) in which Hanumān is depicted as being the son of Śiva and, as a brave hero, the slayer of Mahīrāvana; and *Brahma Vaīvarta Purāṇa* (c. 800 C.E. but lost, subsequently recast c. 1600-1700 C.E.) in which Hanumān's character is discussed, albeit briefly²¹⁵.

Dramatic versions in which Hanumān features include the following thirteen *Nāṭakas*, a form of Sanskrit drama, the performance of which often included music and dance. Again offered in the order of chronological dating, these are: *Pratimā Nāṭaka* (c. 300-500 C.E.) in which Hanumān is mentioned after the coronation of Rāma; *Abhiśeka Nāṭaka* (c. 300-500 C.E.) in which Hanumān features as a warrior and as an ambassador for Rāma; *Mahāvīra Caritam Nāṭaka* (c. 700-800 C.E.) in which is featured a brave and fearless hero, interestingly named Vṛṣākapi; *Anargha Rāghava Nāṭaka* (c. 900-1000 C.E.) in which Hanumān's wonderful feats and his mission to Lankā are described; *Aścarya Cūḍāmaṇī Nāṭaka* (c. 900-1000 C.E.) in which Hanumān figures as a messenger to Sītā and then again during Sītā's trial of fire; *Mahā-Nāṭaka* (c. 1000-1400 C.E.) in which Hanumān features as *Rudrāvātāra*; *Hanumān Nāṭaka* (c. 1000-1400 C.E.) in which Hanumān, *Rudrāvātāra*, is shown to be a devotee of Rāma and the executor of miraculous deeds; *Prasanna Rāghava Nāṭaka* (c. 1200 C.E.) which features Hanumān's exploits in Lankā; *Saugandhīkāharṇ Nāṭaka* (c. 1291-1332 C.E.) in which Hanumān is presented as being a learned scholar with a great knowledge of magic and also as a devotee of Rāma; *Dutānagada Nāṭaka* (c. 1300 C.E.) in which Hanumān is shown to be the devotee of Rāma; *Ullāgha Raghāva Nāṭaka* (c. 1300 C.E.) in which Hanumān is depicted as being the loyal follower and devotee of Rāma; *Anjana Pavanajava Nāṭaka* (c. 1300 C.E.) in which Hanumān's parentage is discussed, along with the legends that surround his birth, his marriage – otherwise mostly unseen in Indian representations of Hanumān as a celibate – and his exploits; and the modern-day *Prasanna-Hanumān Nāṭaka* (c. 2000 C.E.) in which Hanumān's birth and wartime exploits are featured²¹⁶.

Before proceeding with analysis of the role of Hanumān within the Rāmāyaṇic tradition itself, two further textual inclusions should be acknowledged here; for Hanumān makes appearances in both the *Mahābhārata* and also the *Bhāgavad Gītā*. The section in the *Mahābhārata* that features Hanumān most prominently is the *Rāmopākhyāna* (3:257-75), a section of some 728

²¹⁵ Narula, 2005, pp. 79-83

²¹⁶ *ibid.*

verses that focuses on the story of Rāma and so includes his greatest servant also. The adorning of Arjuna's battle flag happens to be the single explicit manner in which Hanumān is incorporated into the *Bhāgavad Gītā* (BG 1.20).

It might be anticipated that, across the length and span of the Rāmāyaṇic tradition, the character of Hanumān comes to signify different purposes. That the figure has an evolving role even within the parameters of a *single text* proves more unexpected. Yet it remains the case that, within the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* alone, Hanumān's role is one that undergoes significant, indeed exceptional, change in response to the demands and the direction of the narrative. Whilst he is here primarily the humble envoy and emissary – first of Sugrīva and then of King Rāma – when occasion dictates, Hanumān suddenly gains remembrance of phenomenal *siddhis*. These include dramatically changing his size or even animal form (such as when he turns himself into a cat so that he may enter Laṅkā unnoticed), being able to leap unaided across the ocean to Laṅkā and carrying an entire mountain in a single hand. In addition to the demonstration of these extraordinary powers, the learned monkey ambassador – the sensitivity of whose diplomacy initially brokers the alliance between the hero and the *vānara* forces in the first place – startlingly changes once more. He rapidly becomes the ultimate ferocious warrior, whose stamina and prowess on the battlefield is unmatched by everyone involved in the epic. Arguably this even includes Rāma himself.

As discussed above in 1.V.ii, the peers of Tulsīdās pronounced him to have been the reincarnation of Vālmīki. Whatever parallels may be drawn between the status of these two authorial voices, no such similarities may be drawn between their depictions of Hanumān. In this later work, Hanumān *does* continue to symbolise the envoy of Rāma, and he *does* continue to represent his ideal devotee. However, quite aside from the substantial rounding of the *vānara's* character within the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, Tulsīdās' Hanumān is portrayed in such a radically different philosophical light that he is a different creature entirely than his Vālmīki predecessor. In accord with developments throughout the Rāmāyaṇic tradition, and with the significant move towards a more *bhakti*-oriented philosophical positioning in contemporaneous Indological texts, Rāma is no longer simply the king who nobly bows to the dictates of social order and Vedic ruling. Instead, he has been given the status of divine standing in *saguṇa* form.

As has been seen above, it is the very *name* of Rāma that Tulsīdās promotes as possessing the most sublime authority of all. Hanumān concurs entirely with the poet and tells his Lord, “Your Name keeps watch night and day” (RCM 5.30). His intimate association with Rāma shows him in a newly elevated status in the *Rāmacaritamānasa* that is only further enhanced

through his frequent repetition of the divine name. Furthermore, in carrying Rāma's signet ring to Sītā in Lankā (*RCM* 5.12.1-6), he is positioned as its bearer also – he becomes the necessary intermediary. The significance of the fact that, as he performs his duties, he does so filled with joy and “with an image of Śrī Rāma (the Lord of Rāghus) enshrined in his heart” (*RCM* 5.3.2) may not be underestimated either. As it infers, it is not simply the action that is performed but the manner in which the service is executed that is important²¹⁷. It is thus through closeness of association that aspects of divinity come to be associated with Hanumān. Continuing to represent the ally, envoy and warrior as he did before, these are suddenly of secondary importance to Tulsīdās: Hanumān is first, and foremost, the devotee. More than that, he is the beloved devotee, the favourite of Rāma²¹⁸. Even though Rāma may represent the absolute guru, it is nonetheless still through observation of the behaviour of his devotee Hanumān (in particular in connection with Rāma or in the execution of his divine bidding) that the reader may receive instruction on paths to personal salvation.

The principal salvific mode here is *Rāma-bhakti* and Hanumān is the perfect illustration of this path. Moreover, his representation offers a viable devotional alternative to the contemporary popular figure of the *gopī* who, in her abandoned yearning for the arms of the divine, loses all sense of herself and of her propriety. For Tulsīdās' Hanumān the situation is significantly reversed: remaining ever controlled by his senses, this devotee offers his unswerving servile loyalty at the *feet* of the divine and, in doing so, finds his own liberation. In many ways it could be said that Hanumān's role at this point is to *find* himself through his devotion, not to lose himself.

When he is shown in the *Rāmacaritamānasa* to be this embodiment of *dāsyā bhakti* Hanumān comes to mirror his creator, Tulsīdās. This is an interesting narrative situation and, through the close connection between the devotee author and the devotee character one, in many ways, becomes interchangeable with the other. That the popularity of Tulsīdās grew in line with that of Hanumān at the time of the writing of this text, undoubtedly served this purpose further. The fact that Tulsīdās' enduring relationship with the deity was not restricted to this text alone can only have done the same. As discussed above, much of the poet's body of work is concerned either with his devotion to Rām(a) or with his own relationship with Hanumān. Indeed, many traditional tales attest to the active role that Hanumān plays in the composition of Tulsīdās' poems in the first instance. What emerges from this situation is the

²¹⁷ See 3.IV.iii (pp. 205-208) for the resonance of this within the *seva* practice of the Neem Karoli Baba community

²¹⁸ “There is no one so blessed nor anyone so devoted to Śrī Rāma's lotus-feet as Hanumān, whose love and service, O daughter of the mountain-king have repeatedly been extolled by the Lord with His own mouth” (*RCM* 7.49.5).

potential that the supposed literary ‘creation’ thus becomes the creator or at least as the one that enables creation.

One particular story relating to Tulsīdās’ apparent composition of the *Hanumān Cālīsā* (arguably Neem Karoli Baba’s favourite prayer and a mainstay of the present-day community) illustrates the intimate connection between Tulsīdās and Hanumān. According to legend, Tulsīdās was imprisoned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in the jail in Fatehpur Sikri. Whilst incarcerated there, the poet turned to his beloved Hanumān for help and guidance. Writing forty verses in praise of the deity and of his attributes he composed the *Hanumān Cālīsā* and, desperate at being held captive, recited it day and night. On the fortieth day of his petition – so it is said – the entire jail complex was invaded by a vast troop of aggressive monkeys, of all different sizes, who proceeded to attack the royal army and the guards. Informed of the ensuing terror and mayhem, Akbar realised his mistake, apologised to the poet and had him released. Upon Tulsīdās’ liberation, the troop of monkeys also disappeared. From that time, the *Cālīsā* has traditionally been recited or sung both to praise and to call upon the help of Hanumān²¹⁹.

1.V.iv Attributes and Characteristics of Hanumān: Portrait of a *Śakta* and a *Bhakta*

Across India today iconographic representations of Hanumān are ubiquitous²²⁰. This is not a recent phenomenon: throughout the centuries his image has been depicted in paintings and drawings, sculpture, on the walls of temples, on the faces of fourteenth century coins²²¹ as well as on much of the calendar art that remains so popular across the subcontinent. Hanumān is most commonly shown as having a golden simian face and a well-muscled human body, albeit one with a long and agile tail. Often shown arching upwards to symbolise his strength and virility, Hanumān demonstrates his quick-wittedness and miraculous shape-shifting nature when he employs his tail at regular intervals throughout the *Rāma-kathā* to a variety of different ends²²². As if by way of demonstrating a mastery of a number of *siddhis*, Hanumān

²¹⁹ Related in Nagar, Shantilal. *Hanumān (The Only Devotee)*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2006b, pp. 95-96

²²⁰ See Lutgendorf, 2007, pp. 3-10 for a discussion on the many statuary representations in India. In particular, he draws attention to the existence of a considerable number of very large recent Hanumān *mūrtis*. These include a 45 foot granite figure situated in a Western suburb of Delhi; a 30 foot figure at Sidhabari in Himachal Pradesh; a 70 foot figure at Puttapparthi in Andhra Pradesh (consecrated to celebrate the sixty-fifth birthday of Sathya Sai Baba); and two further figures in New Delhi that reach 91 feet and 108 feet respectively.

²²¹ Two fourteenth century Sangama rulers – Harohara I (1336-57) and Bukka I (1334-77) – issued coins upon which was displayed the figure of Hanumān. (Khokar, Ashish and S. Saraswati. *Hanuman*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001, p. 37)

²²² See Nagar, Shantilal. *Hanumān Through the Ages. 3 Volumes*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2004, pp. 395-396

turns it into a throne for himself when in Rāvaṇa's court; he succeeds in burning much of Lankā to the ground when he uses his blazing tail as a torch (*RCM* 5.25.1-4); by whipping up the water with the tail, he manages to protect Rāma's bridge by stunning the demon king's fish; and he even turns the tail into a coiled fortress that safeguards Rāma and Sītā from the sorcery of Mahīrāvana. Its prominence and significance throughout the different textual workings operates as a symbol of Hanumān's agile mind and wizard-like aspects.

Often shown flying towards the south – that is towards Lankā – Hanumān may be seen with his right foot raised as if to signify motion, with a mace in his right hand as a symbol of self-sovereignty and a Himalayan mountain in his left. This last refers to Hanumān's role in collecting the healing herbs that save the life of Lakṣmaṇa when, unsure of which herbs to pick, he brings the entire mountain top back with him (*RCM* 6.57.4). At other times he is depicted in a more *bhakta* aspect: kneeling devotedly before Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, with his palms pressed together in prayer, occasionally also portrayed in this context as fervently ripping open his chest, to show the images of Rāma and Sītā as engraved within his very core. A popular image in this vein shows Hanumān sat piously beside a flowing river, quietly meditating on the divine couple, whose faces can be seen behind him. An open book – presumably the *Rāma-kathā* – lies open before him. Returning to a more miraculous vein, a fiercer image known as the *Pañcamukhī Hanumān* depicts Hanumān as having five heads, sometimes also with fifteen eyes and ten arms. This image originates from within the tantric tradition and, in particular, from texts such as the *Śrīvidyarnarva Tantra*²²³. At times Hanumān is seen with his hands in *abhaya* (fear removing) and *varada* (wish granting) *mudrās*, or to be carrying a club, bow, trident, conch, tree, thunderbolt or indeed lotus. As Ludvik comments, in many of these images Hanumān is “devoted and providing devotion, compassionate yet fierce, protector and remover of obstacles, giver of prosperity and destroyer of evil”²²⁴. Hanumān is all of these representations and many others also.

A primary importance of the iconographic representations of Hanumān is that they cast significant light on what might be regarded to be his attributes and characteristics. Amongst the roles that Hanumān has come to signify within Indian society, he represents the scholar and also the student; the diplomatic envoy; the musician; the yogi; the hermit absorbed in meditation; the celibate *brahmācārī*; he is the soldier and great warrior; the patron of physical culture; he is the healer; the guardian against sorcery and the destroyer of baneful astrological influences; he is the *cirañjīvi*, or one blessed with long life; and, of course, he is the servant and devotee also. Furthermore, it is within these roles that Hanumān may demonstrate his

²²³ Nagar, 2006, p. 116

²²⁴ Ludvik, 1997, p. 1

acknowledged principal character traits of intelligence, inherent wisdom, quick-wittedness, physical might, being blessed with a body as strong as a *vajra* (diamond), bravery, curiosity, discipline, self-control, humility, selflessness and devotion. Thus the figure of Hanumān may be seen to be a *śakta* or a *bhakta*.

Of the portrayal of Hanumān as a *śakta*, an interesting aspect for the purposes of this study is that of the *vānara* as the yogi. Exceptionally disciplined in body and in mind, resonances of this representation are to be seen in the early biographical portrayal of Neem Karoli Baba (“an incarnation of Hanuman”²²⁵) as a renunciate and cave-dwelling *sādhaka*. Indeed, in describing Hanumān in the following manner, Pattanaik could be one of the guru’s own hagiographers, so similar is the language that is utilised:

He is the *gyan yogi* having controlled his mind through intellectual introspection and discernment... He is a *bhakti yogi* having controlled his mind through absolute faith in the divine... He is a *karma yogi* having controlled his mind through detached action... He is a *hatha yogi* having controlled his mind by the practice of pranayama or breath control and asanas... He is a *laya yogi* with the knowledge to control his mind with chants (*mantras*) and charms (*yantras*). Thus he has acquired *mahasiddha*, sacred occult powers²²⁶.

Once again, in contrast to the *gopī*, it is through his mastery of discipline and self-control that Hanumān comes to be revered as an object worthy of emulation – and it is through such practices that miraculous powers may be seen to emerge. This aspect of self-control extends into the scholar’s sphere too²²⁷. Here, in an interesting expansion of the aspect of discipline from the physical into the intellectual planes, Hanumān represents both the teacher and the learner: he receives wisdom and teachings from the celestial realm and, in turn, delivers the same message to the mortal sphere. Thus he is the student of the gods but the teacher of men and, as such, is shown once more to function as an intermediary between the two. In *The Monkey Grammarian*, twentieth century Mexican poet Octavio Paz employs part of this aspect at least in his contemporary narrative that documents Hanumān’s philosophical mind-journey inwards. After many pages, he produces a dictionary-type entry with which to depict Hanumān. Amongst these lines he offers the model, “An ideogram of the poet, the master /

²²⁵ Bail, Scharada. *The Hanuman Heart*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2005, p. 1

²²⁶ Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Hanuman – An Introduction*. Mumbai: Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd., 2001, p. 114

²²⁷ From the viewpoint of the development of his role in this aspect, Hanumān’s knowledge of Sanskrit and scripture is already evident in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* from the manner in which he conducts his initial interaction with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Yet, by the time of Tulsīdās’ writing, Hanumān’s education has grown considerably. Ludvik comments on these developments that are most apparent in the late devotional hymns of the *Vinaya-Patrikā*, composed towards the end of the poet’s life: “Tulasī considers [Hanumān] to be learned in Vedānta (VP 26:8), the best of *Sāma Veda* singers (VP 27:3), a scriptural, Vedic and grammatic commentator (VP 28:5), a poet, one proficient in many arts (VP 28:5) and the author of the *Mahānataka*. (Ludvik, 1999, p. 14)

servant of universal metamorphosis”²²⁸. Grasping the interchangeability of the author and the character, of the subject-object narrative divide, Paz too sees the fluid teacher / learner, master / servant aspect of Hanumān. Furthermore, he recognises the vast transformative potential inherent within it.

Proceeding to Hanumān in the role of emissary or messenger (*dūta*), it is once again the *vānara*'s mental acuity combined with his self-controlled, discreet nature that our attention is repeatedly drawn to. Hanumān executes this role superlatively, indeed seems to relish its challenge and, within the Rāmāyaṇic texts, it is almost always Hanumān who is sent out as the skilled envoy. This is particularly evident in delicate situations that demand sensitive handling: firstly, when Sugrīva sends Hanumān out into the forest to identify and then forge an allegiance with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (*RCM* 4.1-4); not that long after it is Hanumān who is requisitioned to fetch Sītā from Laṅkā (*RCM* 4.29.2-6); later still, it is Hanumān who proceeds to Ayodhyā to inform Bharata of Rāma's impending return (*RCM* 7.1-2). The manner in which he assumes this role is unquestioning and effortlessly undertaken. The resonance that might be perceived between Hanumān's position as intermediary and *dūta* and the actions and motivations of the Neem Karoli Baba's Western satsang will be investigated further in 3.V.viii, 'Sending Hanumān to the West'.

The many miraculous abilities of this deity portray him as being an extraordinary creature: that his *siddhis* are seen effortlessly to co-exist with a sublime sense of humility, and of devotion make him appear all the more so. Yet Hanumān is known, above all, to be an embodiment of devotion – as a *bhakta*. In particular in the north of India, whenever a recitation of the *Rāmācaritamānasa* occurs, a spare seat is saved for Hanumān. It is believed that he never fails to make an appearance at such an occasion, so strong is his love of hearing of the glory of Rāma²²⁹. Similarly, no temple to Rāma is considered complete without an appropriate representation of Hanumān saluting his Lord²³⁰. It should be remembered that Hanumān is not Rāma's only devotee in Tulsīdās' poem. Rāma's brother and companion, Lakṣmaṇa, also demonstrates extraordinary and consistent devotion throughout as do the characters of Sītā, Bharata and Vibhīṣaṇa. Yet, the difference between them and Hanumān is that, whilst the others may love Rāma whole-heartedly and wish to serve him to their best ability, the *vānara* goes so far as to surrender himself entirely and irrevocably at his guru's feet. For Hanumān, Rāma is all that there is: nothing more has even the potential to exist.

²²⁸ Paz, Octavio. *The Monkey Grammarian*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990, p. 131

²²⁹ This finds a textual resonance in the *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa*, in which it is declared that wherever the story of Rāma is told on earth, that Hanumān will remain present.

²³⁰ Pattanaik, 2001, p. 116

This is a radical position for Hanumān to occupy yet, whilst even the Vālmīki Hanumān is shown, at times, to vacillate between moods of depression and enthusiasm as he searches unsuccessfully for the abducted Sītā, Tulsīdās' Hanumān has no such thoughts of worry. For him, the possibility of objective failure is removed – again, since all that is belongs solely to Rāma. Rāma is all prevalent and all pervading and Hanumān sees him in all existence: everywhere the monkey turns in the *Sundara kāṇḍa*, he finds depiction or talk or remembrance of Rāma. (“Everywhere I look I see only Ram, and that’s why I am always honouring everything”²³¹.) As Tulsīdās reminds his reader, the true *bhakta* is never alone even in the face of struggle or adversity. Similarly revealing of the loss of egoic selfhood, when Hanumān is beaten and bound by Rāvaṇa’s hordes (later in the same *kāṇḍa*, *RCM* 5.19-24) in an attempt to humiliate him, here too he cannot even conceive of feeling shame. Indeed, as is amply illustrated in Hanumān’s meek acceptance of his binding (“It was in the service of the Lord that Hanumān allowed himself to be bound” *RCM* 5.19.3), where there is an absence of personal ego there is also a subsequent absence of any tendency towards self-consciousness.

In the surrender of his egoic self to Rāma’s will, it is not so much that Hanumān loses ‘himself’ as that he uncovers ‘Himself’ living within him in the process. Hanumān simply moves himself out of the way in order that Rāma’s Self can show itself through his person and through his actions also²³². The nature and the process of disciplic surrender is a crucial point for consideration in any evaluation of the guru-disciple relationship and it is an aspect to which we shall return again in both Parts Two and Three. This will be in relationship to preceptorial interaction in general and to that relating to Neem Karoli Baba in particular. What may be observed here, however, is that Tulsīdās’ Hanumān embodies a perfect model of the principle of surrender that will be discussed at greater length in these parts still to come.

Finally, in this consideration of Hanumān as the ideal *bhakta*, one should not forget the significance of Rāma’s role. Part of what makes the depiction of Hanumān’s devoted interactions with Rāma in the *Rāmacaritamānasa* so powerful is that it is presented as being a true relationship, in which both parties love each other. Rāma is not a distant or fearsome God; indeed, the more that he is loved by Hanumān, the more he loves his devotee in return²³³.

²³¹ Attributed to Neem Karoli Baba. Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 363

²³² This intention might be similarly ascribed to certain members of the Neem Karoli Baba satsang in their various acts of seva. Whilst engaged in the compilation process of *Be Here Now*, for example, Ram Dass writes from America to his friend K.K. Sah in Nainital: “Please, please touch the feet of Maharaj-ji for me. I want only to serve him in this life” (Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 9 September 1968. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India). Like Hanumān, this Western devotee may be seen to exhibit the traits of the *dāsya bhakta*. For further discussion, see 3.V.ix, pp. 246-259.

²³³ For the most part, the same is reported to have been the case in the relationship between Neem Karoli

Acknowledgement of this reciprocated affection proves overwhelming to Hanumān who, more than once, swoons at his master's feet so "absorbed in love that he would not rise" (*RCM* 5.32.1). Rāma is shown to be moved by his servant's devotion, lifts him up and embraces him, "wetting him with the tears of His eyes." (*RCM* 4.2.3). In the wider context of Tulsīdās's writing, so offers Ludvik, "Raghupati, in the words of the *Kavitāvalī* (6:55, 7:19), has enslaved Himself (*hātha bikāne*) in His devotee's love."²³⁴

The depth of this connection is significant for it represents what has come to be known as the spiritual marriage of the authentic guru-disciple relationship that we will turn to shortly in Part Two. Hanumān is both servant and devotee of the Lord, simultaneously he becomes the greatest teacher and ally of mortal man intent on an emulation of his own salvation. He may be seen as the "objectification of Raghupati's *śakti*"²³⁵ or, as befits his status as the son of the Wind, indeed as *prāna*, as that 'essence of devotion' mentioned by the *Cālīsā* that Tulsīdās believes is contained within each incarnated man. In this way Hanumān is shown to achieve an intimacy and proximity with the divine so as to be known as Rāma's very breath. This concept, whilst not directly from the *Rāmacaritamānasa*²³⁶, has nonetheless become a much repeated phrase within the Neem Karoli Baba community and an intrinsic part of the insider theological beliefs that make up their unique canon. Having established a background of tradition and belief that informs this movement, we proceed now with a location of Neem Karoli Baba within the convention of the Hindu guru and examine his preceptorial contribution within the framework of that tradition.

Baba and his devotees. The compassionate nature that he displayed is referred to repeatedly within the hagiography. For discussion, see 3.III.iv (pp. 193-195), 'Matters of Love and Personal Attachment'.

²³⁴ Ludvik, 1997, p. 128

²³⁵ *ibid.* p. 136

²³⁶ In the *Rāmacaritamānasa* it is the Vedas (and, one would imagine, the authority and tradition that such an association would confer) that are said to represent the breath of Rāma (*RCM* 1.121). Hanumān is not connected explicitly in this way in this text.

PART TWO

MANIFESTATIONS OF ŚAKTI: LOCATING NEEM KAROLI BABA WITHIN THE GURU TRADITION

The Gurū accordingly is God; the Gurū is the voice of God; and the Gurū is the Word, the Truth of God.¹

Just as you filter water, have a working knowledge of gurus.

Neem Karoli Baba²

2.I Manifestations of Śakti

2.I.i Introduction

The thirty-ninth *Nārada-Bhakti Sūtra* states, “To come in contact with a great soul is indeed extremely difficult; it is impossible to know them fully; yet it is infallible in its effect”³. Whether the effect may, indeed, be observed as infallible is impossible to assay; yet, it is apparent that, whilst the Hindu tradition is filled with exemplars of the figure of the guru, understanding how to approach (let alone ‘know’) one remains considerably challenging. This stance might be maintained in relation to the figure of the guru in general or with our principal protagonist. Attempting to evaluate a *satguru*, as one would any other normal human being does not prove fruitful in terms of either surety or clarity. Much of the point of such figures is that they are quite obviously *not* like other men or women, representing as they do, “the essential mediator[s] of divine Truth”⁴. When one approaches Neem Karoli Baba in the same manner, the situation is not improved: finding out who he was, and why he operated in the way that it is said that he did, represents a challenge. Other than the number of modest temples and ashrams that are still run in his memory (despite his assertion that, “Temples are but piles of stones”⁵) and that were built during the latter half of his life, Neem Karoli Baba left behind him nothing more than a small number of artefacts. These include the plain wooden cots on which he slept at night and sat during the day; a collection of blankets; several pieces of clothing such as *dhotīs*, woollen jumpers and a pair of socks⁶; and a few other personal effects, subsequently assembled by his former attendants that include a walking stick, *cimṭa* (pair of

¹ McLeod, W.H. *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 199

² Ram Dass comp. 1995. p. 339

³ Chinmayananda, Swami trans. *Nārada-Bhakti Sūtra*. Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2005, p. 72

⁴ McLeod, 1996, p. 197

⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 186

⁶ There are socks, kept at Kainchi Dham, that still bear faint vermilion markings upon them from where devotees have pressed their tilak-ed foreheads upon the guru’s feet in obeisance.

tongs), some barely worn slippers⁷ and also a set of dentures in a purple box⁸. Nor did this guru provide many written traces of who he was, nor any systematic presentation of his teachings, other than in diary entries (even those only written during the last couple of years of his life⁹) and on a few scraps of paper. In both these instances, and as will be seen, he painstakingly and repeatedly inscribed the name of Rām – very occasionally, with the addition of his signature¹⁰. From such limited written evidence, his interests would appear to lie more in a direct participation with life than in any commentary upon it. He certainly showed no concern over the preservation of what might be termed a formal legacy. This seems like sparse tangible evidence indeed by which to measure the life of a holy man.

The hagiography does not assist in the matter either. It contains impenetrable pronouncements such as “it [is] not possible to describe Maharajji’s life or any of his activities”¹¹, or alternately, “it was like being near a black hole in the universe, a personality was there but no one was home”¹². Statements of this nature are intriguing but they offer nothing in the way of understanding and, certainly for the purpose of this investigation, seem unsatisfying. One may not deny that Neem Karoli Baba led an embodied, physical existence, nor that he died a relatively old man. Ergo, whilst the absence of substantive markers along the length of his life presents a challenge, merely to skim over his biography seems an inadequate investigative approach. Accordingly, it is more insightful to investigate Neem Karoli Baba within a wider context and in connection with the institution of the guru. With this much one *may* establish a clear association. Part Two represents this essay.

Feuerstein would concur with the line of investigation that is proposed here. In evaluating adepts of what he terms the ‘crazy wisdom traditions’, he concludes:

⁷ According to Jaya Prasada, personal attendant to Siddhi Ma, the Indian women who cared for Neem Karoli Baba during his later years would try to make him wear slippers when the ground was cold. Paying little heed to physical comforts, however, he would almost always remove them, preferring instead to go bare foot. This was related at Kainchi Dham, 21 October 2007.

⁸ These last items are kept in a glass case in Neem Karoli Baba’s former room at the temple at Kainchi. Whilst prayers and offerings continue to be performed daily in this room, it is opened to the public only very infrequently.

⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 376

¹⁰ One such scrap remains in the possession of K.K. Sah of Nainital. Upon half a page of lined paper, torn from an exercise book and in blue ballpoint pen is written the name of Rām in the hand of Neem Karoli Baba. Under this is his signature. Dada Mukerjee, however, comments that he only saw Neem Karoli Baba sign his name once – when applying for a grant for temple land at Rishikesh. (Mukerjee, 2001, p. 25)

¹¹ Josi, P.C. ‘Mukunda’. *Premavatar: Baba Neem Karoli Maharaj*. Kainchi Dham: Sri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir & Ashram, 2006, p. 15

¹² Anasuya. *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA (November 2003), p. 7

...it is impossible to talk intelligently about this phenomenon without placing it in a wider context by talking as well about the nature of the spiritual process, charismatic teachers (gurus), authority, discipleship, submission, freedom of will, nonverbal transmission, and the new religious movements¹³.

With this in mind, 3.II considers what Indological tradition would hold to be the divinely originated nature of the guru figure. 3.II.i commences with inquiry into 'who' or 'what' is signified by the term guru in the first instance; 3.II.ii acknowledges the twin aspects of both vertical and horizontal operation integral to the guru function; 3.II.iii observes the imperative of the guru within Indological tradition; and 3.II.iv examines issues that accompany the transplantation of the guru function into a non-native setting. Only at this juncture may the part of the disciple (or devotee) be introduced and issues connected with the relationship between the two parties more appropriately evaluated. 3.III, therefore, assesses matters of the nature and co-responsibility of the guru-disciple relationship¹⁴. 3.III.i investigates the instigation of the relationship; 3.III.ii contemplates issues of disciplic willingness and surrender; and 3.III.iii addresses concerns of spiritual transformation, transmission and *śaktipāta*. To frame this slightly differently, the first of these two chapters remains concerned with matters of *śakti*; the next moves closer to those of *bhakti*, or the issue of the devotion, that may be seen to lie at the heart of the authentic guru-disciple relationship. Within this framework, 3.IV represents our continuing approach to the persona of Neem Karoli Baba. 3.IV.i demonstrates how his devotees perceive him to be unbound by the temporal world and for his influence to be ongoing three and a half decades after his death and considers matters of charismatic succession and the ongoing validation of spiritual authority within his movement; 3.IV.ii contemplates his elusive, even 'hidden' nature; 3.IV.iii approaches the reportedly miraculous nature of this man as a manifestation of the traditional state known as *sahaja*; and 3.IV.iv considers matters of conventional lineage in relation to this guru.

2.I.i Recognising the Eminence of the Hindu Guru

Before proceeding with inquiry into the inner nature and function of the guru figure, the extraordinary prevalence of the preceptorial role within Indian culture should be acknowledged. Since its earliest incarnations as the *śakta*, *ācārya* or as the Brahman priest of

¹³ Feuerstein, 1992, p. xx

¹⁴ It is clear that neither gurus nor aspirants need be bound by the masculine gender; however, for the sake of clarity in this study, the personal pronoun 'he' will be used throughout to signify both. Moreover, followers are traditionally referred to as either a disciple (*śiṣya*) or devotee (*celā*) – for the most part, dependent upon whether the point of connection between preceptor and his human charge is held to be one of discipline or one of devotion. In the following discourse concerning generic guru-disciple relations, both terms are used interchangeably. When referring specifically to the followers of *bhakta* Neem Karoli Baba, only the term devotee is used.

Vedic times¹⁵, the role of the guru has assumed an eminence of such a degree that there must exist very few strata of native thought or society that have remained untouched by the influence of this institution, at one time or another in its history¹⁶. As Chaubey remarks, “Guru is the symbol of Indian culture”¹⁷. Perennial motifs have continued to interest and stimulate both participants and observers of the phenomenon. These include deliberation upon how one might come to understand the role of the guru, how to appreciate the extent of his inner realisation and how to evaluate what this might mean in terms of the potential liberation of his followers.

Swami Rama Tirtha is reported as having said, “A God defined is a God confined”¹⁸. This is as may be but, concerning the figure of the guru, no such reticence has been displayed. Across the tradition, there are many textual elucidations that negotiate themes relating to the guru that provide reminders of the pre-eminent vertical connections (and therefore, one assumes, the abiding authority) of the preceptorial figure¹⁹. The Rāmāyaṇic lineage alone provides ample illustration in this regard. It might even be said that the many versions of the *Rāma-kathā* provide expositions upon the nature of the guru and offer guidance on how to interact with such a figure. Not that, significantly, that which could be defined as being the ‘guru’ actually remains consistent throughout the development of the tradition. Such pliancy, however, is merely another hallmark of the institution in general.

Solely within the parameters of the *Rāma-kathā*, therefore, the guru may be seen in a variety of ways, primarily according to the philosophical handling of the material. In the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, the guru figure remains outside the complement of principal characters, although his authority is continually noted and observed²⁰. In the fifteenth century *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, as Rāma represents the universal *paramātma* and Sītā the individual soul, or *jīvātma*, it is left to Hanumān – as the intermediary between them – to represent the figure of the guru, or at least a guru, whose significance rests more in his function than in what one might term his characterisation. As a third example, at the heart of Tulsīdās’

¹⁵ For discussion of the evolution of the guru during this early period, see Chaubey, B.B. “The Nature of Guruship According to the Hindu Scriptures” in McMullen, Clarence O. ed. *The Concept of Guru in Indian Religions*. Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1982, pp. 4-5

¹⁶ Brent, Peter. *The Indian Guru and His Disciple*. Tunbridge Wells: Institute for Cultural Research, 1971, p. 26

¹⁷ Chaubey, 1982, p. 17

¹⁸ Ram Dass, *Paths to God: Living the Bhagavad Gita*. New York: Harmony Books, 2004, p. 94

¹⁹ The *Kūrma Purāna* provides a very long list of those who should be treated as gurus, of which five find precedence: the father, mother, teacher, eldest brother and (for a woman) her husband. Of these, the first three assume the role of the supreme guru. See Chaubey, 1982, pp. 7-8

²⁰ An illustration of this can be seen in the opening *kāṇḍa*. As part of the contest organised to find a husband for Sītā, the guru instructs Rāma to look at the bow. Upon inspecting the bow, Rāma agrees to enter and so succeeds in winning her hand.

Rāmacaritamānasa, it is Rāma who is depicted as *the* idealised guru – and as God, of course, also. In this last handling, Hanumān is seen to act as the ultimate devotee. It makes for an interesting addition that, within the same handling, Tulsīdās may be considered a guru figure of some standing; yet, simultaneously, he represents a devotee of pre-eminent status also.

As may be evidenced here, within a single textual tradition, the role of the guru is one with the potential for considerable plasticity. When one broadens contextual parameters to include the *human* guru figure, an even more pronounced malleability may be seen. Peter Brent identifies hereditary gurus²¹, sectarian gurus, *mahants*²² and *satgurus* as integral to Indian tradition. Elsewhere seen as “spiritual guide or preceptor, very often a single wanderer or a celibate teacher, or a Brahmin instructor”²³, or as a mystic who courts “euphoria and ecstasy as his method”²⁴, as “a married man, a householder, whose home became the home and school of his pupils”²⁵, or, alternatively, predominantly as one who “possesses charismatic authority”²⁶, the term guru within Indian culture is, furthermore, “to some extent analogous to both the prophet and the sage... [and] the contemplative type”²⁷ also. In short, as twentieth century teacher Swami Rama succinctly puts it, “the guru is tradition”²⁸.

Rather than denoting a functional homogeneity, this last statement highlights the fact that the exact nature of the guru’s active role for the most part depends upon the area (or era) of tradition of which he is representative. Prabhu notes that, “Hinduism shows a tendency towards tolerant syncretism, which allows it to incorporate almost any ritual or deity into its own system”²⁹. Thus the Vedic guru of earliest recorded times, the early *bhakti* guru of the Hindu Renaissance or the twentieth century *advaita* guru, for example, have all played their individual parts according to the context of their lineage or philosophical positioning and, simultaneously, each are accorded a place within the wider guru convention. Additionally, and as with many aspects of Indian religious tradition, it is apparent that antiquity has continued to

²¹ Succession within the Vallabhācārya *sampradāya* illustrates this point: the lineage is passed between male members of that one bloodline. Brent remarks on the time-honoured nature of this practice, “...such groups are only following the tradition of the ancient, Vedic Guru, who inherited the *shishya varga*, his group of students and disciples, from his Guru father, just as they inherited theirs from their fathers” (Brent, 1971, p. 17).

²² The heads of monasteries who would also perform preceptorial duties

²³ Smart, Ninian. *Dimensions of the Sacred – An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1996. p. 217

²⁴ Bharati, 1976, p. 29

²⁵ Brent, 1971, p. 2

²⁶ McMullen, Clarence O. “The Nature of Guruship: A Sociological Perspective” in McMullen, Clarence O. ed. *The Concept of Guru in Indian Religions*. Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1982, p. 133

²⁷ Smart, 1996, p. 217

²⁸ Swami Rama, *Sadhana: The Essence of Spiritual Life*. New Delhi: Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy, 1996, p. 109

²⁹ Prabhu, Pandarinath H. *Hindu Social Organization*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963, p. 6

feed contemporary practice and that the function and teaching concerns of twentieth century masters (including Neem Karoli Baba) should not be considered peculiar to that century alone. Instead they have been informed by the ministrations and modalities of their many predecessors and it is this sense of the ongoing nature of the institution that facilitates discourse on the generic nature of the guru function. With this in mind, it is now possible to consider the traditional view of the *satguru* as agent of the divine.

2.II The Guru as Agent of the Divine

Guru is not a physical being. Those who think of the guru as a body and as a man do not understand this pious word. If a guru comes to think that his power is his own, then he is a guide no more. The guru is tradition; he is a stream of knowledge.

Swami Rama³⁰

2.II.i Divine or Human: A Traditional Consideration of the Guru

Who is the doer?

Neem Karoli Baba³¹

Recognising how tradition portrays, indeed defines, the institution of which Neem Karoli Baba was a part is significant in any approach to this guru. Indological tradition holds that the primary nature of the guru is that of an agent of divine power. Whilst not held to be directly responsible for its generation, he is nevertheless seen to act as a human channel for the transmission of this *śakti*. This is a strong stance, but a conventional one nonetheless. Differentiation between worldly actions and those of a divine origin must, of course, be made. The fact that the guru has been born into a human incarnation in the first place is undoubtedly significant. Indeed, McMullen has noted that, other than upholding a valid claim for spiritual authority, the other principal criterion of the guru is that he is “a person or human being”³². As will be investigated more closely in the pages immediately to follow, part of the challenge for and about the human guru is to recognise where any such boundaries meet and merge. Nevertheless, if one accepts that the actions of the guru *do* originate in a divine source, then one must also recognise that it is God who continues to be the ‘doer’ in the truest sense – and not the physical vessel of the guru. Swami Muktananda concurs in this and, emphasising the *downward* streaming of guru ‘energy’, brings attention to the fact that, whilst the human vessel

³⁰ Swami Rama, 1996, pp. 108-109

³¹ Pande, 2005, p. 206

³² McMullen, 1982, p. 133

of the guru may be manifold³³, the *śakti* that passes through them comes from one source alone:

Gurus are only different forms of the same Shakti. The same divine power works through each of them and only the outer forms differ. Therefore it is true to say that all Gurus are one. The seers say that the Guru is not a particular body or individual. The Guru is one who transmits the divine power of grace into the disciple. Though the Guru may appear to be a human being, he is, in his innermost essence, this very divine power which bestows grace on all³⁴.

As a *bhakta* informed by the traditions of his native spiritual culture, it is conceivable that Neem Karoli Baba was similarly of the opinion that the actual force in operation through him was not of his personal creation. In this light, many of his comments that demonstrate his apparent lack of attachment – both to the vessel of his physical body and also to his role as the perpetrator of miraculous deeds – take on a resonance that they did not have before. “I do nothing. God does everything”³⁵, Neem Karoli Baba is reported as having said and it is conceivable that it is illustrative of what he believed. This belief is certainly shared by a substantial proportion of his devotees. A comment from one unnamed follower demonstrates two points: firstly that he considers his guru to be a channel for divinely-motivated action and, secondly, that in behaving in such a manner, the *celā* perceives his master to be acting as part of a wider tradition:

Who can say with these saints? They are like the sky. Maharajji’s [Neem Karoli Baba’s] mind was completely clear. He would seem to have no thoughts; only that which Bhagavan (God) willed would come into his mind. Like a cloud it would come then – whup – oh, such action that thought would produce! And, again, like a cloud it would pass. His mind was always clear³⁶.

Such awareness of this overarching traditional context is further demonstrated by elder devotee Dada Mukerjee, who is in implicit agreement with his fellow *gurubhāī*. Again in relation to Neem Karoli Baba, he claims, “Saints are one in their work as divine channels. They link us up with the source from which all bliss flows: love”³⁷. Whilst both of these statements about the vertical connection of this guru remain general in tone, Swami Chidananda of the Divine Life Society outlines a more elaborate proposition altogether. In a pamphlet on Neem Karoli Baba,

³³ Of the nature of the satguru, Feuerstein acknowledges, “their overriding purpose can be expected to be the communication of the transcendental Reality. Yet their behaviour is, in the final analysis, always a matter of personal style” (Feuerstein, 1992 p. 241).

³⁴ Muktananda, 1974, p. 8

³⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 363

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 60

³⁷ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 18

he illustrates the concept of the guru as operating within part of something altogether larger. He writes:

I also feel that he [Neem Karoli Baba] had hidden inner spiritual contact and connection with a number of other spiritual teachers and saints who were his contemporaries. His work was not completely an individual and isolated one. It formed part of a wider work which many other saints were actively engaged in and were in spiritual co-ordination³⁸.

This presents an intriguing thesis that is not so explicitly replicated elsewhere in the hagiography relating to this guru³⁹. By weaving Neem Karoli Baba somewhere and somehow into an extended web of saintly collaborations, Chidananda also expands the parameters of the area with which we are here concerned – arguably, to infinite proportions. It would appear that Chidananda (a revered guru in his own right) was not insensible to the vastness and complexity of entering into such deliberations. He tiptoes at the edge of his statement with a careful choice of opening verb. Ultimately, of course, Chidananda’s speculation must remain just that, yet it represents an interesting concept that, to follow it through, raises all manner of additional questions – all of which continue to be utterly unanswerable.

2.II.ii Defining the Guru Function

The Guru is unfathomable.

Swami Muktananda⁴⁰

In principle, the word ‘guru’ appears to be a simple one, and yet the variety of different meanings that may be connected to this term attest to its complexity. Sociologist McMullen notes that, in line with its adjectival meaning, the word means ‘heavy’ or may refer to a heavily built person; it has been used in relation to Brihaspati, the *ācārya* of the gods; it may

³⁸ Swami Chidananda. “Baba Neem Karoli – A Wonder Mystic of Northern India.” *Divine Life Society* Accessed at <<http://www.dlshq.org/saints/neemkaroli.htm>> (6 September 2005)

³⁹ The idea that a number of contemporary holy men and women might be communicating and collaborating in their work in this way has (to date) not received much commentative attention. This notwithstanding, T.V. Kapali Sastry was sent by one guru (Aurobindo) to study and confer with another (Ramana Maharshi) which, it might be suggested, could form an act of indirect collaboration between gurus, albeit on the mundane plane. Sastry has published an account of these meetings (T.V. Kapali Sastry, *Collected Works of T.V. Kapali Sastry – Volume Three. The Book of Lights – 3*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1981, pp. 185-252). Furthermore, it has been reported by a number of the Western devotees of Neem Karoli Baba that he too would, on occasion, direct them to attend the darshan of another guru. Both Girija Brilliant and also Rameshwar Das remember being sent to be with Anandamayi Ma, for example. The exact purpose of this arrangement was, however, not revealed to them.

⁴⁰ Muktananda, 2000, p. 22

refer to the bestower of a *mantra* or to a preceptor; and it has been associated with a number of different religious functions and functionaries⁴¹. Of the literal meaning, Chaubey writes:

The word Guru has been derived in two ways: firstly it is derived from *gur* 'to raise, to lift up, to hurt, to kill, to make effort, to kill, to go' with the noun-making termination 'u'. According to this derivation, a person is called a Guru (lit. great) because he tortures, kills or eats up his disciple's ignorance and elevates (or makes an effort to elevate) his character and ultimately leads him to the path of salvation. Secondly, *Guru* is derived from *gr*, 'to sing' or 'to swallow'; accordingly, a person is called a Guru because he preaches *Dharma* to his disciples, or swallows his ignorance⁴².

A well-known twentieth century master, Swami Satchidananda offers a more succinct explanation that is also an abidingly popular one: "Two syllables: *gu* is darkness or ignorance; *ru* means the remover. Guru is the remover of darkness."⁴³ Such an etymology finds repetition in numerous ways across the textual tradition. A dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī makes up the well-known *Guru Gītā*. Bringing together Chaubey's suggestion with that of Satchidananda, it states, "The letter 'Gu' denotes darkness, the letter 'Ru' denotes the remover of darkness. Brahman who is capable of swallowing up ignorance is certainly the Guru"⁴⁴.

As Satchidananda's adherence might suggest, this clarification remains relevant to contemporary teaching concerns. Naga Baba Shiv Raj Giri is a modern-day preceptor who continues to live and teach from a humble tarpaulin-covered hut on the banks of the Ganges at Hardwar. In a 2005 film documentary, he comments:

The word 'guru' is a huge word and to talk about it is not in the hands of you or me. The word is enormous in its nature. 'Gu' means darkness and 'ru' means light – so to bring one from darkness to enlightenment, that is the relationship between the guru and the disciple. That's what the word 'guru' means. How important is the guru? Even the gods – Brahma, Visnu, Siva – must have had their gurus⁴⁵.

Two significant points for consideration are raised in this statement. Firstly, Shiv Raj Giri points out that the meaning of the word guru rests more in its *function*, more in its relation to others; thus, our understanding of it should be more in terms of it being a verb than a noun. Secondly, in his concluding two sentences, he emphasises both the tradition and also the magnitude of this function. In the celestial picture that he paints (in which even the three most

⁴¹ McMullen, 1982, p. 132

⁴² Chaubey, 1982, p. 3

⁴³ Satchidananda, Swami. (Philip Mandelkorn ed.) *To Know Yourself: The Essential Teachings of Swami Satchidananda*. Buckingham, VA: Integral Yoga Publications, 2003, p. 39.

⁴⁴ *Sri Guru Gita*. (Swami Narayanananda trans.) Distr. Tehri-Garhwal, UP: Divine Life Society, 2005, Verse 44

⁴⁵ Fouce, Paula. *Naked in Ashes*. DVD Video. Paradise Filmworks International, 2005. DVD Chapter 15

important deities of the major pantheon are bound by custom to the guru process), he proposes the institution of the guru not only to be one that transcends this worldly sphere but also as pre-dating the start of human time.

In his statement, Shiv Raj Giri adds his support to promoting the path of tradition as being more important than those who walk it, no matter the divinity of their birth. A further layer for consideration makes the matter more complicated, however. Not only is the guru figure held to be one employed in the spiritual preparation of the gods; indeed, he is often traditionally associated as being identical with these three deities also. The second verse of the *Guru Stotra*, an exceptionally well-known hymn to the guru (that also finds regular recitation at the temples of Neem Karoli Baba), offers illustration of this. The most recent prayer book to find publication in the Neem Karoli Baba movement reproduces the verse in the following way:

gurubrahmā guruvishṇuh gurudevo maheshvarah
guruh sākshāt parambrahma tasmai shrī gurave namaḥ⁴⁶

This is translated by the same text in the following manner:

I bow to you, revered Guru. You are Brahma, the creator; Vishu, the preserver; and Maheshwara, the destroyer; you are directly the limitless Brahman⁴⁷.

Observing such a position, the guru is cast in an altogether more imposing and mysterious light than simply the 'remover of darkness'. Suddenly he is an intermediary figure that (according to tradition at least) becomes capable of straddling the manifest and the unmanifest spheres. Moreover, the guru may be seen to have the ability to transcend and inform both. Swami Satyasangananda, herself a disciple of Satyananda, writes on this:

No doubt the guru exists in the physical body, but he operates on a much higher plane. The guru is God himself manifesting in a physical form to guide the disciple... With the finite mind you can never comprehend the infinite nature of the ultimate reality. So, the guru guides you to that realization through interaction with you. He is truly the link between the individual and the divine⁴⁸.

The function of guiding is brought to the fore once more⁴⁹. This is a perspective that situates itself firmly in the divine sphere, looking down upon the earthly and most definitely not the

⁴⁶ Michau comp. 2008, p. 99

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Swami Satyasangananda. *Karma Sannyasa: Spiritual Life for the Householder*. Bihar: Yoga Publications Trust, 1984, p. 53

⁴⁹ Brent cites a poem by Kabīr that emphasis the guiding function of the guru: "In the midst of the highest heaven there is a shining light; he who has no Guru cannot reach the palace; he only will reach it who is under the guidance of a true guru" (Brent, 1971, p. 16).

other way around. Equating the guru with tradition, as it has been to this point, is an incontrovertibly theological stance and one that keeps the function firmly within the vertical plane. Yet, as has been noted above, one of the ongoing fascinations of the role of the guru is that it marks an intersection with the horizontal plane. Accordingly, the guru should not truly be seen as divine *or* human as much as divine *and* human. As Brent notes, tradition might dictate that “the Guru becomes the visible part of God. At the same time, he remains a teacher, setting out tasks which the disciple has to do to achieve spiritual perfection. And he is an example proving that these tasks, this devotion, lead to a successful end”⁵⁰. McLeod concurs. In response to the question of who the guru actually is, he considers: “A contemporary answer is that the *Gurū* is a particular personality, a creative and perfect personality who stands as an exemplar and guide”⁵¹.

Opinions have varied concerning the means by which this bisection of the vertical and the horizontal planes may or should occur (for example, whether it should be performed effortlessly and spontaneously or resultant upon the rigours of *sādhana*⁵²) or also what might be expected as its result. Questions consequently arise as to the impact that the vertical aspects of the guru function must make upon his horizontal existence. In other words, does being a divine channel make its human vessel somehow ‘superhuman’ or different from any other incarnated form? ‘Perfect’ – whatever that actually entails – as McLeod suggests directly above? Does the intermediary nature of the guru function ensure some level of omniscience, omnipotence or absolute beneficence in the human preceptor? If so, is this arrangement total or partial and is it – can it ever be – permanent? Can the observer equate an enlightened state in the guru to giving rise to a perfected human being on every level – vertical and horizontal too? Or (if, as Muktananda suggests above in 2.II.i, the same vertical force moves through every guru) in every case? Kramer and Alstad would not consider any guru’s claim in this respect (or any claims made about him by his followers) to have validity. Instead, so they believe, the promotion of such extraordinary hypotheses are inextricably linked to issues of authoritarianism and to the detrimental coercion of followers into absolute obeisance⁵³. This perspective is not one to which most observers of the guru-disciple phenomenon would uphold, however. A more middle way might be perceived in commentary from Bharati and Feuerstein, who are in agreement that excellence in the vertical dimension may indeed exist

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. 13

⁵¹ McLeod, 1996, p. 197

⁵² Of this Bharati writes, “While the latter [practitioners of *bhakti*] have to wait for ‘grace’, or wait in despair, the Indian yogi and his disciples in India and abroad have the conviction that they own the technical know-how, the way to get there” (Bharati, 1976, p. 170). See also McDaniel, June. *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 257-8

⁵³ Kramer, Joel & Diana Alstad. *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*. Berkeley, CA: Frog Ltd., 1993, p. 108

but should not be assumed to equate with a similar attainment in the horizontal. Feuerstein remarks:

Of course, enlightened persons are not immune to the law of cause and effect. If they eat wrongly, their stomachs will ache. If they cut their fingers, they will bleed. And if they misunderstand something, they will draw the wrong conclusions. They are not omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent – at least not in the usual terms. Their omniscience transcends the particulars of knowledge. And the omnipotence of fully illumined persons does not pertain to the material-sensate order. It is, rather, their ability to be present without obstruction, to shine like a bright light to infinity. Likewise their omnipotence is neither physical nor mental. It is the stream of life itself, the transcendental energy (shakti), out of whose inconceivable ‘mechanics’ enlightened beings spontaneously enact whatever is needful in the moment, as would we all without the interpolation of the ego mechanism⁵⁴.

Rather less prosaic, Bharati agrees nonetheless:

The zero-experience cannot generate sanctity, extra-mystical skills, wisdom, academic qualification, political leadership, or even charisma, any more than orgasm can generate good citizenship, good parental value, or even love in the romantic-erotic sense⁵⁵.

This more measured approach is defensible. It is not that enlightened gurus cannot also be exceptional human beings, but they should not immediately be assumed to be so without investigation at extremely close quarters. Neem Karoli Baba’s recommendation to have a working knowledge of gurus in the same manner that one would filter water (cited at the start of 3.I) appears a sensible course of action. When one considers the innate asymmetry of power within the guru-disciple relationship⁵⁶, then the development of the preceptor’s skills as a divine agent and simultaneously his expertise in human pedagogic interaction take on significance that perhaps was not previously appreciated. Nor should it be assumed that the guru remains permanently suspended in the vertical plane. Even those gurus who have been best known for their demonstration of *samādhi*-like states, have not been known to remain in such suspension from worldly concerns for ever. Writing of one of these holy men, Ramakrishna, Bharati considers that whatever it was that his disciples learned from their master whilst witnessing his ‘state of oneness’, it was not formal teaching in the manner of passing on of the lore: “...during the periods, short or long, when they [gurus] are in that state, they cannot function: they cannot talk and teach, take notes, listen to arguments and to petulant queries”⁵⁷. Bharati refutes the position of the Hindu critics who would assert that mystical

⁵⁴ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 224

⁵⁵ Bharati, 1976, p. 110

⁵⁶ See Feuerstein, 1992, p. 151

⁵⁷ Bharati, 1976, p. 47

teaching might equally come in the form of example as well as in words. In response to their implication that masters remain permanently suspended in the core state, he replies simply, “The critics are wrong”⁵⁸.

Whether pedagogy needs to assume a formal structure for it to be valid or, indeed, informative is an interesting consideration. Many *bhakti* gurus, including Neem Karoli Baba and Ramakrishna, would consider the modelling of *bhāva*-realisation to represent a more skilful instructive method than the *jñāna*-oriented techniques that Bharati refers to here⁵⁹. This commentator’s point that great teachers are ultimately bound in this way to the temporal world (as any other human being might be) is nevertheless a valid proposition. It could be argued, in fact, that this is no human flaw on the part of the preceptor but truly only as it should be: if the guru function is to provide a gateway between the vertical and the horizontal planes, then the practitioner needs to have sufficient fluency *within* both and be skilful at moving *between* both also⁶⁰. Depending on his own perspective, the strategies of his teaching method may change; yet, the essence of his guiding role remains unaltered across the varying quarters of tradition.

Potentially this is a key aspect that separates the *dharma* of the preceptor (with the responsibilities of his students or followers) from that of more solitary spiritual beings. The hermit or cave-dwelling yogi, for example, does not have the worldly duties of his guru peers and, conceivably, this creates a different set of parameters within which he might approach his relationship with the divine. His purpose is less to bisect the vertical plane with the horizontal than to attempt an existence within its intersection. Whether these solo disciplinarians find it easier to remain in a core experience or vertical state than their guru peers may not truly be clarified, but it is a compelling consideration nonetheless. The necessity of dual functional observance could also be held to represent a fundamental difference between the intermediary role of the human guru and that of, for example, a minor deity such as Hanumān. This last may never truly have an understanding of the horizontal nature of being, for he exists solely in the vertical sphere. The situation of the *satguru*, however, is altogether more complex and for the observer to overlook this is a major omission; in doing so, it denies the guru his full function and his humanity too.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ For discussion of Neem Karoli Baba and *bhāva*-realisation, see 3.IV.i. In relation to Amritanandamayi Ma, Maya Warrior too discusses this point. (Warrior, Maya. *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Hindu Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005, p. 65)

⁶⁰ Describing the role of Hanumān, Lutgendorf could also refer to that of his human intermediary counterpart: “Hanuman stands in the middle of things... he moves easily and masterfully between them [the vertical and horizontal worlds], carrying messages and performing mediation” (Lutgendorf, 1997, p. 376). This citation is also included at the opening of Part One, p. 11.

Traditionally, insider observers have tended towards an over-emphasis of the divine aspect of the guru function⁶¹. Outsider observers have done the reverse. This is a generalisation, but true in many instances nonetheless. Insider sources often promote their gurus primarily to be manifestations of divinity who have *also* assumed a level of responsibility in the mundane world (so it is inferred) out of a compassionate concern for the well-being of mankind. In commenting on his own guru (Nityananda), Muktananda exemplifies this position⁶². Satyasangananda's writings provide further illustration⁶³. The hagiographical material relating to Neem Karoli Baba displays a similar tendency to assume that the man existed predominantly in the divine sphere and that his vertical connection was a permanent feature ("You see, he is God. That's of course who he is"⁶⁴). The chapter headings of *The Divine Reality* – including 'Omniscience' and 'Omnipotence' – are revealing in this regard.

It is useful to remember hagiographical convention (in particular that relating to the *bhakti* practice of *guru-yoga*) when approaching narrative material of this type that unfailingly positions its subject 'from the top down'. As McLeod notes of the *bhakti* tradition: "the ancient respect for one's spiritual teacher had been magnified to the point where the gurū had become an object of devotion and his voice accepted as the veritable voice of God"⁶⁵. Failing to observe the stylised nature of this traditional practice, outsider commentators have sometimes reacted negatively to its devotional nature. In an over-simplification of *guru-yoga*, Feuerstein describes it as, "no more than childish adulation and fawning"⁶⁶. Robert Masters comments that it is, "fundamentally no more than spiritual laziness, just one more 'solution' to a primarily problematic orientation towards Life"⁶⁷. Going a step further, Kramer and Alstad are diametrically opposed to the insider commentators referred to in previous paragraphs. They choose to view these teachers exclusively 'from the bottom up'. In doing so, the emphasis on the agency of the guru function is replaced by more worldly consideration of power and control that might be achieved through the assumption of a preceptorial role. From a traditional Hindu perspective, however, this last opinion is also the most unseeing. Their view does succeed in renegotiating matters of hierarchy so that, "not all power ran only from top down"⁶⁸; yet, in supplanting the role of the intermediary with that of potential abuser, it misses

⁶¹ Bharati notes that one reason for this tendency is that Hindu tradition "never uses *etic* language to talk about mystical things; his reports are well within the code of the tradition" (Bharati, 1976, p. 49)

⁶² Muktananda, 1974, p. 10

⁶³ Satyasangananda, 1984, p. 53

⁶⁴ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 57

⁶⁵ McLeod, 1996, p. 197

⁶⁶ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 162

⁶⁷ Masters, Robert A. *The Way of the Lover: The Awakening & Embodiment of the Full Human*. West Vancouver, BC: Xanthiros Foundation, 1988, p. 141

⁶⁸ Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 12

altogether the aspect of the guru function that should remain at the heart of preceptorial tradition and practice too.

With this in mind, an appropriate way to conclude this consideration of the guru function would be to take suggestion from more measured commentators of the phenomenon who do not overlook the central dualism inherent within the preceptor's role. Within the material relating to Neem Karoli Baba, one unnamed *celā* comments: "Sometimes he [Neem Karoli Baba] was like God and sometimes he was like an ordinary person"⁶⁹. This understated reflection arguably succeeds in encapsulating the issue at hand. In a booklet distributed at the guru's 1998 *mahāsamādhi bhandārā*⁷⁰, Saroj Pande reminds her fellow devotees, "Baba was a saint as He had a dual personality. The divine and the human"⁷¹. Thirdly, in *The Near and the Dear*, Mukerjee provides closer explanation of how the insider observer may approach and appreciate the twin aspects of the guru function in general and of Neem Karoli Baba in particular:

... a saint is a person with a dual personality – the divine and the human. Many of us have seen the human person in Babaji [Neem Karoli Baba], but that doesn't mean we can claim to have seen the divine person in him.

In a saint, the divine person is encased in the human frame but is not entirely identical. The bottom and the top of the divine stand far apart from each other. There is a co-mingling in the inner space, and in noble human beings, some of the divine qualities merge entirely with their human qualities, destroying all distinction between human and divine⁷².

2.II.iii The Guru Imperative

Is spiritual illumination possible without a preceptor? ...Can a boat ever float without water even though you strain every nerve till your last breath?

(RCM 7.89A & 89B)

Whilst discord exists between different spiritual practitioners and commentators as to how much knowledge is to be assumed to be within the preceptor's grasp, it remains true that the great majority of parties would agree upon the imperative of the guru function. At least, this would be the case for those participants and observers who adhere to an emic perspective. Different agents might employ different terminology (in particular in their expression of what constitutes the divine), yet the end role remains similar. As Chaubey remarks, "In Indian culture the supreme position has been assigned to a Guru, because he is the source of all

⁶⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 132

⁷⁰ This is an annual public feast of consecrated food to mark the day of the guru's death.

⁷¹ Pande, Dr (Mrs) Saroj. "Baba Neem Karauli Sant Maharaj". Booklet distributed at Bhandara (1998). Accessed at <<http://www.neemkarolibaba.com/experiences/pande1.html>> p. 1 (6 September 2005)

⁷² Mukerjee, 1996, p. 7

learning”⁷³. Some three and a half decades before Muktananda took his message to the West, Ramana Maharshi is recorded as having discussed the importance of the guru with a visitor to his ashram in Tiruvannamalai:

All scriptures recommend spiritual teachers. The guru is none other than the goal men seek, the Self. As the seeker’s mind is bent outwards, the Self takes a human shape as a guru to help driving it inwards. Thayumanavar⁷⁴ says that God, Self, or Guru appears as a man to dispel the ignorance of man, just as a deer is used as a decoy to capture a wild deer. He has to appear in the body in order to dispel the ‘I-am-in-the-body’ notion of the seeker⁷⁵.

As is only appropriate to a viewpoint that owes much to Śāṅkara, Ramana Maharshi’s approach is that the seeker needs ‘only’ to uncover the truth (or the Self) already existent within his or her being for enlightenment to be revealed. The role of an externalised grace that is such a driving force through the *bhakti*-inspired schools of thought is not prevalent here⁷⁶. For this guru, there is simply no difference between the vertical plane of the guru function and the horizontal plane of its application in the world; any indications of potential separation are merely *māyā* (the product of ignorance) at work. The spiritual secret lies in the realisation of this non-duality, yet for this (so says Ramana in line with the rest of his peers) again one does need a guru to function as a guide:

The Guru is both external and internal. From the exterior he gives a push to the mind to turn it inwards. From the interior he pulls the mind towards the Self and helps on the quietening of the mind. That is Guru’s grace. There is no difference between God, Guru and the Self⁷⁷.

Different theological and philosophical lineages may offer significantly differing opinions as to the roles of grace and even the exact nature of the divine. Yet an almost pan-tradition concordance exists as to the imperative of the guru. Those few individuals who do demur from this line in recent times (such as J. Krishnamurti⁷⁸) on the whole still encourage aspirants to

⁷³ Chaubey, 1982, p. 15

⁷⁴ Thayunmanavar lived in the south of India in the first half of the eighteenth century. A philosopher and author of almost 1500 devotional hymns or poems, he was often referred to by Ramana Maharshi.

⁷⁵ Cohen, S.S. *Guru Ramana – Memories and Notes*. Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1998, pp. 59-60

⁷⁶ On grace, Ramana Maharshi tells the aspirant, “Grace is always there... Grace is constant. Your judgement is the variable. Where else should the fault lie?” (Godman, David ed. 1985, p. 101) The acknowledgement of the non-temporal nature of reality, of grace and of the responsibility of the seeker to apply himself to the process of s/Self-inquiry is key to this guru’s perspective. It is different to that of Neem Karoli Baba who, as a *bhakta*, considered grace to be divinely given and that might be made attainable through the devotional purity and intensity of the *celā*.

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 96

⁷⁸ For J. Krishnamurti’s stance on the inner teacher see Powell, Robert “An Approach to Krishnamurti” in Vas, Luis S. R. ed. *The Mind of Krishnamurti*. Mumbai: Jaico Books, 2003, pp. 28-29

connect with their sense of the *inner* teacher⁷⁹. It is only a very small minority (for example U.G. Krishnamurti⁸⁰) who would refute the need for a preceptor altogether.

2.II.iv Issues of Transplanting the Guru Function

Ever since Vivekananda's 1893 address to the Chicago Parliament of World Religions and the subsequent growth of the neo-Hindu movement throughout the course of the previous century, a transplantation of these traditional values into a number of non-indigenous settings has occurred. These developments, featuring the geographical expansion or translocation of elements of the tradition, have led to a new breed of modern teacher and, in turn, provided revised considerations for the guru-disciple relationship. Swami Vivekananda (in the nineteenth century) and then Swamis Prabhavananda, Rama, Satchidananda and Muktananda (in the twentieth century) would all exemplify this preceptor. These gurus were sent (in the main by their own masters and lineages⁸¹) as missionary-type figures to feed what they perceived to be the spiritually hungry West. Pushed to work outside their usual cultural context in a way their own spiritual forefathers could hardly have imagined, it is arguable that these 'hybrid teachers' (or, as Bharati would have them known, the "roaming swamis"⁸²) have had to negotiate different preceptorial challenges than those Hindu teachers who remained at home – for example, Ramana Maharshi, Anandamayi Ma or also Neem Karoli Baba. This remains the case even though each of these last three individuals also engaged with Western followers⁸³, albeit on Indian soil and within the traditional setting of the ashram (as opposed to lecture theatre). Yet, those neo-Hindu preceptors sent to work outside their native lands subsequently developed an additional awareness of the particular and new-found considerations of bringing ancient Indian teachings into a contemporary alien setting.

It is, therefore, revealing that there has been a voice of warning from these 'hybrid teachers'. Concerning the agency and function of the guru, they have early on recognised how

⁷⁹ Feuerstein takes exception to J. Krishnamurti's position complaining, "Not everyone is endowed with razor-sharp intelligence, a fact that was overlooked by Jiddu Krishnamurti" (Feuerstein, 1992, p. 128). He continues: "I am not completely debunking the concept of the inner guru. Even the external guru must be internalized at a certain point in one's spiritual maturation, and the transcendental Identity, or Self, can indeed act as a guiding force in our lives. But we must first learn to distinguish between fantasy and reality, between our childish needs and neurotic desires and the genuine impulse to transcend the ego. Otherwise our spirituality is bound to remain a sad parody" (*ibid.*).

⁸⁰ "I don't believe in the revivalism of this religion which is dead. What do you want to revive in this country [India]? – you tell me... Another *ashram*? What for? There are so many *ashrams*, so many *gurus*... I feel it is all futile. They [gurus] can't do anything" (Rodney Arns ed. *The Mystique of Enlightenment. The unrational ideas of a man called U.G.* Goa: Cemetile Corporation, 1982, p. 74).

⁸¹ The Ramakrishna Vedanta Math is an example here.

⁸² Bharati, 1976, p. 172

⁸³ For discussion on the inclusivity of traditional *bhakti* practice (in relation to Neem Karoli Baba and Anandamayi Ma at least) that would not have precluded followers from other castes and creeds, see 3.V.i, pp. 217-220.

psychologically seductive the position of the guru might appear to those in a non-native setting without adequate understanding of the institution, or without adherence to any lineage.

Reminding us once more that the function of the guru is the essence of his purpose and that that eligibility of one's suitability for such a function is one that is authorised from the 'top down' and *not vice versa* (whatever one might wish for on a personal level), 'hybrid teacher' Swami Rama warns those with contemporary guru aspirations: "No human being can ever become a guru. But when a human being allows himself to be used as a channel for receiving and transmitting the Power of Powers, then it happens"⁸⁴.

From the discussion so far it is clear that, as far as tradition is concerned, becoming a guru is not a proactive choice: one either is or is not a preceptor in the conventional mould. Guru status in India might be attained through the strength of personal charisma / divine agency of the preceptor in question. Alternately, succession to the role might be legitimised through designation by an established master or his lineage or by virtue of one's birth (in other words, through hereditary succession)⁸⁵. In each circumstance, however, the role is one that achieves its legitimacy and support from a wider institutional context that is implicitly understood by teacher and, significantly, by his students also. Moreover, so Narayan considers, there are "inbuilt cultural mechanisms [in India] to limit abuses of this powerful role"⁸⁶. She gives as illustration the many cautionary figures of the scoundrel ascetics that are to be found in Indian folklore and the fact that, if a preceptor is found to be transgressing his role within a certain part of society, he would most probably be driven out from their midst⁸⁷. In a modern context (and writing in relation to Mata Amritanandamayi), Maya Warrier observes that guru figures find frequent portrayal in the Indian film industry as "crooks and libertines"⁸⁸, as sexual predators or as "con-men (and women) with criminal connections, using their spirituality as a façade for making money"⁸⁹. With such 'mechanisms' in place, indigenous respect for unknown gurus is likely to be healthily guarded until the preceptor in question proves himself to be genuine.

In relation to transplanting the institution into a Western environment, however, the situation is rather different. As Narayan pertinently observes, "The role of Guru is open to anyone who can convince disciples to follow him or her"⁹⁰. In an alien setting, much of the traditional

⁸⁴ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 393

⁸⁵ See Weber, 1978, pp. 246-249

⁸⁶ Narayan, Kirin. *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*. Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass Publishers, 1992, p. 85

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Warrier, 2005, p. 66

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Narayan, 1992, p. 85

framework that defines the guru-disciple relationship, and that creates the appropriate boundaries for its maintenance, may become distorted or even lost altogether. In the rejection of their own religious models in favour of ideas of the 'spiritualised East' (in a manner that lies outside the bounds of their own native cultural experience), foreign seekers not only "sustain the illusion of a polarization between East and West"⁹¹ but are also less likely to possess the natural discernment that has been culturally instilled into the Indian follower. Consequently, the way is opened for an increase in the potential abuse of power within the institution and within the spiritual relationship too:

Lacking a cultural context in which to place the roles of ascetic, Guru or disciple, Western followers tend to be the shining-eyed purveyors of ideals. Gurus may be disapproved of in the wider culture, but within the pocket of a sect, the trope of the mysterious East comes into play. Even if in their own religious tradition there is folklore mocking monks, priests, rabbis and other religious orders, the healthy cynicism maintained by anti-ascetic folklore in India is unknown to most Westerners who link up with a Guru. Through eyes coloured by visions of the wholly spiritual land, the average *sādhu* is to be viewed more likely as a saint than the scoundrel he may well be⁹².

Uday Mehta has also written on the challenges of transplanting the Indian guru into a non-indigenous context and observes the potential for the institution to be used for ends other than purely spiritual. According to Mehta, a number of the neo-Hindu movements (which he describes as being cults) that have achieved a foreign foothold as a result of Western interest in Eastern spirituality have had unseemly financial connections with industrial establishments and even direct political patronage, including links with the CIA⁹³. It is undeniable that malpractice has occurred within past decades and there has been some level of scandal or indiscretion of one sort or another associated with a number of the lineages brought to the West in the latter half of the twentieth century. At the same time, it may not be denied that such incidences – whilst attention-grabbing – have not been representative of most Western aspirants' experiences. What is most important here is to recognise that there have been (and continue to be) challenges inherent in the transposition of the institution of the guru into a non-native setting. Neither Neem Karoli Baba, nor his successors, ever went to the West in the manner of the 'hybrid teachers'; thus the issue of translation is not directly relevant to this movement. Having said this, it is true that he admitted Western aspirants into his satsang in the final decade of his life and that a fair proportion of these devotees subsequently returned home

⁹¹ *ibid.* p. 158. Narayan holds this situation to be a "historically embedded construct that derived from colonial perceptions of the Other" (*ibid.*)

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ Mehta, Uday. *Modern Godmen in India: A Sociological Appraisal*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993, p. 44

bearing his teachings on his behalf (see 3.V.viii). Consequently, this movement must also be associated with the translocation of the institution into different spheres – however obliquely.

To this point, the foremost focus of the examination of the guru figure has been to consider the aetiological divinity of the institution as a whole. The primary purpose of the authentic guru has been shown to rest in his combined functions as a guide, as a role model to seekers and as one who establishes (at the very least) a dialogue between the divine and the manifest planes. In comparing the role of the guru to be that of a boat, Swami Rama is in entire agreement with this perspective. At the same time, he cautions:

Never forget that the guru is not the goal. Guru is like a boat for crossing the river. It is very important to have a good boat and it is very dangerous to have a boat that is leaking. But after you have crossed the river, you don't need to hang onto your boat, and you certainly don't need to worship the boat⁹⁴.

In these words (directed, one assumes, to a Western reader), he reminds aspirants that the guru is representative of the *path* to enlightenment and that he is not the *destination* itself, however much one might feel devoted or connected to the preceptor. Advocates of *guru-kṛpā* might not always agree with this perspective, but it is clear *bhakti* practice nonetheless. That this should be the case finds illustration in the *Rāmacaritamānasa*: Hanumān (as the foremost proponent of devotion) is introduced to the reader only *after* Rāma's revelation of the nine-fold *path* of devotion (*RCM* 3.34.4-35.4). Again, the path is given priority over he who walks it. The space that this clarification creates subsequently allows the disciple to make an active contribution; indeed, it acknowledges that he *must*. With this in mind, therefore, we proceed with an appraisal of the interdependent role of the aspirant in the relationship and assess any responsibilities that could be held to accompany that position also.

2.III Concerning the Nature of Devotion: Considerations for the Guru – Disciple Relationship

2.III.i The Hunter or the Hunted: Issues of Seeking the Guru

We think we are running after the guru, but he [Neem Karoli Baba] is actually running after us. Why does he do it? ...It is out of sheer grace, out of sheer kindness.

Mukerjee⁹⁵

Swami Rama describes the intense devotion of the guru-disciple bond as “such a pure relationship that I don't think that any other relationship is comparable”⁹⁶. Feuerstein, not

⁹⁴ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 393

⁹⁵ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 179

inspired by *bhakti guru-yoga*, nonetheless believes, “There is mystery and power in the sacred relationship between teacher and disciple”⁹⁷. From these statements, and from the discussion that has featured in the previous chapter, it may be appreciated that the complexities of this spiritual union have long presented a fascination to insider and outsider voices alike. This may be held to be the case in relation to Neem Karoli Baba as well as to other guru-disciple arrangements. Whilst every aspect of the guru-disciple relationship has provided cause for speculation, a foremost concern appears to be how the follower may initially come to locate, meet and then connect on a meaningful level with the *satguru* figure, such as is depicted above in 2.II. Of recognising the one’s guru, Warriar observes, “it is imperative to ask how individuals make sense of the bewildering variety that they encounter in the world of gurus and guru organizations”⁹⁸. An element of this consternation relates to the perceived rarity of the genuine guru, even within what is patently a ubiquitous institution. (“It is for this reason that potential disciples may spend years in searching for the Guru right for them”⁹⁹) When one considers the necessary divine attributes that appear to be required of the guru, then it might indeed follow that a meeting with such a being would mark a rare occurrence¹⁰⁰. That this might be disheartening to any potential *celā* is not surprising.

What is more challenging still is that, according to convention, physically finding the *satguru* is no guarantee of any further relationship with him; however frustrating this might prove to the seeker. As will be seen in relation to Neem Karoli Baba in the remainder of this study, instigation of a connection is traditionally seen to remain solely at the discretion of the guru. Makarand Paranjape states in an essay entitled ‘Nine Meditations on the Guru’, “the guru is the hunter not the hunted”¹⁰¹. Yet it is not always an easy matter for contemporary followers to observe and abide by this principle in the midst of their search. Swami Rama contributes an interesting dimension to this predicament of finding one’s true guru when he comments:

⁹⁶ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 392

⁹⁷ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 147

⁹⁸ Warriar, 2005, p. 65

⁹⁹ Brent, 1971, p. 14

¹⁰⁰ Chaubey lists the necessary attributes prescribed by the Hindu scriptures for the guru. The *Kularnava Tantra*, for example, presents over eighty requirements, some of which are considerable qualifications: *trikaljna* (being the knower of past, present and future), *dambha* (being devoid of attachment, hate, fear, pain and ostentation) and *ahankara* (being devoid of egoism) are but three (Chaubey, 1982, p. 11). Other Hindu scriptures describe the disqualifications for guruship. The *Kalpachintamani* provides a long list of features that would debar one from becoming a guru. Amongst other things, this includes having tuberculosis, a hunched back, bad skin and nails, black teeth, one eye, being prone to gesticulation or being foolish (*ibid.* pp. 12-13).

¹⁰¹ Paranjape, Makarand. “Nine Meditations on the Guru” *Life Positive* (October 2004)

No one can search for a preceptor... [the guru-disciple relationship] only happens because of *samskaras*. Teacher and student *samskaras* are very ancient and strong¹⁰².

To follow his line of argument, it stands that the seeker's personal choice (or what might be thought of as representative of his 'free will') is not of foremost importance here. Abiding by traditional dictates, the inherited tendencies of the individual follower or his subconscious imprints in relation to the individual teacher invariably remain the determinative factors in whether a relationship between the pair may flourish in any particular incarnation. Moreover, as Feuerstein remarks:

In many traditions, this teacher-disciple bond is thought to be eternal, outlasting the death of the physical body and continuing until the disciple's own awakening in some future lifetime. Even after the disciple's enlightenment, this spiritual connection remains intact, although the enlightened disciple may now be a teacher in his or her own right... All too often this aspect is entirely misunderstood¹⁰³.

With the potential inclusion of multiple lifetimes and the resultant karmic accrual, the parameters within which the relationship is thought to operate become altogether more vast. It simultaneously becomes one more or less removed from rational comprehension, so it might be argued, by the unenlightened mind at least.

It should be remembered at this juncture that, in India itself, the search for one's personal guru is generally not such a fraught experience as has sometimes been the case for the non-indigenous seeker. This is not to say that Indian believers have not been presented with the same personal challenges of deciding whether or not to surrender to the hands of a particular preceptor, or with the later issues of transmission and transformation. However, the initial point of finding the true guru appears to be a more organic process for most. Indeed, many seekers study with any number of *upagurus*¹⁰⁴ for a variety of spiritual purposes before they connect with their *satguru* – if that is indeed to happen at all¹⁰⁵. A fair proportion of native aspirants come to meet a particular guru as a result of physical or geographical proximity or of the traditions of their own family. It is an understandable and commonplace occurrence for the disciple parent to place the child under the guidance of his or her own personal guru, and not much more is thought about it. Such is certainly true for many of Neem Karoli Baba's own

¹⁰² Swami Rama, 1996, p. 106

¹⁰³ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 147

¹⁰⁴ As opposed to the 'true guru' represented by the *satguru*, the *upaguru* denotes any spiritual teacher who has played a part in an aspirant's instruction or preparation. Neem Karoli Baba was a *satguru* for many devotees; it is likewise true that he would have represented an *upaguru* figure for many others.

¹⁰⁵ See Chaubey, 1982, p. 15

devotees – the Sah family and the Tewari family have connections of this nature, for example. Yet this is not generally the case in the West, where aspirants are (for the most part) searching outside their own native spiritual traditions for guidance that, for whatever reason, they do not feel able to receive ‘at home’. With this in mind, therefore, it is arguable that the question of hunting the guru – as opposed to being his ‘prey’ – becomes one of greater consternation for contemporary Western seekers than it does for native followers.

Within recent decades, a considerable amount of guidance has been offered by contemporary masters (in particular, with an eye to the Western audience) on the appropriate manner in which to seek the guru. Personally relocated to the West in 1966, Satchidananda recognises the tendency towards misguided preconceptions of how Eastern wisdom should appear. He speaks, in particular, to students born outside the tradition when he warns of the pitfalls of judging the guru by the appearance of his incarnate form: “If a long beard were a qualification, all goats could be gurus, because they all have beards”¹⁰⁶. Moreover, as he continues, one may not necessarily locate or even recognise the guru by the words that he has to offer:

A real guru will never call himself a guru. Then how can you know a real guru? Such a person won’t come forward and say, ‘I’ll teach you’. He’ll simply be living a beautiful life. You can learn from his example. He is Dedication personified, not affected by praise or censure. He is wise. He will not be after things or name or fame or anything... He is just there. He won’t even force his advice or teachings on you. He won’t knock at your door to come and read scriptures to you. You will have to go to him and even prove your interest and sincerity¹⁰⁷.

The concept of the elusive nature of the *satguru* is highlighted, again without much practical assistance. Satchidananda’s final sentence raises a further question, however, that concerns the role of the aspirant in the matter of locating the guru. If the guru is to remain in the role of the hunter, how much of an active part does the seeker have to play in the initiatory process? Such a consideration is reminiscent of two contrasting *vaiṣṇava* schools of thought concerning the acquisition of grace: in the first, the Tenkalai school, the devotee is provided with the model of the passive kitten that is simply carried to safety by its mother; in the second, the Vadakalai school, the aspirant is offered the concept of the baby monkey that must actively cling to its mother whilst she carries it away from danger. These two models may be seen as equally applicable to the relationship between the hunted-student and the hunter-guru. As in the case of the ‘kitten school’, must the follower rely entirely upon the advances of his guru and so be entirely dependent upon the preceptor’s powers of perception as to his suitability as a serious student? Or, as Satchidananda’s statement would infer, is his a more active part than it at first

¹⁰⁶ Satchidananda (Mandelkorn ed.) 2003, p. 39

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.* p. 40

appears? As in the case of the 'monkey school', must the follower *prove* his suitability to the teacher? Once more, opinion remains plastic and is inevitably influenced by the philosophical positioning of the guru or commentator concerned.

As will be seen in 3.III, devotees of Neem Karoli Baba held that any interaction with their guru ultimately remained his decision or of his determination. Part of their great wonder at this preceptor was that they perceived that he loved them without reserve, no matter what they had previously done, thought or felt, a viewpoint that might appear rather naïve. The intensity and potential within this position would locate their relations (predominantly at least) within the 'kitten school' of thought¹⁰⁸. At the same time, they were most concerned to adhere to the practices that were prescribed for them by their preceptor. Thus, as Feuerstein remarks:

Most schools [including the satsang discussed here], however, assume a middle path in this matter: there must be what... is called 'self-effort' and 'other-effort' – that is work and grace – for spiritual growth to occur. Grace here means the inflow of understanding and strength that is received after opening up. Without appropriate self-purificatory effort, there is no foundation to receive the gift of grace, and without grace self-effort is destined to remain barren. Both are necessary for the harvest¹⁰⁹.

Feuerstein refers here more to the act of spiritual progress after the initial guru-disciplic point of initiation – the “moment of recognition, or of something perhaps a little sharper”¹¹⁰ – but his description is equally applicable to the early stages of connection also. In this, matters of self-responsibility and self-preparation are not always given adequate consideration. They are, nonetheless, both vital factors. Satchidananda reminds, “the outside guru will not actually take you to the goal, he can only show you the way. You have to walk”¹¹¹. One would pre-suppose that, in order to be able to walk, one must first be able to find one's spiritual feet. Swami Rama asks, “Are you capable of attracting a teacher? Are you prepared to be guided?”¹¹² His question is illuminating in that it may be interpreted in two different ways, both of which are significant here: firstly is the aspirant suitably *able* to be guided and, simultaneously, does the aspirant sufficiently *desire* to be guided?

¹⁰⁸ Warriar comes to a similar decision in relation to the devotees of Amritanandamayi Ma before conceding that such a view is overly simplistic. (Warriar, Maya. *Devotion to a Goddess in Contemporary India*. 2nd Series Occasional Paper 40. Lampeter: University of Wales, 2004, p. 13). In a subsequent publication she expands her view and acknowledges the apparent paradox of devotees occupying elements of both schools (See Warriar, 2005, pp. 114-116).

¹⁰⁹ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 120

¹¹⁰ Brent, 1971, p. 18

¹¹¹ Satchidananda (Mandelkorn ed.) 2003, p. 39

¹¹² Swami Rama, 1996, p. 107

2.III.ii Considerations of Willingness and Surrender

*The Guru and the shishya, they are like two kernels in one jack-fruit, one raw, the other ripe. The raw one wants to be ripe; the ripe one is ripe and wants nothing more... The difference is only felt by the unripe*¹¹³.

This last factor of willingness is important in any consideration of the guru-disciple relationship. Furthermore, it is potentially one of the most revealing. The question of a proactive surrender to spiritual (re-)moulding at the guru's hands marks a core concern with which followers have to engage and it raises personal issues of authority, autonomy and hierarchy. It is also the area of the guru-disciple relationship with which its critics (justifiably) have the most strident concerns¹¹⁴. One of the first Westerners to become a devotee of Neem Karoli Baba, Bhagavan Das depicts the challenge of the experience in visceral terms:

The whole cosmos around us collapses like a house of cards when the guru huffs and puffs and blows it down. The guru is the big bad wolf. He's come to eat us. If you're not willing to offer him the pudding of your being, it can be scary. You need to give your whole self to him, inside and out. Only through that surrender can you come to understand the power of atman¹¹⁵.

With evidence such as this, perhaps critics are correct to be apprehensive. The relinquishment of one's egoic identity that the process of surrender (whether partial or in full is another matter¹¹⁶) demands is an enormous undertaking and requires the aspirant to have total faith in the motivation and expertise of the preceptor involved. If the teacher is not authentic – that is, not fully enlightened himself or, worse, “unscrupulous and corrupt”¹¹⁷ – then he will not be spiritually empowered to effect the desired transformation in his student. The still-present ego or improper agenda of the imperfect preceptor will simply intervene. The process will be (at best) a humiliating and pointless process for the aspirant and, at worst, it can be positively dangerous. McMullen observes that where gurus promise “magical solutions and instant salvation... without due emphasis on a code of conduct and social and religious discipline and awareness”, they become responsible for “producing a cheap, superficial and perverted religiosity”¹¹⁸. More than this, Kramer and Alstad caution, “disciples become attached to having the guru as their center, whereas the guru becomes attached to the power of being others' center”¹¹⁹. It is clear that the potential repercussions of the situation are ominous. Even

¹¹³ Reproduced in Brent, 1971, p. 22

¹¹⁴ Kramer and Alstad deem the process of spiritual surrender to be entirely inappropriate. (See Kramer and Alstad, 1993, pp. 62-63)

¹¹⁵ Bhagavan Das, 1997, pp. 96-97

¹¹⁶ Feuerstein believes that, whilst total surrender is the ‘ideal’, in practice surrender is partial. (Feuerstein, 1992, p. 120)

¹¹⁷ McMullen, 1982, p. 137

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* pp. 137-138

¹¹⁹ Kramer and Alstad, 1993, p. 50

if the teacher is a fully-realised *satguru*, as Bhagavan Das's statement (presumably of his own experience) would suggest, surrender marks a very unsettling process.

In many ways, surrender represents a paradoxical situation: the aspirant is committed to an absolute relinquishment of his egoic personality. The subtlety involved in such a process simply steps outside much of what is taught (in particular) in Western culture. When, in 1943, Yogananda instructed that, "Obedience to the guru is the surest way when one is seeking God"¹²⁰, one can only imagine how the issues of trust and compliance must have felt to his Hollywood lecture class. Nevertheless, Yogananda is here only espousing conventional spiritual values that almost always prescribe surrender to the guru as an essential part of spiritual practice. As Feuerstein qualifies, however, "Obedience to spiritual authority need not, and should not, negate personal freedom."¹²¹ Indeed, rather than a forced-upon abnegation of the disciple's individuality, such a process is designed to act as guidance: "Spiritual discipleship is the voluntary acceptance of constraints in order to facilitate one's own inner freedom"¹²². Again, Swami Rama's question appears significant, 'Are you prepared to be guided?'"¹²³ With this inquiry, the role of *willingness* is highlighted once more: with the readiness or inclination of the aspirant, the active process of surrender becomes separate from the passive act of capitulation. On this point, Feuerstein concurs:

The trick is not to turn surrender into suppression and repression. Surrender is openness to Reality; whereas suppression and repression are forms of psychic closure¹²⁴.

Whilst they may hail from different generations and varying oriented lineages, Swamis Vivekananda¹²⁵, Sivananda¹²⁶, Muktananda¹²⁷, Satyasangananda¹²⁸ and also H.W.L. Poonja¹²⁹ are entirely representative of the many nineteenth and twentieth century teachers who have adhered to the traditional line of the significance of surrender. For the student to be able to release himself into the paradigm of the guru-disciple relationship, trust might be seen to be a clear prerequisite. *Advaita* master, Nisargadatta Maharaj develops this in the following way:

¹²⁰ Yogananda, Paramahansa. *The Divine Romance*. New Delhi: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1986, p. 81

¹²¹ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 257

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ Swami Rama, 1996, p. 107

¹²⁴ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 118

¹²⁵ Swami Vivekananda. *Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga*. New York: Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, 1982, pp. 139-140

¹²⁶ Swami Sivananda. *Sadhana – A Text Book of the Psychology and Practice of the Techniques to Spiritual Perfection*. Distr. Tehri-Garhwal, UP: Divine Life Society, 1998, pp. 497-498

¹²⁷ Muktananda, 2000, pp. 24-26

¹²⁸ Satyasangananda, 1984, pp. 54-55

¹²⁹ Poonja, H.W.L. Prashanti De Jager comp. *The Truth Is*. Delhi: Full Circle, 2000, p. 60

The master, the disciple, the love and the trust between them, these are one fact, not so many independent facts. Each is a part of the other. Without love and trust there would have been no Guru nor disciple, and no relationship between them. It is like pressing a switch to light a lamp. It is because the lamp, the wiring, the switch, the transformer, the transmission lines and the power house, form a single whole, that you get a light. Any one factor missing and there would be no light. You must not separate the inseparable¹³⁰.

Whilst this point is frequently overlooked, what Nisargadatta Maharaj alludes to here is that the guru tradition demands that the act of surrender between follower and his preceptor should be seen as a reciprocal one. It is only at that point at which the disciple is finally prepared (or willing) to release himself into the guru's hands that the teacher may simultaneously offer *himself* to the disciple. Brent comments, "Only when the would-be disciple has made his decision [to surrender] can the Guru exercise what is his prerogative [as the 'hunter'], the acceptance or the rejection of the newcomer"¹³¹. Thus, whilst the initial relinquishment necessarily comes from the disciple, the offering of his self to the preceptor is subsequently transformed into an action that is shared by guru and devotee alike. The significance of this is not to be underestimated, for it marks the initiation of what has been described as the 'spiritual marriage' of the guru-disciple relationship. At the point of connection, the vertical and horizontal planes may at last truly intersect. Moreover, such a reciprocation of the surrender principle serves to soften and provide a context for what is, undoubtedly, a challenging process on the part of almost any aspirant.

The moment of *dīkṣā*, or initiation, may take a variety of forms including "a look, a touch, receipt of a *mantra*, or even, in the realms of folklore, the cutting of a nose"¹³². One well-known traditional disciplic initiation ritual involves the burning of sticks by his guru. At its culmination, so Swami Rama believes, a deep connection is established between both parties:

When a student goes to a guru, he takes a bundle of dry sticks. With reverence and love he bows and says, 'Here, I offer this.' That indicates that he is surrendering himself with all his mind, action and speech with a single desire to attain the highest wisdom. The guru burns those sticks and says, 'Now I will guide you and protect you in the future.' Then he initiates the student on various levels and gives him the disciplines to practice. It is such a pure relationship that I don't think that any other relationship is comparable. Everything the guru has, even his body, mind and soul, belongs to his student. But if he has any odd habits at all, they belong to himself¹³³.

¹³⁰ Maharaj, Nisargadatta. Maurice Frydman trans. *I Am That: Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*. Bombay: Chetana (P.) Ttd., 1973, p. 402

¹³¹ Brent, 1971, p. 21

¹³² Narayan, 1989, p. 82

¹³³ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 392

The purity of purpose that Swami Rama proposes here is an exceptionally rare concept and, for those standing outside the experience of the devoted guru-disciple relationship, it is conceivably exceptionally challenging. This remains the case in relation to how observers to the tradition might view the practice of ‘offering’ – whether of one’s sticks, oneself or of one’s worldly possessions – to the guru. The act of *dakṣiṇa* (literally ‘sacred offering’) is one again prescribed by convention. It involves the aspirant presenting a portion of his worldly belongings or a gift to the guru. This might entail a rather grand gesture (a large amount of money, for example), but it is just as likely to be a small offering (maybe some fruit or confectionary) that is presented to the preceptor at the start of a *darśana*¹³⁴. As *dakṣiṇa* is a practice that might be seen to be particularly vulnerable to any ‘impure’ motivations on the part of its recipients, it seems important to appraise it in the traditional manner in which it is intended.

In recent decades there have been a number of material object or money-related incidents that have attracted the attention of the press (in particular, although not solely, in the West), whereby certain gurus have been seen to manipulate the principle of *dakṣiṇa* to their own considerable advantage. Rajneesh and his fleet of ninety-three Rolls Royce cars offers a clear illustration¹³⁵, as does the fact that the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi charged certain potential aspirants upwards of \$50 for the provision of a mantra¹³⁶. As a result of such examples, the idea of the pure and reciprocal ‘spiritual marriage’ is, for some observers, forever tarred as being a situation of potential abuse¹³⁷. It is, of course, indubitable that there have been instances of the misuse of guru power during the twentieth century; in particular with the translocation of neo-Hinduism into a Western context, factors of power, sex and money have been added into the guru-disciplic dynamic in a manner not previously (at least not so often) experienced in a native Indian setting. As McDaniel observes, “The classical problems are shown in Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa’s phrase ‘women and gold’ ”¹³⁸. Devotees are right to be wary of gurus who they feel are being overly demanding in this manner but to attribute such potentially abusive and / or manipulative intentions to *all* guru figures and to *all* guru-disciple relationships is to miss the mark.

¹³⁴ The custom of bringing the guru an offering during the course of a *darśana* was observed with Neem Karoli Baba. See 3.IV.ii

¹³⁵ Storr, 1997, p. 59

¹³⁶ Bancroft, Anne. *Modern Mystics and Sages*. London: Paladin, 1978, pp. 123 & 126

¹³⁷ Kramer & Alstad, 1993, pp. 45-59. A subsequent article further demonstrates their view that the guru figure is, in its nature, inherently abusive and authoritarian. (See Blacker, Hal. “The Kramer Papers: A Look Behind the Mask of Antiauthoritarianism. A Personal Account of a Meeting with the Authors of the Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power” *What is Enlightenment? Magazine*. Journal 9. (Spring / Summer 1996): 18-25)

¹³⁸ McDaniel, 1989, p. 246

The purity of motivation on the part of both guru and disciple remains of paramount importance. Warriar notes, “Any hint of personal aggrandizement on the guru’s part is seen in a negative light, and it is often those gurus who are seen to lead austere lives, and who appear selfless in their engagement with devotees, who carry maximum credibility in devotees’ perceptions”¹³⁹. In the case of Amritanandamayi Ma, she concedes that although this guru is the head of a huge international empire, leads a very materially comfortable life and receives large donations from wealthy supporters, she is nevertheless accepted by her devotees as a renunciant who has little personally to gain from her Mission. As devotees see it, her lifestyle “remains austere and indeed full of hardship, since she is constantly straining to ease the suffering of others”¹⁴⁰. Whilst no obvious scandal is attendant upon the financial workings of this guru, how she is viewed by others nevertheless appears to be a matter of personal perspective. It is of note that Max Weber observes in *Economy and Society*, “Pure charisma is specifically foreign to economic considerations”¹⁴¹. He continues by remarking on how authentic charismatics follow a calling (as opposed to a profession) and so do not hold *dakṣiṇa* to be any source of income, before conceding, “this often remains more an ideal than a fact”¹⁴². Swami Satyasangananda warns, “Your judgements are based on your level of perception”¹⁴³. Of the spiritual purpose of *dakṣiṇa* she reminds us:

Dakshina symbolizes surrender of the ego to the guru. Attachment of wealth, property and riches is a clear indication of the strength of your ego. In offering a portion of your material assets, you begin to sever the strong and obstinate roots of the ego which are implanted in you. Remember, the guru does not require material gain. His only concern is with your spiritual gain, and for that you need his riches more than he needs yours¹⁴⁴.

Muktananda adds to this an additional level of understanding. He writes of the *satguru*, “He doesn’t steal his disciples’ money; instead he takes their ignorance or nescience”¹⁴⁵. Ergo, when a guru accepts an offering from his seeker – whether in the form of money or possessions or indeed in the form of fruit, food or flowers also – tradition considers that he is, in fact, taking on the responsibility for part of the devotee’s negative *karma*. The significance of such a transaction is considerable and it is clear that the exchange is not one to be

¹³⁹ Warriar, 2005, p. 69

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Weber, 1978, p. 244

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ Satyasangananda, 1984, pp. 54. In notes accompanying his translation of the *Nārada-Bhakti Sūtra*, Swami Chinmayananda similarly exhorts potential disciples to regard the *satguru* appropriately. He notes that it is, “extremely difficult... to tune ourselves to them”. Moreover, so he warns, “Many of the masters have been crushed, whipped, crucified and destroyed by the general stampede of the foolish and their richly dense material preoccupations” (Chinmayananda, 2005, p. 72).

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 56

¹⁴⁵ Muktananda, 2000, p. 21

undertaken lightly. Once more the issue of the hunted and the hunter comes to the fore: if we accept that there is a personal cost attendant upon the receipt of a gift endowed with another's negative *karma*, it is less surprising that it remains ultimately in the hands of the guru as to whether a relationship – or even interaction – will ensue. Swami Rama offers an illustration of when it is *not* forthcoming. In the memoirs of his youth, he documents his travels with a number of holy men and women, including Ananadamayi Ma and also Neem Karoli Baba. Of the last (“a man who lived half here and half there”¹⁴⁶), he describes how a rich man arrives for the guru's darshan and attempts to offer him a considerable amount of money:

[Neem Karoli] Baba spread the notes out and sat on them. He said, ‘They are not very comfortable as a cushion and I don't have a fireplace, so I cannot burn them for heat. They are of no use to me; what shall I do with them?’

The man said, ‘Sir, it's money!’

Baba returned the money and asked him to get some fruit with it. The rich man said, ‘Sir there is no market here.’

‘Then how can you say it is money?’ asked Baba. ‘If it doesn't buy fruit it isn't money for me.’ Then Baba asked him, ‘What do you want from me?’

The man said, ‘I have a headache.’

Baba replied, ‘That you have created for yourself. What can I do for you?’¹⁴⁷

From the exchange, it might be surmised that this particular aspirant was not considered eligible for the spiritual exchange that is implied by the practice of *dakṣiṇa*. Why this might be is not provided. The guru's motivation in the matter is clearer to appreciate: the ‘gift’ of money appears to have been too costly for the guru to be willing to entertain.

2.III.iii Concerning Transmission and Transformation

It has been said that the Guru-disciple relationship is not a teaching, it is a transmission.

Brent¹⁴⁸

*No shakti without bhakti*¹⁴⁹

In light of the reciprocal matters of willingness and surrender between the guru and his disciple, consideration may now turn to what should be seen as the point of the relationship: the spiritual transformation of the aspirant. Speaking in the broadest terms here of course, preceptors of the more *jñāna*-inspired systems primarily instruct their charges in order that they might ‘merge’ with Reality; the teachers of the *bhakti* schools guide their students in a

¹⁴⁶ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 107

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.* pp. 107-108

¹⁴⁸ Brent, 1971, p. 22

¹⁴⁹ Reported in Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 49

manner of ‘playing’ with the divine¹⁵⁰. Although it is a matter that is sometimes overlooked, disciplic surrender is therefore not an end in itself. It rather represents a preparatory stage that is needed to enable the student to receive from the guru what is necessary to facilitate his inner transformation and, by implication, his liberation also¹⁵¹. Concerning disciplic transformation, it might be argued that whether inner change can be explained in full or in partial terms, or as being permanent or merely temporary, would be dependent upon a number of variables. This might include the aspirant’s preparation, his *adhikāra* (suitability) for the process, as well as the powers of transmission afforded by the guru concerned. Muktananda remarks:

Many people ask why all the disciples of the same Guru do not make uniform spiritual progress or turn out to be exactly the same. This is because of the difference in their standards and abilities. All are not equally worthy or virtuous, and therefore, even though several disciples may be initiated by the same Guru, in one the divine Shakti may develop and shine fully, in another it may show only partial development, while in a third it may not show any visible effects at all¹⁵².

The process of transformation may also be viewed differently, according to the philosophical stance of the individual guru or lineage involved. Issues concerning the passive or active involvement of the *sādhaka* in the recognition of the guru (and of grace) have been discussed above in 2.III.i and are of significance here too. Within this ongoing awareness of the heterogeneity of the situation, what role does the aspirant play in relation to his inner transformation? How much influence does he actually have upon the process? Does the disciple earn it by dint of his concerted efforts (as is proposed by the ‘monkey school’) or, instead, is it resultant upon grace alone (as is accepted by the ‘kitten school’)? A consideration of transformation earned through willpower is a straightforward matter: what one invests in terms of effort and practice, one may conceivably harvest after an appropriate amount of time¹⁵³. Transformation that is considered to be grace-given, however, becomes more mysterious. Yet, even some situations of grace may be seen to need prior preparation. As Feuerstein has proposed, it is a matter of both “work *and* grace”¹⁵⁴. A traditional image paints the portrait of an aspirant focusing solely on preparing the sails of his boat; should the winds

¹⁵⁰ This may, of course, also become a manner of merging by utilising the dualistic nature of devotion in order to transcend it. Brent cites one *bhakti* guru’s belief that, “When you reach the intoxication level of love, you are God”. (Brent, 1971, p. 12)

¹⁵¹ The term enlightenment is not always seen as appropriate to the *bhakti* concept of liberation. It is certainly not a word that Neem Karoli Baba used with any regularity. Liberation, in this context, has more to do with the expression of devotion either in the model of the *gopī* or Hanumān.

¹⁵² Swami Muktananda. *Light on the Path*. New York: SYDA, 1981, pp. 46-47

¹⁵³ Writing from outside the *bhakti* tradition, Bharati determines the five principal “orthodox methods of mystical effort” to be physical discipline, theological study, withdrawal from society, sexual continence and careful dietetic observance (Bharati, 1976, p. 131). These techniques would vary greatly from the nine steps promoted in the *Rāmacaritamānasa*. This traditional *bhakti* prescription involves fellowship with saints, sharing stories about God, *sevā*, *kīrtana*, *japa*, self-restraint, seeing divinity in all things and beings, personal contentment, absolute honesty and faith in God (*RCM* 4.34.4 -35.4).

¹⁵⁴ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 120

of grace ever arrive, then he might be able to sail upon their power¹⁵⁵. Procuring the arrival of the winds of grace is an entirely different matter, of course, and one not held to be in the hands of the unenlightened being. This is where the intercession of the guru figure – and his power of transmission – is an essential factor.

Of transmission, it is clear that no set boundaries or common features exist that would connect all guru-disciple experiences. Almost more than anywhere else, its form depends upon the guru concerned:

A guru transmits shakti by a pregnant glance, touch¹⁵⁶, mantra, or simply by thought. Thus he installs his divine energy in his disciple, releasing mental and physiological blocks that had prevented the prana from moving freely in the body. The guru, being in tune with his own master and with God, continues to receive shakti uninterruptedly and abundantly in order to serve the spiritually hungry disciples... Some receive shaktipat by reading the writings of the master or by looking at his picture. This divine energy can be transferred at will or unconsciously. Simply touching any article which belongs to the guru can ignite the spark within the disciple¹⁵⁷.

The process of transmission is sometimes known as *śaktipāta*. According to Muktananda, “it is absolutely true that complete inner peace is not possible until one is graced with *shaktipat* by a competent Guru”¹⁵⁸. One of Ram Dass’ first students, Jim Lytton (later Rameshwar Das) had the opportunity to meet with Muktananda in 1970. He was on his way from America to India to meet Neem Karoli Baba for the first time and, simultaneously, Muktananda was on his way from India to visit America. They met at a small flat in London, where Rameshwar Das, Jeffrey Kagel (later Krishna Das) and Daniel Goleman (later Jagannath Das) spent several days in Muktananda’s presence. Rameshwar Das says of the experience:

Muktananda was pretty far out... there was *so* much energy coming from him and he didn’t speak any English and there wasn’t much verbal teaching going on in any case. It was mostly just sitting and meditating while he was chanting or meditating himself and you would go into these sort of spontaneous *kriyas* and *pranayam* things and start bouncing around. And that was the *shakti* – the *shaktipat!*¹⁵⁹

Transmission is not necessarily something the results of which are immediately determinable, of course, and possibly not ever with any exactitude. The process is nevertheless one that may

¹⁵⁵ See Sayings 677 & 688 in Sri Ramakrishna. *Sayings of Ramakrishna – An Exhaustive Collection*. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003, pp. 180-181

¹⁵⁶ On the power of touch in relation to Indian gurus (and Amritanandamayi Ma in particular) see Warrier, 2005, pp. 67-69

¹⁵⁷ Yogi Amrit Desai, “Kundalini Yoga Through Shaktipat” in White, J. ed. *Kundalini: Evolution and Enlightenment*. St Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1990, p. 70

¹⁵⁸ Muktananda, 1974, p. 55

¹⁵⁹ Rameshwar Das. *Interview*. East Hampton, NY. 1 June 2006, 00:51

be held to represent a motivating factor, indeed an attractor, upon the spiritual path. Feuerstein notes how addictive the transmission experience can feel to the aspirant¹⁶⁰. Bhagavan Das' report illustrates the same. He describes a night that he spends in the same room in which Neem Karoli Baba is sleeping:

He just lay there. I sat up against the wall meditating, and then he started to snore. The moment Maharaji started snoring, I fell into this incredible bliss. Then he'd stop snoring and sit up. I'd come out of it. Then he'd lay back down and start snoring again, and the bliss would hit me intensely. I don't know what went on that night, but something extraordinary happened to me. Some transference occurred vibrationally from his body into mine. It was one of the most unforgettable nights of my life... The snoring was his *prana*, his life force, penetrating mine. No words can convey the bliss of the union between a realized master and his devotee¹⁶¹.

At the moment of transmission, the student may commonly be seen to be pulled out of his existing egoic position¹⁶². As a result of this, it could be argued he is better able to experience a sense of self that lies beyond the current parameters of his personality. Importantly it is also an event that, to be considered complete, should effect some level of change within the aspirant – however imperceptible that might appear either to the observer or, potentially, to the participant also. “[T]he ultimate objective of spiritual transmission is to modify the disciple's very state of being”¹⁶³. Yet the transmission of the guru's grace, by its nature, is not always clear or self-explanatory in its purpose. Reflection, meditation, devotional practices, self-inquiry, study, external guidance, sometimes simply the passage of time are not uncommon requirements for the purpose of the integration of a transmission experience. Nor can any chronological framework be imposed upon it: what may take a matter of seconds in one instance, may take a matter of years in another.

Whilst the moment of transmission itself conceivably represents the most obviously thrilling aspect of the interaction, the umbrella of the entire experience may be seen to extend beyond that sole moment. In many ways, it marks the start of the journey rather than any culmination: what the seeker subsequently *does* with the transmission experience is as important as being in a suitable place in which to receive the transmission from the guru in the first instance. It could be argued that the purpose of much of the aspirant's preparatory spiritual training (commonly seen as being required to ready the seeker *for* a transmission experience) is, in fact, designed to

¹⁶⁰ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 134

¹⁶¹ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 53

¹⁶² Kramer and Alstad refute the guru-given nature of transmission. Instead, so they assert, such experiences are merely dependent upon suggestion given to the disciple with a “predicted end result... What the promise is matters little because the mind can eventually construct any image one focuses upon” (Kramer and Alstad, 1993, p. 63).

¹⁶³ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 152

assist with what happens *afterwards*, in the period of integration that follows. Without this assimilation, the potency of the seed that has been sown may be lost, transformation (arguably the point of the exercise) will not occur, and the disciple will remain as he was – albeit having experienced something out of the ordinary.

As before, tradition demands that the guru's role in this 'spiritual marriage' remains unconditional in its nature. His duty is to be actively involved in the preparation of his follower; or, at the least, he has made the decision that the student is suitably prepared for the experience to follow. The guru is then thought to transmit the teaching through whichever form he deems most suitable – "he inseminated the name of God into my heart. He poured the essence of his being into my being"¹⁶⁴. Subsequently, he must surrender attachment to all results. He might offer further guidance to his charge, but the true integrative work itself necessarily remains the responsibility of the aspirant. Indeed, it is through meeting the challenge of how to integrate the experience into his interior and exterior realities that the disciple or devotee may be (sometimes fundamentally) transformed. Weber observes, whether it is "born out of suffering, conflicts or enthusiasm"¹⁶⁵, the effects of exposure to charismatic force may be such as to bring about a complete subjective or internalised reorientation on behalf of the follower. "It may then result in a radical alteration of the central attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems of the 'world'"¹⁶⁶. The potential rewards thus remain the aspirant's. By this measure, the guru stands to gain nothing from the entire interaction.

As is implied in the language that Bhagavan Das uses above, the moment of transmission often represents an extraordinarily intimate moment and potentially for both parties. Many devotees choose not to talk about such things publicly. Indeed, reticence on this is traditionally encouraged, in order to preserve any *śakti* still held (and conceivably still in operation) from the experience¹⁶⁷. As was experienced by both Rameshwar Das and Bhagavan Das, it can represent a moment of high power and, at times, also high emotion. Jai Uttal writes of his own relationship with Neem Karoli Baba, "[sometimes] I just cry from the grace"¹⁶⁸. Whilst the function of the guru may be considered to be an integral part of the Hindu tradition itself; whilst according to some at least, all gurus are part of the same divine force; whilst even Ram

¹⁶⁴ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 53

¹⁶⁵ Weber, 1978, p. 245

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Relating an early transmission experience of his own involving Neem Karoli Baba (that took place in 1972), Shyamdas pauses in his narration. He exclaims, "You're not supposed to talk about these things!" before adding, "But why not!" He then describes the experience. (Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*. Long Island, NY: Spring 2007, 00:14)

¹⁶⁸ Reported in Caplan, 2002, p. 130

Dass in a 1974 lecture expressed: “The relation between the guru and the chela is not interpersonal, it’s intrapersonal”¹⁶⁹, what remains incontrovertible is that the process of spiritual transmission is one that is extraordinarily personal. As individual transformation is, by necessity, a unique undertaking that is entirely dependent upon the practitioners concerned¹⁷⁰, so too is the process of transmission. With this, and to borrow the terminology of Ram Dass, we are finally able to move from the intrapersonal into the realm of the interpersonal and so are able to consider at closer quarters the main human protagonist of this research, Neem Karoli Baba.

2.IV A Traditional Approach to Neem Karoli Baba

2.IV.i Acknowledgement of the Ongoing Influence of Neem Karoli Baba

As the great puppeteer, he [Neem Karoli Baba] is pulling all the strings from just beyond the field of our vision, providing us with a way to gather the strands of all the many parts of our lives, our psyches, and twist them into a strong rope with which we can bind ourselves to the feet of True Love.

Krishna Das¹⁷¹

Would you rather have me make believe I’m one of the puppets?

Neem Karoli Baba¹⁷²

It is now close to four decades since Neem Karoli Baba’s death or, as they prefer to say in India in relation to holy men and women, his *mahāsamādhi* in 1973. Yet, for many devotees in both India and beyond, he is perceived as exerting as much influence upon their lives today as he did whilst he was still ‘in the body’. His charismatic force (and the connections with divinity that this implicitly entails) that was once perceived as being bound to his human form, is now given the aspect of being allegedly ‘time-less’ and of being of ongoing concern. Whether devotees address him, as is most commonly the case, by the name of Maharaj-ji (great king) or Baba (beloved elder), whether they see him in the guise of “father, mother, child, friend, master, lover, or God”¹⁷³ or, indeed, also as “a miraculous saint, an incarnation, a great scholar, a scientist, rishi, Maharishi, sadhu, an ascetic, [or] a yogi”¹⁷⁴, what is clear is that the relationship between this guru and his devotees is one that many followers promote as remaining extant. For these *celās*, the fact that the connection is now played out on the path of the formless, as opposed to that of the form, appears not to represent an insurmountable

¹⁶⁹ Ram Dass, 1974, p. 91

¹⁷⁰ See Ram Dass with Stephen Levine. *Grist for the Mill*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1987, pp. 7-9

¹⁷¹ Krishna Das. *Flow of Grace: Chanting the Hanumān Chalisa*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2007, p. 50

¹⁷² Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush, 1992, p. 40

¹⁷³ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 55

¹⁷⁴ Josi, 2006, p. 6

impediment. The hagiography reports Neem Karoli Baba as having declared, “When people think on me, I am with them”¹⁷⁵. This belief appears to remain intact and so, as S.D. Ganda promotes to be the case in *Hanumān Vistas*, “His force works even today and protects us all”¹⁷⁶.

This sentiment is not just restricted to members of the indigenous satsang. Although the Western satsang only truly came into being in the last two or three years of the guru’s life, many members would also adhere to this approach and remain of the opinion that their relationship with Neem Karoli Baba is ongoing. In the opening quotation of this chapter, and in a text published in 2007, American kirtan practitioner Krishna Das refers to the guru in the present tense. Similarly, in a 2004 satsang community newsletter, Ram Dass writes to his Western *gurubhāi*:

Maharaj-ji is everywhere. As I travel around the country, I hear more and more stories of the way he is manifesting, the way he is touching people through dreams, through visions, through the books about him¹⁷⁷.

And in an interview given in 2005, Bhagavan Das concurs:

He’s completely present in my life, you know. I feel him all the time. I feel his blanket around me and I feel myself connected to his light – the light that he carries and the light that he is¹⁷⁸.

The implication of all such writing is of course that, according to the commentators featured here, the workings of this particular guru are considered able to transcend the usual restrictions of time and space and even of being ‘in the body’ at all. In line with traditional dictates (and as discussed in 2.II.i), the divine force of the guru is held to be so powerful as to be able to exist without its human vessel.

In the practice of *guru-kṛpā*, the path of petitioning and surrendering to the grace of the guru that the (majority of the) devotees of this guru observe, “The Guru is divine. He is, he must be believed to be self-realized and thus essentially indivisible from Brahman”¹⁷⁹. This much has been previously established over the course of 2.II.ii. Yet, what has visibly altered at this juncture is that the primary intermediary function of this guru has been divested of its

¹⁷⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 402. Mukerjee also records the guru as having said “‘Yad karane se ham ajate hain.’ [I come to you when you remember me]” (Mukerjee, 2001, p. 64).

¹⁷⁶ Ganda, S.D. *Hanumān Vistas*. New Delhi: Self-published, 2002, p. vi

¹⁷⁷ “Letter from Ram Dass” *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanumān Temple. Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA (Summer 2004): p. 1

¹⁷⁸ Bhagavan Das. *Interview*. London. 15 November 2005, 00:18

¹⁷⁹ Brent, 1971, p. 22

requirement of the horizontal aspect and the presence of his physical form is no longer needed, or at least not to the extent that was previously the case¹⁸⁰. What might be perceived to be a theological distortion, however, is actually more representative of the plasticity of the devotional tradition. Issues concerning the form and the formless nature of divinity, and of this guru in particular, are ones with which each devotee has had to grapple at the point of the preceptor's death. Thus Ram Dass comments that his relationship with Neem Karoli Baba "became less and less rooted in dualism as time went on"¹⁸¹, which might conceivably account for part of the guru's continuing sway over the American for so many years.

The adaptability that Ram Dass demonstrates towards acceptance of the formless aspect of the guru could not be said to have been the case for all of his immediate devotees ("they have intense attachment to Maharaji's form, don't they"¹⁸²). Indeed, it could be maintained that at least some direct devotees still mourn the passing of the physical presence of their guru. Indeed, upon being asked how it felt when Neem Karoli Baba died, Western devotee Ram Giri¹⁸³ (who happened to be in India with his master at the time) only recently, and still obviously deeply affected, replied, "How does it feel when the heart is ripped out of the universe?"¹⁸⁴ Also in India at that time with his wife Girija, Larry Brilliant recalls the moment when he heard of the guru's death: "It was the worst moment of our lives"¹⁸⁵. It could be posited that devotees have attempted to reconcile their (as yet unresolved) issues of grief and loss through a continuing observance of their guru's presence in their life. This is, however, impossible to clarify. What may be gained is that these followers also continue to acknowledge the guru's influence – "I strive daily to just try and surrender to him, to offer my life to him, to live kindly"¹⁸⁶ remarks Jai Uttal – whether in the form of his teachings, of visions and dreams, of stories about him or of his memory.

¹⁸⁰ In each of the temple dedicated to this guru there exists a *mūrti* in his likeness, many of them life size. These *mūrtis* are worshipped as if it was the living guru (and not a marble representation) in residence. From this evidence, it might be suggested that the physical form is still missed.

¹⁸¹ Ram Dass, 2004, p. 170

¹⁸² Shyamdas in Rosen, Steven. *The Yoga of Kirtan: Conversations on the Sacred Art of Chanting*. New York: FOLK Books, 2008, p. 66

¹⁸³ German by birth, Ram Giri met Shyamdas and another man, Berni – later named Balaram – in Essaouira, Morocco in 1971. Together they went overland to India, travelling via Istanbul and Kandahar. Subsequently all three became devotees of Neem Karoli Baba. Ram Giri later lived for twenty-five years at the Kashi Ashram in Florida with Joya Santanya and, in 1995, submitted his Ph.D. thesis that documents his personal experiences with both gurus. (Ram Giri. *Meeting. Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Temple. Kainchi, India. 18 October 2007*)

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Dr Larry Brilliant and Dr Girija Brilliant. *Interview*. Seva Foundation, Berkeley, CA. 19 December 2005, 01:02

¹⁸⁶ Jai Uttal. *Interview*. San Anselmo, CA. 19 December 2005, 00:12

At the same time, there exists a further and powerful motive for the upholding of the guru's presence within the community in this manner. This relates to the matter of the ongoing validation of the movement and how its continuity has been assured in the years since the guru's passing. If, after all, Neem Karoli Baba was allowed to become a communal memory (however fondly remembered) and relegated to a time now past, then the security of the present satsang would become weakened to a degree that would threaten the group's very existence. In the hagiographical assertion of his ongoing power and interaction with particular devotees, however, the situation is altered. Instead, through the reported instances of his continuing charismatic authority, the community is provided with ongoing legitimacy. Horstmann comments that it is through having recourse to the charismatic beginnings of the movement that the collective finds its key to continuity¹⁸⁷. It is, therefore, in everyone's interest within the movement that the guru's power should be seen to remain not just intact but increasingly present. Through its expression across the various narrative channels utilised by members of this group, the guru's heart continues to beat, and the satsang body is kept very much alive.

This brings us to a consideration of charismatic succession within the community – a vital step in securing the long-term viability of the movement. It is conceivably of significance to recognise that the sources cited above all originate from devotees who had 'in the body' relationships with Neem Karoli Baba whilst he was still alive and who have additionally played ongoing parts in satsang life at the temples at which the guru spent his time in the years since his death. Moreover, these are followers who have continued an ongoing interaction with either or both of whom might be termed the guru's 'successors' who remain in charge of the running of the various ashrams and temples connected with him. These are his youngest son and a former favoured attendant. Based primarily at the Neem Karoli Baba ashram and temple in Vrindavan, Dharma Narayan is perceived as having been granted charismatic legitimacy by virtue of his blood connection. Undoubtedly enhanced by the striking physical resemblance that he bears to his charismatic father, Dharma Narayan's right to the role of successor is less determinate on what he brings that is 'new' to the movement and revolves more around the preservation of his father's 'legacy' – in looking so like his father, it almost appears that the guru never actually left¹⁸⁸. Siddhi Ma has become a successor by a different route. Principally (albeit not exclusively) located at the Neem Karoli Baba ashrams and temples in the more northerly Nainital district, she is seen as having been designated as a successor by Neem

¹⁸⁷ Horstmann, Monika. "Charisma, Transfer of Charisma and Canon in North Indian Bhakti" in Dalmia Malinar and Christof eds. 2001, p. 171

¹⁸⁸ See Weber, 1978, p. 248

Karoli Baba himself. Close to his death, he presented her with his diaries and, in doing so, is perceived as having conveyed charismatic legitimacy upon her. Both serve as a living link to the guru and both are now seen (by many first generation, as well as subsequent generation, devotees) to be masters in their own right.

It is interesting that two successors manage to co-exist within the movement (at least publicly) without an undue sense of competition or rivalry. It might be seen that a foremost reason for this is that each preceptor has taken responsibility for a particular region and, as a result, for a particular body of devotees and their concerns. It appears to be an amicable relationship, for both are known to visit the ashrams and temples under the auspices of the other with some regularity. Dharma Narayan nevertheless stays mostly in the Vraja region in which both he and his father were born and raised – and in which his father eventually passed away. Conversely, Siddhi Ma spends a greater proportion of her time in her own local Kumaon hill province surrounding Nainital, an area of which Neem Karoli Baba may be seen to have grown particularly fond in the second half of his life and where he chose to build more temples than anywhere else. Moreover, whilst both Dharma Narayan and Siddhi Ma have sizeable Indian followings, it could be mooted that Siddhi Ma has had the greater dealings with the Western devotees in the decades since the guru's death. This includes most of those featured here, possibly with the noted exceptions of American devotee Shyamdas (who continues to live for a great part of the year in the Vrindavan region) and also Canadian devotee Kabir Das (who spent a number of years after 1973 living for six months at a time at the Vrindavan ashram itself). Although both have very good relations with Siddhi Ma, they have nevertheless seen Dharma Narayan with greater regularity.

We return momentarily to Siddhi Ma, however. Whilst in continuing good health, she is nevertheless now an elderly woman, having spent all of the intervening years since the guru's *mahāsamādhi* in the fostering and preservation of his legacy and memory. Neither is Dharma Narayan any longer a young man. What will happen to the wider movement when either of Neem Karoli Baba's two successors are no longer able to provide devotees with their personal guidance and unique 'living link' to the guru remains to be seen¹⁸⁹. Certainly, no further spiritual heirs have been identified that are necessary to secure the next stage of the community's existence – or, at least, no one has been publicly promoted as such. As Weber has noted, however, the issue of succession is "crucial because through it occurs the routinization of the charismatic force of the structure"¹⁹⁰. Whilst not openly discussed in this

¹⁸⁹ When questioned about just this, Shyamdas considered that the lineage would nevertheless find a way to continue "just as it has done before". Shyamdas. *Meeting*. Vrindavan, India, 5 December 2008.

¹⁹⁰ Weber, 1978, p. 253

community, it is an issue that will demand serious consideration in the years to come. Indeed, it might be seen to represent *the* critical juncture that will determine whether the Neem Karoli Baba movement is an enduring one, or whether it will have been one of two generations only. In writing of the North Indian seventeenth century Dādūpanth, Horstmann has observed that, as in other sects, significant change is necessary to secure the establishment of succession to a particularly charismatic agent. These developments within the movement:

...passed through an initial stage of about two generations after the generation of the founder during which it was still assumed or hoped that the successor to the office might bear the founder's charisma. Succession would take place within the founder's family or by different processes of selection. However, at a stage increasingly remote from the prime charisma, a crisis seems to have been almost inevitable... The charisma became vested in spirited individuals within the sect who could justly claim to participate in the prime charisma embodied by guru Dādū. These in turn made disciples of their own, so that the community soon became fragmented. This process was spurred by inherited and often differing religious traditions and life-styles which influenced the sect's clientele... Consequently, before long the DP [Dādūpanth] was threatened by dissolution¹⁹¹.

The crisis within the Dādūpanth was averted through the regulation of a "predictable procedure of succession, according to which the new abbot would be designated by his predecessor-guru"¹⁹². It is clear that the Neem Karoli Baba movement is not yet sufficiently evolved to the point of the regularisation of charismatic office. Even though Dharma Narayan and Siddhi Ma both operate in the role of the officiating 'priests' rather than that of the original 'prophet', the crucial matter of investiture has been neither concretised nor made explicit. How it will be handled in the coming years will be interesting to see. For now at least, attention remains more directly focussed on Neem Karoli Baba and on the relationships that a considerable proportion of first generation devotees assert that they continue to share with him. In conclusion, the following words from Ram Dass might seem an apposite (and entirely traditional) manner in which to summarise the views of many devotees: "You think that because he's not in a body, it makes any difference?"¹⁹³ From the discussion immediately above, however, it could be argued that, yes, it does in fact make a significant difference.

¹⁹¹ Horstmann, 2001, pp. 172-173

¹⁹² *ibid.* p. 173

¹⁹³ Ram Dass. *The Yogas of the Bhagavad Gita*, CD 12: Devotion and the Guru 1, Track 14

2.IV.ii Contemplating the Elusive Nature of Neem Karoli Baba

*Be vigilant. He [Neem Karoli Baba] escapes very easily.*¹⁹⁴

A further conventional manner in which this guru continues to be appraised by his followers is through the consideration of his elusive or 'hidden' nature. The ability to keep the full truth of one's inner nature obscured from public view is promoted in India as one of the hallmarks of holy persons and represents a thematic recurrence across much hagiography¹⁹⁵. Observance of this practice implies that the *śakti* in operation within the physical form of the guru is so divinely empowered that it may not be freely 'revealed' – at least not unless the observer has the correct 'eyes' with which to appreciate it¹⁹⁶. Consequently, so it is observed, the great adepts will go to considerable lengths to remain elusive and hidden and so, ultimately, they remain unknowable. Mukerjee reflects upon this same aspect of Neem Karoli Baba:

People asked me so often, 'Why does Babaji go on covering himself with a blanket?'... I used to say that there were two blankets: one blanket covered his physical body, that we all knew... But there was another blanket that was inside. He was covering all his sadhana, all his siddhis, all his achievements, all his plans and programs. Why was he hiding all this from us? Perhaps it was for our protection, perhaps to save himself from crowds of followers. We cannot know¹⁹⁷.

French devotee of Anandamayi Ma, Swami Vijayananda, recalls seeing a visitor at his own guru's ashram only to discover later that this was 'Nimkaroli Baba', "the yogi whose name radiated an aura of mystery and miracle"¹⁹⁸. About his initial impression of the guru he writes:

Visitors to the ashram were not rare and generally I paid them very little attention. One now passed very close by me, a "great strapping fellow" with a long moustache and dressed, quite ordinarily, in a white dhoti. His head was shaven clean, leaving only a lock of hair on the crown in the custom of orthodox upper caste Hindus. He appeared to be a Brahmin such as one frequently encounters in the streets of Benares¹⁹⁹.

According to the hagiographers, this unremarkable choice of appearance was seen to represent a conscious decision on the guru's part. Mukerjee explains, "He did this deliberately to keep away curious sightseers"²⁰⁰. Josi adds, he "was very against publicity (he never tried to reveal

¹⁹⁴ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 19

¹⁹⁵ Bharati discusses the same situation in relation to Anandamayi Ma (Bharati, 1976, p. 108) and Warrier in relation to Amritanandamayi Ma (Warrier, 2005, pp. 73-75).

¹⁹⁶ Bharati, 1976, p. 106

¹⁹⁷ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 164

¹⁹⁸ Vijayananda, Swami. *In the Steps of the Yogis*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1978, p. 103

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 4

himself)²⁰¹. Leading a simple life away from the accumulating glare of his growing reputation appeared to have been an important matter for Neem Karoli Baba. Indeed, Pande reports that, on being approached by strangers in his own ashram and asked where ‘Baba’ was, the guru would often go so far as to deny his own existence: “There is no baba here. Go and have darshan before the murti of Hanumān²⁰². A different source reports him as having said, “I am not a sadhu, nor do I know what a saint is” before adding, “But what is wrong with that?”²⁰³ Despite his assertions (“Ask God or Hanuman. I’m just an ordinary human being²⁰⁴), it is nevertheless true that, by his later years, his renown had spread considerably. So much so in fact that, in a 1976 pamphlet entitled “Baba Neem Karoli: A Wonder Mystic of the Northern India”, Swami Chidananda of the Divine Life Society maintains that he was “one of the most unique phenomena among the religious fraternity of Saints, Sages, and holy Fakirs of Northern India²⁰⁵. Should this extraordinary statement be seen as plausible, then it is further conceivable that (as Pande writes), “Baba often created a misleading impression of himself and bewildered people in order to divert their attention²⁰⁶.

Such a misleading impression continued into Neem Karoli Baba’s mannerisms, for it seems fair to say he exhibited behaviour and also a ripeness of language²⁰⁷ that one might not always associate with a reputed saint. The guru was rarely seen sitting still or quietly²⁰⁸. Nor, for the most part, did he choose to adopt a ‘meditational’ mien. Accounts demonstrate that he was more often engaged in conversation and sometimes in several at once (“Soon he had about

²⁰¹ Josi, 2006, p. 7

²⁰² Pande, 2005, p. 14

²⁰³ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 223. It is interesting to note that such denial of knowledge was not unique to this guru. *Bhakti* peer, Anandamayi Ma appears to have expressed herself similarly. Upon being questioned, she excuses herself “I know nothing of these things” (Bharati, 1976, p. 108).

²⁰⁴ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 133

²⁰⁵ Chidananda, Sri Swami. “Baba Neem Karoli – A Wonder Mystic of Northern India.” *Divine Life Society*. Accessed at <<http://www.dlshq.org/saints/neemkaroli.htm>> (6 September 2005)

²⁰⁶ Pande, 2005, p. 14

²⁰⁷ In one lecture, Ram Dass comments of the guru: “He was known as latrine baba, mainly because he used to use such foul language” (*The Yogas of the Bhagavad Gita*, 1974, CD 12: Devotion & the Guru I, Track 6). Western devotee, Kabir Das, refutes this statement. According to him, the term ‘latrine baba’ was attributed to the fact that the guru insisted upon the installation of an unusual amount of bathroom facilities during the construction of the ashram and temple at Vrindavan. What he does agree with, though, is the earthy nature of Neem Karoli Baba’s use of language. Yet, both Kabir Das and Shyamdas concur that such an apparently crude manner of speaking is merely in accord with the traditional Vraja customs that were native to the guru and would have been representative of the manner in which men of that region would generally have been spoken at that time. (Discussed during a meeting at the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Temple in Vrindavan, 5 December 2008.)

Of Ramakrishna’s similarly earthy use of Bengali, see Kripal, Jeffrey K. “Revealing and Concealing the Secret: A Textual History of Mahendranath Gupta’s *Srisriramakrsnakathamrta*” in Seeley, Clinton B. ed. *Calcutta, Bangladesh, and Bengal Studies. 1990 Bengal Studies Conference Proceedings*. East Lansing, MI: Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University, 1990, p. 246

²⁰⁸ See Photographs 5-10, Appendix 6 (p. 319)

eight conversations going on at the same time, never losing his thread”²⁰⁹), was often joking or shouting or playfully throwing oranges and other pieces of fruit at devotees. Describing the guru as, “fidgeting like a monkey, scratching, looking around”²¹⁰, Bhagavan Das remembers, “He’d be kibitzing around with other people, just hanging out talking about day-to-day things”²¹¹. In *The Near and the Dear*, Mukerjee offers his interpretation of the guru in full flow in this manner:

People who visited Babaji in his ashram might have noticed how busy he was in looking after every aspect of their lives when they were with him. Not merely food and shelter and the physical needs of comfort and rest, but also the needs of mind and spirit. [Since his death] Some people may not miss his talks, filled with their sober undertones about our duties and responsibilities, but everyone misses the sallies and shouts, abuses and sarcasms, that he used freely on his chosen few. This was entertainment, recreation for all around, and a sure cure for a dull and overtaxed mind. Babaji used these devices to teach something valuable, adding sauce and spice to make the talks palatable, just as food is made appealing for those who would not otherwise go for it. Sallies, sarcasm, jokes, humor in expert and benevolent hands are the best nutrition to take. Babaji never forgot that. The teachings given by these methods are remembered and much benefit is derived from them... Food for the body was given through others, but food for the mind and soul came all through him alone²¹².

Exactly why Neem Karoli Baba chose to act in such a manner may not be determined with any precision, of course. Nor can it be sure that all devotees appreciated being shouted at by the master, as Mukerjee would have us believe. This aside, in considering the personality of similar adepts, Feuerstein notes the traditional Hindu view that enlightened beings act spontaneously in this unpredictable manner, “out of the fullness of the Divine”²¹³. Offering Ananadamayi Ma as illustrative of this, he speculates on whether the observer may ever locate the internal ‘truth’ that resides behind the façade of their human form and externalised action. As before, the workings of divine agency remain hidden from unenlightened view. When seeking to defer to their own guru, therefore, it is not surprising that the devotees of Neem Karoli Baba choose to depict or discuss his elusive or hidden nature with enthusiasm: it is an acknowledgement of convention and an assertion of what they perceive to be the spiritual superiority of their preceptor. Accordingly, in his doctoral thesis, Ram Giri comments, “much of his actions were hidden and subtle”²¹⁴. Mukerjee too acknowledges this hidden nature,

²⁰⁹ Braun, Andreas S. (Ram Giri). *Breaking the Cup: Taking the Guru Path to the End*. PhD Thesis in Transpersonal Psychology and Studies in Higher Consciousness. The Union Institute. Cincinnati, OH: April 10 1995, p. 65

²¹⁰ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 46

²¹¹ *ibid.* p. 51

²¹² Mukerjee, 1996, pp. 199-200

²¹³ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 239

²¹⁴ Braun (Ram Giri), 1995, p. 64

“which was not displayed like the robe worn by the sadhu”²¹⁵ and explains that, “Whatever little I came to know of him did not come overnight, in spite of all the grace flowing from him”²¹⁶.

What is more remarkable within the hagiography, however, is that devotees also repeatedly refer to Neem Karoli Baba in terms of the ‘emptiness’ – that is the *non*-personality – that he further embodies for them. This communal view seems to go beyond even that which is perceived as the unknowability of the guru and recurrently acknowledges the absence of anything that might be considered to be psychologically tangible about the man in the first place. According to the opinions of the following featured devotees, that which is hidden becomes supplanted by that which is *not even there*. In 1974 Ram Dass offered the following appraisal of the emptiness of Neem Karoli Baba:

I’ve thought about him, studied him, reflected on him, analysed him – I can’t find anybody *there*. I keep projecting into him that there’ll be another person, because there’s a flesh-and-blood body there and it walks and it talks and it smiles and it laughs and it does all this stuff. But when I look into those eyes or I reside in that heart or I quiet down and meditate on the form or I go towards that guru, it’s like I’m going into *vast emptiness*²¹⁷.

Almost twenty years later, he continues to remember his guru as being, “*passionately* alive... and at the same moment... just like a vast mountain of emptiness”²¹⁸. Nor is it just Ram Dass who has commented on Neem Karoli Baba in this way. Ram Giri provides the following description:

Baba was the center of all this [the teachings being enacted around him]. But it was a centerless center. The very secret of who he was seemed to be that he was completely empty of self. He lived in the still and empty hub of the wheel, in the eye of the storm, and from there he simply directed the traffic²¹⁹.

Furthermore, so elder Indian devotee Dada Mukerjee, reflects:

All the shouting and joking were like the waves on the surface of the ocean. But in the depths of that ocean all was calm, all tranquil, all peaceful. He was living in that peace and serenity all the time²²⁰.

²¹⁵ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 5

²¹⁶ *ibid.*

²¹⁷ Ram Dass. *The Yogas of the Bhagavad Gita*, 1974, CD 7: Brahman, Track 9

²¹⁸ Ram Dass. *Being Free Together*, 1994, Track 8

²¹⁹ Braun (Ram Giri), 1995, p. 70

²²⁰ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 90

That one man can be seen simultaneously to straddle the realms of both action and stillness, of fullness and emptiness, is interesting. Ultimately it is also less revealing of the man himself and more illustrative of the insider theology that devotees have concretised since his passing. The image of the guru who “cannot be fathomed. He was transcendent, all pervading, and beyond duality”²²¹ or who, “like Wind, could not be touched. He could neither be held nor bound... It was / is impossible to know his Cosmic Form, to see it, or even perceive it in its entirety”²²² is enticing and, from the devotees’ perspective at least, it is reassuring too. It positions the man once again as being, “completely immersed in the Godhead all the time”²²³ and, as such, as being untouchable (maybe undiminshable) by the passing of time. As before, Neem Karoli Baba’s ‘permanence’ and ongoing presence is asserted through the canonical representation of the master in this light. As Von Stietencron reminds us of the significance of this process, “The canon is a perfect body that defeats time... it seems to be the one human possession that approaches the ideal of permanence”²²⁴.

As has been explored above in 2.IV.i, the acceptance of the guru’s alleged permanence brings with it an ongoing sense of validity for the spiritual authority of the community. It is, therefore, of exceptional importance. Having said this, the presentation of Neem Karoli Baba in this elusive light may be seen to serve a further exegetic purpose. If his truth or essence may never truly be ‘grasped’ or beheld, then approaching him in anything like an analytical manner proves pointless. Despite the guru’s own apparent assertion that, like the filtering of water, one should have a working knowledge of gurus, it would appear that he personally is not to be included in such a process. After all, according to his consistent hagiographical portrayal, there is nothing there to ‘filter’, and so the investigative way to him is both effectively blocked and actively discouraged. Instead, it might be assumed, the preferable route through which one might achieve closer awareness of him is shown to be through the more intimate (and more demanding) path of disciplic surrender – a process that does not seek to ‘know’ the man as much as to be ‘known’ by him in return. A twin purpose of this prevalent narrative presentation of the preceptor might, therefore, be observed. On the one hand it acts as a potential conversion tool and assists incoming devotees in how to become involved and integrated with the movement. On the other hand, it may be seen to provide encouragement to existing devotees in that it reminds them of the importance of the maintenance of their surrendered stance.

²²¹ Pande, 2005, p. 22

²²² Josi, 2006, p. 9

²²³ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 114

²²⁴ Von Stietencron, 2001, p. 15

2.IV.iii Approaching the ‘Miraculous Nature’ of Neem Karoli Baba

*He [Neem Karoli Baba] did everything according to nature*²²⁵

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature

David Hume²²⁶

From such deliberation, a further matter is raised: this concerns the allegedly miraculous nature of the guru that is such a core aspect of the narratives about him and that continues to attract considerable interest from devotees and observers alike. Describing his guru as someone who “performed a miracle a minute”²²⁷, Bhagavan Das is not alone in his consideration that Neem Karoli Baba acted in ways that were simply beyond all usual human ability. The view of this (or any) man as a channel for the miraculous is an extraordinary one. Yet, as the choice of title for the compilation *Miracle of Love* would illustrate, this situation is one commonly accepted by devotees as being a key feature of how they perceive their preceptor. Identifying the purpose(s) of the many miraculous representations within the hagiographical canon is interesting. The functioning of this motif may be seen to be manifold. It is clear that the miracle stories emphasise the apparently divine nature of the guru and that such exhibitions of divine power serve to demonstrate his exceptional spiritual attainment. Indeed, the incidences that illustrate either the accelerated processes of nature or, alternately, the suspension of the same attest to the teacher’s extraordinary ability. In *Miracles and the Critical Mind*, Brown comments, “True miracles have a signlike quality that exemplifies, reinforces, and attests the teaching of the human agent who performs the miracle”²²⁸. This may be seen to be precisely the case here: the guru is positioned as the skilful wielder of a number of *siddhis* and the hagiographical depiction of such events is both an appeal to the stupendous and, at the same time, an intrinsic link to the context of his preceptorial career.

Other agendas are simultaneously at work, however, that have less to do with the presentation of the guru and more to do with how he is received by others. Brown observes that miracles are, “like visible words, and as such they call for the response of faith”²²⁹. Accordingly, the miracle stories of Neem Karoli Baba may be perceived as acts that invoke wonder and surprise in the reader / hearer²³⁰. Their reception affirms the faith of those already converted. It also, conceivably, functions as a devotional attractor to the as yet unconverted. The miraculous is

²²⁵ Reproduced in *Hanuman Foundation Dying Project Newsletter*. Number 3. Santa Fe, NM, USA (July 1979): p. 5

²²⁶ Hume, David (Richard H. Popkin ed.). *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Second Edition. Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998, p. 111

²²⁷ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 97

²²⁸ Brown, Colin. *Miracles and the Critical Mind*. Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984, p. 16

²²⁹ *ibid.* p. 14

²³⁰ See Hume, David (Richard H. Popkin ed.), p. 113

here seen as a phenomenon that is simultaneously a means of religious expression and communication²³¹ between the wider satsang and provides both a level of cohesion and a sense of common orientation. It could be maintained that it is the telling of stories in relation to the guru that effectually constructs the miracle and, as Anne-Marie Korte considers, “The miracle has an impact through its telling and interpreting. The effect of a miracle is closely related to the way in which it is understood. A miracle cannot be separated from the discourse in which it is told”²³². As will be evidenced in 3.II, the miracles that are documented from the early parts of his life – for example, miraculously moving from one branch of a tree to another or assuming the form of Śiva – may be seen in a different context (and so to serve a slightly different end) than those that accompany his final years, which on the whole appear less dramatic, maybe more personal, in tone.

Of how the miraculous nature of Neem Karoli Baba may actually be understood, it is simply not helpful to be overly concerned with the exact mechanics in operation. From David Hume’s eighteenth century speculations onwards, apologists and sceptics to the phenomenon of miracles have been concerned with the theoretical proving and disproving of their existence and whether they might be seen to breach the laws of physics²³³. Writing of one of Neem Karoli Baba’s similarly ‘miraculous’ contemporaries, Smriti Srinivas has also grappled with this consideration:

I, therefore, take devotees’ assertions about miracles or their experiences of Baba’s presence seriously, as descriptions of the ‘hopeful’ reality that they inhabit, rather than trying to prove what ‘really’ happened or trying to excavate some ‘true’ presence. This is not a book about Sathya Sai Baba, his truth or fraudulence, or scholarly reason and objectivity versus faith but about the social and cultural world of devotion²³⁴.

Korte would agree that it is more revealing to adopt a hermeneutical approach to miracles (and to a guru’s miraculous nature) and to evaluate what it has meant to those who have experienced them / it²³⁵. In particular in the consideration of the later miracle stories of the Neem Karoli Baba movement, what may be seen is an increasing abundance of ‘private miracles’ that are significant to those who experienced them but that might mean less to others outside the immediate circle concerned. These are (often touching) stories that are concerned with matters of the family, personal predictions, help with finding employment or marriage

²³¹ See Korte, Anne-Marie ed. *Women and Miracle Stories: A Multi-Disciplinary Exploration*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001, pp. 5-6

²³² *ibid.* p. 13

²³³ *ibid.* p. 8

²³⁴ Srinivas, 2008, p. 16

²³⁵ Korte, Anne-Marie ed. 2001, p. 5

prospects, issues relating to health and so on. The miraculous events are always seen to be positive and to be beneficently motivated even if, at times, they might also be temporarily disruptive to the existing plans of the devotee in question.

Whilst the presentation of the miraculous nature of Neem Karoli Baba is at the very heart of this movement, one of its underlying themes is also a conventional one: the astounding occurrences are frequently promoted as being spontaneous expressions of divine lore and so the dictates of tradition are observed once again. The guru's part in the reception and channelling of grace or energy is shown to be neither contrived nor striven for by him. In many ways, he is shown to *be* (or to embody) the miracle rather than to be the performer of it. With this in mind, Ram Dass offers the following:

It's not like there's somebody sitting there thinking, 'I'll use this power and blow his mind.' It is some being that is so much a statement of the laws of the universe that, at the appropriate moment with a person, a certain flip of something happens, which does the next thing... I realise how unfathomable that law is from my rational mind as to what the guru's doing to whom and why²³⁶.

Krishna Das reflects in a similar way:

...he accomplished a lot of things by apparently doing nothing, just by submitting to the desires of those around him. He appeared to do nothing, but... everything was taken care of perfectly and God's will was done in all cases perfectly²³⁷.

This is not a unique hagiographical predicament for a reputed saint. Muktananda's guru and direct peer of Neem Karoli Baba, Nityananda, is said to have lived in a similar way. Muktananda says of his guru that he was, "no miracle-monger" but that, having merged himself with *brahman*, he acquired *rddhi-siddhi* (supernatural powers) that ensured that, "big and small miracles spontaneously manifested, without any deliberate effort on his part"²³⁸. The persona of Shirdi Sai Baba is offered as a further illustration of this phenomenon, as is Ram Thakur. Moreover, of Anandamayi Ma (another direct peer of Neem Karoli Baba) has been written, "she had a titanic spiritual presence about her that transformed everything within hundreds of yards into bliss"²³⁹. Describing her as "someone whose actions were totally

²³⁶ Ram Dass, 1974, CD 12: Devotion and the Guru I, Track 12

²³⁷ Reported in Rosen, 2008, pp. 18-19

²³⁸ Muktananda, 1974, p. 10

²³⁹ Quong, Stephen. "Sri Anandamayi Ma, 20th Century Mystic." *Hinduism Today* (April / May / June 2008): p. 65

free”²⁴⁰, Ram Dass remarks, “With beings like that, beings like Anandamayi Ma or my guru, it’s that spirit behind their actions which is the transmission”²⁴¹.

This exceptional yet (on behalf of the true adept) apparently effortless state is sometimes referred to as *sahaja* (“believed by some to be the highest state”²⁴²): that which is totally spontaneous, natural and innate. In no way contrived or manipulated, one who exists in such a manner is said to be “a personification of Absolute Reality, dwelling always in a state of cosmic consciousness, the natural state of *sahaja samādhi*”²⁴³. That a being might be viewed as so evolved as to be “firmly established in the experience of absolute oneness”²⁴⁴ and simultaneously retaining an integral innocence or simplicity of character that is seen as veritably childlike in nature²⁴⁵ represents an interesting paradox. To this way of thinking, an advanced level of spiritual attainment has nothing to do with personal sophistication – not in any worldly sense at least. Referring to Neem Karoli Baba, Swami Rama writes, “In such a high state one becomes like a child. He is not fully aware of mundane things, but he is constantly aware of the Truth”²⁴⁶. This intriguing balance is commonly found in the hagiographical presentations of many of India’s spiritual illuminati (“these understandings are found everywhere in the spiritual literature”²⁴⁷) – and so that relating to Neem Karoli Baba is not exceptional. Potentially revealing both of him and the way in which such beings are culturally regarded, one devotee has written, “He was always natural, like a child, a saint in the traditional manner”²⁴⁸.

Even if one accepts the origination of his miraculous nature to have been a matter out of the preceptor’s hands or direct volition, the subsequent channelling or management of its sheer force nonetheless seems to have made certain demands of Neem Karoli Baba. One might presume that such power is not easy to contain within the human vessel of the body – in that of an apparently realised being, as much as in any other. In the introductory chapter to Ram Dass’ *Doing Your Own Being*, Earnest Scott points to the magnetic power that appeared to be channelled through Neem Karoli Baba and that succeeded in drawing the world to him. At the same time he acknowledges that this would, on occasion, present the threat of becoming too much for the man:

²⁴⁰ Ram Dass, 2004, p. 71

²⁴¹ *ibid.*

²⁴² Brent, 1971, p. 15

²⁴³ Quong, 2008, p. 65

²⁴⁴ *ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 215

²⁴⁶ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 110

²⁴⁷ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 216

²⁴⁸ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 22

The old man was in some state called *sahaj samadhi*²⁴⁹ when he didn't need to seek for anything he needed from the physical universe. Such things of this world as he needed came towards him, gravitated into him and sometimes had to be stopped before they became a deluge. Somewhere on a journey the Maharaji would stop and say 'Build a temple here.' There were gifts of all sorts already in the pipeline sufficient to build a temple. So presently a temple would go up on that spot²⁵⁰.

A number of hagiographical accounts demonstrate that, in line with the experiences of his peers, Neem Karoli Baba sometimes struggled against becoming overwhelmed by the miraculous forces at work. One scene depicts the guru nearly overcome by his devotees' religious fervour, zeal presumably inspired and enhanced by the divine influences said to be moving through him. Finally, he feels compelled to call an abrupt halt to proceedings. This might have been for his own sake, but one could speculate it was equally on behalf of those around him. Certainly, many have already succumbed:

Babaji himself became restless and so overwhelmed with emotions that tears rolled down his eyes; he sobbed, his throat was choked, and a divine change was seen in his mien. As a reaction to it, the devotees also felt vibrations and became very much emotional. People in a state of unconsciousness, semi-consciousness or fully awake observed it silently. When this state became unbearable for Babaji himself, he cried, 'stop it, stop it' and getting up went to another room and shut himself in or there itself covered himself with his blanket and non-stop hiccupping continued for some time²⁵¹.

What is truly occurring during such interaction between the guru and his devotees (or, indeed, between the guru and the divine), ultimately, remains out of reach. However, with greater contextual awareness of the nature of the miraculous within the Hindu guru tradition and within the hagiography pertaining to that institution, this unknowability presents less of a barrier. Before proceeding with investigation into what might be held to be rather more 'knowable' aspects of the life and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba, one more traditional approach is considered here, that of potential lineage.

²⁴⁹ Ram Dass also refers to Neem Karoli Baba in *sahaj samādhi* in the chapter entitled, "Ashtanga Yoga" in *Be Here Now* (1978, no page number); as well as in the foreword to Daniel Goleman's *The Varieties of Meditative Experience*. London: Rider & Company, 1978, p. xiii. As part of this last, he adds, "altered states of consciousness were an integral part of his [Neem Karoli Baba's] life".

²⁵⁰ Ram Dass, 1974, p. 16

²⁵¹ *ibid.* pp. 24-25

2.IV.iv A Consideration of Lineage

His past is shrouded in mystery, but he certainly hails from the lineage of Ram and Hanuman. That's definitely his line.

Krishna Das²⁵²

Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram Ram

Neem Karoli Baba²⁵³

Clearly categorised as a *bhakti* guru, Neem Karoli Baba was not, as far as is known, part of any official *vaiṣṇava paramparā* and neither *satguru* nor any orthodox lineage may be ascribed to him. *The Divine Reality* mentions that he “was initiated as a *Vaiṣṇav*”²⁵⁴, that he was named Lakshman Das and made to “wear the clothes of an ascetic”²⁵⁵. From this it could be argued that some level of instruction was offered, although this remains pure conjecture. An additional reference in *Miracle of Love* offers the opinion that he was “a member of a traditional devotional sect”²⁵⁶ focussing on the relationship between Rām and Hanumān. Unfortunately, no evidence for this is provided (nor even the identity of the devotees in question, by which the weight of the statement might subsequently be judged).

Whilst it is representative of the majority, it is interesting that not every commentator has been in agreement with this assessment of the guru as expressing exclusive leanings towards Rām and Hanumān. Shyamdas views the guru as, “a Vaishnava saint... Unconventionally Vaishnava, no doubt, but Vaishnava nonetheless”²⁵⁷. At the same time, he sees Neem Karoli Baba’s true path to have been more closely associated with Kṛṣṇa. As he explains:

It seems to me that Maharaj-ji’s path is the grace-filled Krishna devotional path. I know that people associate him with Ram and I would, of course, agree with that. But his personality and his style was far more on the Krishna side: grace and laughter and *lila* and not considering law or *sadhana*. This is not *Ram*, this is *Krishna*! *Ramlila* is quite considered and quite concerned with *sadhana* and righteous behaviour and following the path of straight *bhakti*. Maharaj-ji was crooked and grace-filled and gave rewards beyond scripture – now that’s a Krishna thing²⁵⁸.

Neither does Swami Vijayananda concur. He manages to cast a different light entirely on the preceptor when he writes, “Naimakaroli Baba [sic] is a great yogi in the old tradition of

²⁵² Rosen, 2008, p. 19

²⁵³ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 326

²⁵⁴ Pande, 2005, p. 20

²⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 3

²⁵⁶ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 353

²⁵⁷ Rosen, 2008, p. 64

²⁵⁸ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 00:49

Matsyendranath²⁵⁹, Gorakshanath²⁶⁰ and others²⁶¹. In his statement, he seeks to link the guru with *siddha*, *tantra* and also *nātha* philosophy. By association, therefore, he aligns him with *śaiva* and not with *vaiṣṇava* thought at all. On what reasoning this opinion is founded is interesting. Conceivably his standpoint belies a personal interest in the early ascetical practice of the guru. Alternatively, it could reflect a greater curiosity towards the guru as the alleged possessor of *siddhis* or other yogic powers than as one known for his allegiance to the path of devotional practice. Both these aspects of the guru will be explored in 3.II.ii (pp. 149-157).

It is perhaps not surprising that there is some discrepancy in how insiders view the preceptor's spiritual allegiances. Neem Karoli Baba himself was never explicit on the matter of his spiritual descent ("Maharaji never talked about it"²⁶²). What should be borne in mind, however, is that although Neem Karoli Baba must be regarded as operating outside the documented lineages by which many other gurus may be contextualised, it should not be assumed that he stands outside all lineages or traditions altogether. Nor that he stands alone in this respect. Shyamdas asserts, "MAHARAJAJI WAS UNIQUE, as are all pure *bhakti* teachers, they are themselves"²⁶³. Such a statement is revealing and, in many ways, encapsulates the issue: on the one hand it sets Neem Karoli Baba apart from other teachers of tradition by virtue of his apparently 'unique' nature; simultaneously, it acknowledges that it is this same authenticity and individuality that forges a connection between *all* teachers of 'pure' – that is, traditional – *bhakti*. Neem Karoli Baba's lack of preceptorial affiliation therefore neither precludes him from being a traditional Hindu, nor a practitioner of traditional practices. Describing Neem Karoli Baba as being "pure Hindu" and as promoting Hinduism "in his own way"²⁶⁴, Shyamdas considers:

I think that it's a misconception that when you follow *Vaishnava* that it's a form that's rigid or orthodox... The *bhakti marga* is a *Vaishnavite dharma* in that it's not rigid at all. It's *not* rigid, that's the nature of it... And when we saw he [Neem Karoli Baba] was *beyond* everything, it's true – he was *beyond* law but he didn't *contradict* law, otherwise he would have been like Rajneesh and that wasn't true at all. It was rather that we lived in a rather orthodox Hindu society, in a certain way, that had this great love and compassion. So orthodox *bhakti* practice is very loose actually. Most people think it somehow doesn't allow for love of all beings or acceptance of all paths, or the ability to uplift someone without any

²⁵⁹ Considered to be the founder of the *nātha sampradāya*, Matsyendranath (c 10-12 C.E) is also maintained as the author of a number of seminal books on tantric practice.

²⁶⁰ Gorakshanath is thought to have been the disciple of Matsyendranath.

²⁶¹ Vijayananda, 1978, p. 104

²⁶² Rosen, 2008, p. 19

²⁶³ Shyamdas. *Email Correspondence*, 10 August 2007

²⁶⁴ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 01:12

qualifications or the ability to love something that's outside one's specific practice: but these *are* the foundational teachings of *bhakti*²⁶⁵.

The Indian tradition is filled with examples of teachers in similar positions to that of Neem Karoli Baba. He is not alone in standing outside conventional spiritual lineages. Direct contemporary and (some might say) associate of the guru²⁶⁶, Anandamayi Ma offers a clear illustration in this respect. When the author of a recent article describes her as follows: "She never left India, never wrote a book... had no guru, no lineage, belonged formally to no tradition"²⁶⁷, he could equally have been portraying Neem Karoli Baba. Many might categorise Anandamayi Ma as an exceptional *bhakti* guru of the twentieth century; few, however, would deem her to have been a teacher acting either outside or particularly contrary to conventional practice.

As will be seen in the material throughout Part Three, Neem Karoli Baba was a *bhakti* preceptor who, whilst operating within the traditional mode of the Hindu guru, did not feel in the slightest bound by it. The same might be observed of the more formal codes of guru-disciplic succession and convention: he honoured them and yet was not part of one himself. Certainly, Neem Karoli Baba did not belong to a formalised *vaiṣṇava* sect, as did Shyamdas' subsequent guru, His Holiness Goswami Shri Prathameshji, *ācārya* of the Vallabhācārya lineage²⁶⁸. Having said this, Neem Karoli Baba did appear to feel connected to the devotional philosophical lineage afforded by *vaiṣṇava* practice and by that of the Rāmāyaṇic tradition in particular²⁶⁹. At least, the overwhelming majority of hagiographical inclusions attest as much. The legitimising factor attendant upon such a connection is not inconsequential. In the absence of a human *sampradāya* within which to position him, the tradition of Rāma and of Hānuman might be seen to have operated as a convenient and authoritative spiritual lineage for the community and as serving the purposes of validating the ongoing movement. Having said this,

²⁶⁵ *ibid.* 00:19

²⁶⁶ Many devotees describe the friendly interactions between these two gurus. One story describes Neem Karoli Baba being fed by Anandamayi Ma: "She was sitting there and he was saying, 'Ma! Feed me. Feed me, Ma!' She exploded into laughter" (Ram Dass comp. 2005, p. 46). Rameshwar Das remembers that Neem Karoli Baba, "had a great affection for Anandamayi Ma – more than for other saints" and recalls that his guru would send devotees, including himself, to take her darshan in Vrindavan (Rameshwar Das. *Telephone Interview*. Long Island, NY – London. 13 June 2007). A similar picture is given in the 1971 diary of Girija Brilliant in which she receives Anandamayi Ma's darshan in Vrindavan (Girija Brilliant, *Personal Journal*, 31 October and 3 November 1971).

²⁶⁷ Quong, 2008, p. 66

²⁶⁸ See Shyamdas. *Ocean of Grace: The Teachings of His Holiness Goswami Shri Prathameshji*. Vrindaban: Pratham Preeth Publication, 2007.

²⁶⁹ Neem Karoli Baba reputedly chose to hang portraits of the Vallabhācārya lineage upon the walls of his private home (Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 01:14) and at the temple in Vrindavan (Shyamdas. *Meeting*, London, 4 May 2009). He was also apparently fond of quoting the verse of Kabīr, other Northern *Sant* poets and the authors of his birth place, Vraja. In a similar manner, it is known that the *Rāmācaritāmānasa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (See Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 331) were both favoured texts for recitation at his temples.

there is no reason to disbelieve the fact that he was very fond of the *Rāmacaritamānasa* and that it found frequent recitation under his direction.

Much of the purpose of Part Two has been to appraise the reported unfathomability that finds salient representation in many of the subcontinent's saints and gurus, including in the persona of Neem Karoli Baba. In many ways this represents an essay of the role of divine agency within the 'dual personality' proposed in 2.II.ii by Pande and Mukerjee. Having considered our principal protagonist within this light, it becomes possible to move towards the other (more human) aspects of his life. What follows in Part Three, therefore, considers that which is better known – at least, that which is arguably more knowable – about the man who came to be known as Neem Karoli Baba.

PART THREE

A STUDY OF THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF NEEM KAROLI BABA

*I am like the wind
No one can hold me
I belong to everyone
No one can own me
The whole world is my home
All are my family
I live in every heart
I will never leave thee.*

Neem Karoli Baba¹

3.I Neem Karoli Baba

3.I.i Introduction

“There was once a child who lived in a remote village in North India”² so begins an article on the early years of Neem Karoli Baba in a newsletter from the ashram in Taos, New Mexico. Its fairytale tones seem appropriate in the gathering together of what are nothing more than fragments of a life. It is simply not possible to piece together an accurate biography of Chamatkari Baba³ – baba of the miracles – with anything approaching objective clarity. Ram Dass comments, “Who he [Neem Karoli Baba] was was no more than the experience of him”⁴, describing it as, “the totality of his absence”⁵. As has been established already, very few concrete facts remain from which a conventional study might be compiled. With a protagonist who might be characterised by the unpredictability of his nature, to attempt to approach him as one might any other subject proves a fruitless task – at least in any standard sense. Yet, it is incontrovertible that a substantial body of hagiographical accounts and experiences does remain relating to this preceptor. Moreover, as it is known approximately when and where our subject lived his life, it becomes possible to position him reasonably precisely within a socio-cultural setting. In itself, this provides an interesting point of access to him that has not previously been considered in any sources (either insider or outsider) to date. Before proceeding with closer investigation of the life and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba, therefore, we engage first with this aspect. 3.I.ii follows with an overview of the India of Neem Karoli

¹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 403. From the words of Neem Karoli Baba and adapted by Jai Gopal, who is now better known as kirtan singer and musician Jai Uttal. This verse is also used in Pande, 2005, p. x

² Sita Sharan, “A Young Sadhu” in *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA (Spring-Summer 1995): p. 3

³ According to a report in the Vrindavan local newspaper from September 12 1973, the inhabitants of that town “always addressed him by the name of ‘Chamatkari Baba’ (miracle man)” (Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 380).

⁴ Ram Dass with Bo Lozoff comp. 1976, p. 93

⁵ *ibid.*

Baba. In this manner, a greater sense of worldly context is provided that is lacking elsewhere in this material.

With awareness of this contextual framework, 3.II continues with a biographical 'sketch' or 'silhouette' of Neem Karoli Baba that assays how he might have been as a man and how it appears he chose to live his life. More specific study of what might be held to represent his teaching of others forms the contents of 3.III, 3.IV and 3.V. The first of these three chapters considers the potential pedagogic import that can be attributed to the arguably less 'knowable' aspects of his personality and behaviour. Issues of surrender, love and personal attachment are evaluated at this juncture. 3.IV and 3.V are concerned with that which is more clearly documented and thus which is more obviously 'knowable' about his guru role. In the main, this information stems from the later years of his life. 3.IV explores the day-to-day arrangements within his temple community settings. 3.V considers the creation and then his handling of the Western satsang that grew up around Neem Karoli Baba in the final few years of his life. 3.VI concludes this part and this thesis with a final consideration of Neem Karoli Baba and his connection with the lineage of Rām. 3.VI further presents the contributions that have been made by this thesis and considers future avenues of investigation.

Before proceeding with appraisal of the India of Neem Karoli Baba, we pause momentarily to consider the relationship between the narrative voice of the Neem Karoli Baba community and the socio-political matters that were contemporaneous to it. It has been established already that, in hagiographical materials, certain subjects are selected or deemed suitable for inclusion over others. This is an acknowledged feature of the genre. At the same time, Valerie Hardcastle refers to the 'tellability' of personal stories of this variety⁶ and how the projected reception of them will determine their initial presentation. Perhaps it is for this reason that, amongst the material relating to this preceptor, there is ample illustration of his reputedly compassionate mien and of his miraculous abilities and, simultaneously, a sparsity of written commentary upon (or in connection with) the times in which he lived and then died. After all, however extraordinary such external events might be perceived to be, they do not (cannot) hold the same 'tellability' factor as those explicitly connected with the guru. At least not from the communal perspective of the satsang: if the guru is held to be the centre of their world, then any more worldly reportage can only be seen to detract attention from the 'main event'. Such a viewpoint is underpinned further by the fact that the preceptor himself is shown to have taken little real interest in matters of the world: "Only now and then did Maharajji discuss

⁶ Hardcastle, 2008, p. 38

politics at all. Usually he didn't seem to be particularly interested in worldly affairs unless pressed by devotees"⁷.

Should this have been the case, then in not presenting a greater national context in their narratives, chroniclers of the guru's life effectually sought to follow (or possibly abide by) the example of the guru himself. In the autumn of 1971, a young American woman kept a diary of the time that she spent with the guru. In her journal, Girija Brilliant provides two illustrations of the fact that Neem Karoli Baba chose not to be overly distracted by worldly affairs. In the first recorded statement he asserts, "The world is a mirror, it reflects the state you are in"; in the second, he proposes, "The whole world is an illusion. The only way out is to love God"⁸. That such a focus of divine over mundane interests might subsequently feed into the hagiography is, then, not surprising. In only a handful of stories can one connect events with historical landmarks. One example in *The Divine Reality* depicts the guru's apparent prophetic awareness of the Chinese retreat from Indian soil after their military invasion of 1962⁹. A further illustration comes from Girija Brilliant: on 4 December 1971 she writes in her diary, "We are all told to leave today. Pakistan has bombed India. We arrive in Delhi during blackout"¹⁰. Four days later, she records the following interchange with the guru:

M. says, 'There is a war on you know?' Talks about it in Hindi. Krishna asks what special lessons we [the Western satsang] should learn from being here in wartime?

M. says, 'You should be peaceful. It's all God's way of arranging things'¹¹.

Having said this, several reported incidents do intimate that the guru's removed stance from socio-political spheres was more consciously maintained. Refusing to participate in an anti-government "agitation about cow protection"¹², the guru is said to have warned the sadhu concerned, "A sadhu's work is *bhajan* and kirtan, puja and prayer. He should not go in for politics"¹³. Another account depicts Neem Karoli Baba's demurral from participation in a similar protest. On this occasion, the objection is a new law that would permit members of the untouchable caste to enter temples, an act previously forbidden to them. When the leading proponent of this dissent, a sadhu named Karpatriji, harangues the guru for his lack of support, Neem Karoli Baba responds with a torrent of abuse claiming that if anyone should wish to

⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 130

⁸ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 27 November 1971

⁹ Pande, 2005, p. 80

¹⁰ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 4 December 1971

¹¹ *ibid.* Entry for 8 December 1971

¹² Mukerjee, 2001, p. 78

¹³ *ibid.* p. 79

pray, that should be allowed¹⁴. Particularly revealing is the postscript to the event: “Later, when he had calmed down, he added, ‘This is not the work of a sadhu, this is the work of the politicians. You should keep aloof from it’”¹⁵. Whether he is here speaking to Karpatriji, or in fact to himself, is not altogether clear.

Whatever the underlying aetiology, the absence of a greater political context within the narrative of this movement is significant. Its presence might have offered a counterbalance of gravitas to the overtly devotional tones of some contributors and an additional point of access through which to approach the many miraculous events that are purported to have surrounded this guru. Moreover, as the preceptor is known to have offered darshan to a number of politically influential fellow citizens (not least of whom, former prime minister J.L. Nehru and former president V.V. Giri¹⁶), it might be seen as appropriate (at least as interesting) to acknowledge these connections more explicitly. Partially in response to its absence within the hagiography, and in order that Neem Karoli Baba might be approached here as a subject for biographical study – in other words, as a man and not merely as a mythical being – what follows is a broad historico-political overview of the India of his lifetime. Against this contextual backdrop, the specific events of the holy man’s life may be examined within a wider, more human, perspective.

3.I.ii The India of Neem Karoli Baba

To get on familiar terms with the local people is a part of your education.

Rabindranath Tagore¹⁷

Whilst there is little corresponding resonance within the hagiography relating to Neem Karoli Baba, it remains indubitable that the subcontinent experienced – one might say endured – an extraordinary twentieth century. Whatever reason one ascribes for the absence of its depiction, the fact that India was continuing to exist with varying degrees of unease under the rule of the British Colonial Administration (either before, leading up to or during the Second World War) finds little mention in the hagiography, at least not explicitly. This notwithstanding, the first decades of the last century in India were marked by a headlong rush towards industrialisation of the nation, and the consequent demographic changes incumbent upon such growth. The far-

¹⁴ It could be suggested that the guru’s response to this is nevertheless a political stance.

¹⁵ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 79

¹⁶ Pande, 2005, p. 9

¹⁷ Taken from a letter written in 1907 to a relative who had gone to the West to study agriculture, Tagore exhorts his son-in-law to study America as well as its farming methods. As a warning, he then adds that if, in doing so, he starts to lose a sense of his own Indian identity, “it is preferable to stay in a locked room” (Reproduced in Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*. London: Penguin, 2006, p. 105).

reaching effects of this alone have meant permanent change in the face of Indian society that are clear for us to see today. The purpose of this section is to trace certain social, historical and political developments within twentieth century India that might be thought of as significant enough for their impact to have been felt (at some level at least) upon or within the life of Neem Karoli Baba. Whilst some considerations featured below are necessarily pan-Indian, others included here are more regionally located within the geographical regions in which the guru would have lived and operated during the different decades of his lifetime. Where possible, local and contemporaneous sources¹⁸ have been employed.

The India of the guru's youth was one marked by recurrent bouts of famine and widespread disease. Merely in the Agra district – the region in which the holy man was born and in which he then spent the formative decades of his life – the *District Gazetteer* records serious and extensive famine resulting from drought, flooding and also from locust infestation. During these years alone, Neem Karoli Baba would have been aware of (if not directly affected by) periods of famine in 1905 and 1907–08¹⁹; in 1914 and 1919²⁰; and then again in 1924–25, 1928–29, 1929–30, 1930–31 and in 1932²¹. As might be expected in times of material hardship, disease and ill health were further rife. Other than a number of 'lunatics', lepers and an unusually high number of 'blind persons' (caused, so this record speculates, by the "injurious effect" of the "pungent smoke of cowdung fuel"²²), the Agra district records of 1905 document significant mortality rates for malarial fever and for pneumonia, together with somewhat lesser figures for cholera, smallpox and dysentery²³.

What is particularly noteworthy is the rise in deaths recorded in the first decade that result from contraction of the plague. The *District Gazetteer* reports only two plague deaths in the whole of 1900 and both of those "imported"²⁴. Only four years later, however, "the mortality was for several months very high, amounting to over 2,000 deaths weekly for a short period in

¹⁸ The principal source of this contemporaneous material is the extensive collection of *District Gazetteers* that the British Colonial Administration collated for each of its administrative districts. Copies of these are housed in the British Library in London.

¹⁹ *District Gazetteer, United Provinces Govt. Agra. Supplementary Notes and Statistics to Volume VIII of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*. Allahabad: Government Press, United Provinces, 1914, pp. 6-7

²⁰ *District Gazetteer, United Provinces Govt. District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh Supplementary Notes and Statistics. Volume VIII. Agra District*. Allahabad: Government Press, United Provinces, 1924, pp. 3-7

²¹ *District Gazetteer, United Provinces Govt. District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh Supplementary Notes and Statistics up to 1931-1932. Volume VIII (D). Agra District*. Allahabad: Government Press, United Provinces, no date of publication given although date received by India Office in London offered as 1937, pp. 4-6.

²² Neville, H.R. *Agra: A Gazetteer Being Volume VIII of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*. Allahabad: Govt. Press, United Provinces, 1905, p. 25

²³ *ibid.* See Table IV – "Deaths according to cause" – Appendix, p. v

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 25

the beginning of 1905”²⁵. An English-authored political tract from 1907 reports more of the same. Albeit looking further afield than just the Agra district, this author asserts that as many as 500,000 deaths *each month* are being brought about as a result of the “black plague”²⁶ epidemic that was rampant in India at this time. Admittedly, the speaker is here delivering a speech to the International Socialist Congress and so might arguably be perceived as having a political agenda motivating his sentiment. Moreover, as in a further speech from the same year, he determines that his greatest qualification for speaking about India is the fact that he has never been there and so may remain unbiased in his opinion²⁷, his authority must be called into question. Yet his is a contemporary and strident political voice that finds no echo whatsoever in the Indian material relating to Neem Karoli Baba from the early years of the guru’s life.

By the 1920s and 1930s the guru had most probably relocated to the Farrukhabad region, “the most Easterly of the six which at present make up the Agra division”²⁸. A modern political study of this slightly later post-war period creates an interesting picture of the “shift in the matrix of social relations”²⁹ in India, of which the young holy man (willingly or otherwise) would also have found himself a part:

The interwar years were significant for extensive urbanisation, with towns developing rapidly in north India, away from the colonial, industrial port cities or the presidency towns of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, which had experienced earlier growth spurts from the later nineteenth century. Urban development in the two decades after the First World War was stimulated by growth in manufacturing industries and the substantial migration from rural areas that took place as a result of both increasing demographic pressures in the countryside from the 1920s onwards and agrarian depression in the 1930s³⁰.

Certainly, the census returns for Farrukhabad show that the population of this town grew from 229,299 in 1921³¹ to 308,186 a mere ten years later³². Even without consideration of the First World War, it must therefore be conceded that the first decades of the twentieth century saw a

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Hyndman, H.M. *The Ruin of India By British Rule*. London: Twentieth Century Press Ltd., 1907, p. 15

²⁷ Hyndman, H.M. *The Unrest in India*. London: Twentieth Century Press Ltd., 1907, pp. 1-2

²⁸ Neave, N.R. *Farrukhabad: A Gazetteer Being Volume IX of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*. Allahabad: Govt. Press, United Provinces, 1911, p. 1

²⁹ Gooptu, Nandini. *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 6

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh Supplementary Notes and Statistics. Volume B. Farrukhabad District*. Lucknow: Government Branch Press, 1925, Table 1, Appendix, p.i

³² *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh Supplementary Notes and Statistics up to 1931 - 1932. Volume IX (D). Farrukhabad District*. Allahabad: Printing and Stationery, United Provinces, 1935, Table 1, Appendix, p. i

number of “momentous changes”³³ for the Northern region of Neem Karoli Baba’s formative years.

More than the immediate issues of the home front that have featured so far, the impact of the international concerns of this time would have been felt sharply by India. It is clear that the effects of the Western political upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s were felt across the world – and so in India too, of course. As a prime colonial resource, India found its own fate all-too closely bound to that of its administrative rulers. As the Second World War exerted its draining influence upon British reserves, both in terms of material wealth and of manpower, the Indian subcontinent consequently had little choice than to become heavily involved. Poet Girija Kumar Mathur describes the India of this period:

At this time the black clouds had begun to appear on the social and political firmament of the nation [India]. The World War had started in 1939. After 1940 it struck a severe blow to the country in quick succession and set in a social upheaval. By 1942-43 it had firmly gripped the nation in its clutches. The essential commodities were in short supply; the food problem was gaping; cloth, oil, fuel, salt, and sugar were scarce. The prices already soaring rocketed sky-high, thanks to black-marketing and hoarding. The entire atmosphere was permeated by an unprecedented sense of destruction³⁴.

There was a further serious famine in Bengal in 1943. The combination of inflation and ongoing conditions of poverty made for a heady mix of political unrest that fuelled India’s bid for independence from the Raj. Kulshreshtha explains:

The feeling of frustration... [that] arose from a feeling of want and a physical sense of helplessness and despair at having contributed to a war effort not merely materially but also under duress, that is, under the coercion of foreign rulers by losing the finest flower of India’s manhood³⁵.

Outside Neem Karoli Baba’s immediate vicinity (first in the Farrukhabad region and then also the Nainital district from the 1940s onwards), what was being played out on India’s national political stage was the rise of the Indian Independence Movement, with M.K. Gandhi at its centre. This culminated in the post-war departure of the ‘Britishers’ after a colonial influence or administrative rule that stretched back almost two hundred years. A rare hagiographical reference to these times states, “Maharajji, though he expressed favour for India’s independence, said, ‘The British were good at heart’”³⁶. More than this, though, is not offered

³³ Gooptu, Nandini, 2001, p. 6

³⁴ Reproduced in Kulshreshtha, C.M. *T.S. Eliot and Modern Hindi Poetry: A Study of Four Major Poets*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1982, p. 6

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 7

³⁶ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 130

by the guru or his chroniclers about the changes brought about by the granting of independence to the British Indian Empire and its partition into the ‘Dominion of Pakistan’ and the ‘Union of India’ on 14 and 15 August 1947 respectively. Nor is much offered regarding any subsequent events: the ongoing bloody disagreements concerning this division that started in the Indo-Pak War of 1947; the resultant mass movement of over 17 million citizens into or out of newly formed Pakistan; the assassination of M.K. Gandhi by a Hindu extremist on 30 January 1948; the following era of Nehru’s rule; the Chinese attack on Indian soil in September 1962; or Indira Gandhi’s term in office from January 1966, momentous not least in terms of her gender. Yet each of these events must remain a contextual consideration nonetheless – however oblique – in an assessment of this man’s biography. It is therefore against the backdrop of this wider socio-political awareness that it becomes appropriate to approach the subject of this study: a holy man who lived through many of these challenges and changes in twentieth century Northern India.

3.II Attempting a Biography of Neem Karoli Baba

There can be no biography of Maharaji.

Ram Dass³⁷

In many cases ‘lives’ can be generated only through the musings and recollections of somebody else – the chronicler and the poet, the biographer and the bureaucrat, the oral historian and the anthropologist³⁸.

3.II.i A Study of the Early Years

Saints, needless to say, tend to be remarkable children³⁹.

According to the lunar calendar, the guru was born on the fourteenth day of the rising moon of Margashirsha, which by the Western solar calendar relates to a period from approximately the end of November to the middle of December⁴⁰. In 2008, for example, this date was set as Saturday 6 December. As is not uncommon for India – for whose inhabitants the day rather than the year of birth traditionally is often presented as being of greater interest – establishing the year of his birth becomes a more complicated matter. A Western report offers 1900⁴¹, which appears to be a rational suggestion. As soon as one investigates insider hagiographical material, however, things become characteristically more elastic. One particular story tells of a ninety year-old woman who had known Neem Karoli Baba when she was only nine: “he came

³⁷ Ram Dass with Bo Lozoff comp. 1976, p. 93

³⁸ Arnold and Blackburn eds. 1997, p. 12

³⁹ Smith, 2000, p. 35

⁴⁰ Accessed at < www.neebkaroribaba.com/maharajji.htm > (6 September 2005)

⁴¹ Catalfo, Phil. “Neem Karoli Baba (Maharajji).” *Yoga Journal* (December 2001) Accessed at <<http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/6161.cfm>> (6 September 2005)

to our house to give darshan. He was quite old then”⁴². When she subsequently meets the guru once more – this time in her old age – possibly unsurprisingly, “she could not believe her eyes”⁴³. Another account comes from a man, over the age of eighty, who insists that the guru had given him a blessing to take his first job almost seventy years previously⁴⁴. Speculation is only enhanced when, as several devotees discuss a saint who had lived five hundred years before, “Maharajji said, ‘Oh, I knew him’”⁴⁵.

All commentators, however, are in agreement that Neem Karoli Baba was born as ‘Lakshmi Narayan Sharma’⁴⁶ in a small traditional Vraja village called Akbarpur⁴⁷. Situated approximately thirty-five kilometres from Agra, Akbarpur is surrounded in all directions by open fields of wheat and potatoes. Still today, this compact settlement remains relatively untouched by the modern, or rather commercial, advancements seen in many similar villages. As is traditional to hamlets of this sort, the mud-daubed walls and narrow (generally) unpaved paths of Akbarpur are the golden hue of the local soil and villagers keep small numbers of goats and buffalo in pens attached to their houses. More or less at the heart of this community stands a larger house built about a courtyard and it is most probably in the rear of the two ground floor rooms⁴⁸ that the holy man was born, the son of a prosperous Brahmin *jameedar* (landlord) family⁴⁹.

As is common amongst the hagiographies of other Indian saints, it is widely reported that this holy man also demonstrated exceptional spiritual precocity⁵⁰. Omniscience, in particular, is a widely reported feature. Thus, Pande comments that he “exhibited spiritual powers from birth” and further remarks that, whilst he did not appear to show any interest in studying as a child,

⁴² Pande, 2005, p. 260.

⁴³ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 23

⁴⁴ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 176

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ This is also written as Laxmi Narain in certain texts including *The Divine Reality*.

⁴⁷ As a small village, Akbarpur is not mentioned in the *Agra District Gazetteer* that would have been contemporary to the holy man’s youth. The village is situated close to the Agra railway line but, whilst this may clearly be followed upon the 1905 map, the hamlet is not depicted.

⁴⁸ This room was seen by the present author during a visit to Akbarpur to attend a *bhaṅḍārā* held to commemorate the day of Neem Karoli Baba’s birth (on potentially the 108th anniversary). A further alternative to his exact place of birth was identified by locals as being what appears now to be a store room at the rear of the present day school. This is less than a two minute walk from the family residence. Neem Karoli Baba Temple. *Visit and Bhaṅḍārā*, Akbarpur, India, 6 December 2008.

⁴⁹ Shortly after Neem Karoli Baba’s death in 1973, Girija and Larry Brilliant went with two or three others as the first Western satsang members to visit the place of their guru’s birth. Larry Brilliant comments: “As soon as we got into Akbarpur, every single person we saw had a big picture of Maharajji. We were shown his house, then they asked if we wanted to see his family house where he grew up.” Larry & Girija Brilliant, *Interview*. Seva Foundation, Berkeley, CA, USA. 19 December 20, 01:07

⁵⁰ See Isherwood, Christopher. *Ramakrishna and his Disciples*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974, pp. 28-29 and also Lipski, Alexander. *Life and Teaching of Sri Anandamayi Ma*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1997, 2006, pp. 2-4 for further hagiographical illustration of this point.

“he seemed to know everything”⁵¹ – offering the story of the boy’s correct premonition of a burglary at the family home as illustration. *Miracle of Love* proposes that, “Maharajji began his spiritual work very early in life. He told one devotee that as a small child of seven or eight he would skip school to go into the jungle to do tapasya [practice austerities]”⁵². In a 2008 ‘kirtan camp’ retreat at the Breitenbush Hot Springs Retreat and Conference Center in Oregon, Jai Uttal reiterated this view of the child’s spiritual aptitude. He too tells his workshop participants that Neem Karoli Baba chose to become a renunciant at the age of eight⁵³. The most emphatic statement, however, may be found on an American website dedicated to the guru upon which is asserted, “It is believed that by the time Maharaj-ji was 17 years old He knew EVERYTHING”⁵⁴.

Of his earliest years there are a number of inconsistencies in the hagiography that, on occasion, nonetheless overlap in their content. One tale suggests that, at the age of ten or eleven, the boy was punished for some disobedience towards his stepmother by being bound with rope and left upon the roof of his house: “The child lay there in the sweltering heat. That night, when darkness enveloped the village, young Lakshmi Narayan escaped his bonds and left that place”⁵⁵. He travelled to distant Gujarat. There, “he practised austerities on the banks of a talaab⁵⁶ (a man-made tank of water) and became known to the local people as ‘Talaaya Baba’”⁵⁷. A different commentary proposes that, at the same age, he was married to a girl from an affluent local Brahmin family, after which event he then immediately left for Gujarat to roam as a wandering sadhu for a further ten to fifteen years. He finally returned home once more at the instruction of his father, Shri Durga Prasad Sharma, in order to live the life of a householder⁵⁸. As an aside, it should be pointed out that there must be at least some truth in the version of Neem Karoli Baba in this guise (and therefore as the householder guru that he became known to be) as he left behind him a family of a wife⁵⁹, two sons (including Dharma

⁵¹ Pande, 2005, p. 3

⁵² Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 317

⁵³ April 2008. Video footage accessed at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATYueM2fR7Q>> (29 May 2008)

⁵⁴ Accessed at <www.neemkarolibaba.com> (06/09/05)

⁵⁵ Sita Sharan. “A Young Sadhu” in *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA. (Spring-Summer 1995): p. 3

⁵⁶ Or, indeed, as living in the lake itself. See Mukerjee, 1996, pp. 131-132

⁵⁷ Sita Sharan, 1995, p. 3

⁵⁸ Accessed at <www.neemkarolibaba.com> (6 September 2005)

⁵⁹ Bharati suggests that a principal reason that Ramakrishna did not accept ordination from his guru Totapuri was because he, like Neem Karoli Baba, was a married man. Ordination would mean a formal severance of marriage ties. In order to honour his earlier matrimonial commitments to Sarada Devi, so Bharati continues, Ramakrishna remained without ordination and married to his wife. Whilst this proposition has no replication in the hagiography of Neem Karoli Baba, it is conceivable that it was a consideration for this holy man also (See Bharati, 1976, p. 89).

Narayan) and a daughter⁶⁰. How much of an active role as a conventional father figure the guru played in raising his family is not clear⁶¹. However it is reported that, at some point in the children's upbringing, he chose to remove them from his traditional family home in Akbarpur to raise them instead in Agra⁶². Although it presents as an extraordinary discontinuity, insiders never comment upon why the holy man felt the need to keep his family life separate from his preceptorial career. It is unquestioningly accepted as a further idiosyncrasy.

To return once more to the depiction of the Neem Karoli Baba's youth, another account from this period is forwarded in which the boy again leaves for Gujarat at "the tender age of eleven"⁶³. According to this version of events, however, he remained away for a total of seven years, living as an ascetic in the ashram of a *vaiṣṇava* saint. This holy man is said to have given him the name, 'Lakshman Das':

His hair grew long and matted, and he wore a loincloth tied around his waist with a rope made of reed. His sole possession was a *kamandal* (a pot made out of a gourd). He also stayed for some time at an ashram in Babania⁶⁴, a village outside the town of Morvi. There he practiced spiritual austerities, which included immersing himself in a lake for long periods⁶⁵.

A further source relating to this initial period in the saint's life, *Miracle of Love* suggests that during these early formative years:

He travelled about dressed in only a single dhoti, and he took his food and water in a discarded fragment of a broken clay water jug, which he wore on his head like a cap... At this time he was known as 'Handi Walla Baba' (the baba with the broken clay pot)⁶⁶.

Miracle of Love speculates that the young sadhu went on to perform spiritual practices "by sitting for some time in water"⁶⁷ in a location near to Aligarh and Manpuri. Here he was known by the name of 'Tikonja Walla Baba', a name that relates to the triangular shape of the

⁶⁰ At the time of his death, that the guru had a family came as a surprise to most devotees who had not previously been aware of their existence. Thus when the Western satsang members visiting Akbarpur were asked whether they would like to meet some members of his family, Larry Brilliant comments, "I'm surprised that more and more of us didn't have a stroke or a heart attack – his son lives over here, and his wife? His wife's alive!" (Larry & Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 01:07)

⁶¹ The guru's Indian website maintains that, "He devoted time towards his responsibility of a householder and at the same time he continued to look after his bigger family, i.e. the world at large" Accessed at <www.neebkaroribaba.com/maharajji.htm> (6 September 2005).

⁶² As reported by Western devotee Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Akbarpur, India, 6 December 2008

⁶³ Pande, 2005, p. 3

⁶⁴ Sita Sharan refers to this village as 'Vivaniya' in her article *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA. (Spring-Summer 1995): p. 3

⁶⁵ Pande, 2005, p. 3

⁶⁶ Ram Dass comp., 1995, p. 317

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

reservoir in which he practised. In *Premavatar*, Josi proposes that, as part of his *sādhana*, in this place the yogi “installed a Hanuman murti on an open space by the pond. Afterwards a temple was built there”⁶⁸. This statement is significant in that it represents the first mention of any temple established by the guru. Josi continues with the information that he remained there for six or seven years.

It is proposed by more than one source that, following the period of austerities in the lake, the young man then either “set off on a journey around the country”⁶⁹, “wandered about towards North”⁷⁰ or “travelled until he reached a cave where he spent more years”⁷¹. In each case the commentator demonstrates the peripatetic tendencies that remain characteristic for the rest of the guru’s documented life. It was as part of this journeying that the yogi somehow came to be connected with a community in the Farrukhabad district and so entered the next main phase of his life. During this period he lived, more or less as a hermit, in a succession of underground caves that were built for him by the local villagers. Remaining engaged in *sādhana*, so Ram Dass reports in *Inside Out: A Spiritual Manual for Prison Life*, the guru lived in this way for a full twelve years⁷², a number that finds even further increase with Pande who offers a total of eighteen years⁷³.

3.II.ii The Hagiographical Transformation of Neem Karoli Baba: From Seeking God to Becoming God

Whilst the facts of the above accounts may vary in detail, the consensus suggests that the guru spent much of these early years living as an ascetic, engaged in his own personal *sādhana* and the practices of *tapasyā*. The single photograph of Neem Karoli Baba as a young renunciant would attest to this mode of existence⁷⁴. It could be upheld that observance of these traditional spiritual foci would be formative in the youth of any holy person and so in the shaping of this young guru also⁷⁵: the influence of the practice of non-attachment, in particular, is evident in reports concerning his later actions and pedagogic modalities (as will be discussed more fully in 3.IV and 3.V). The fact that this young sadhu was himself supposedly so involved in strict yogic practices as part of his own training and yet did not subsequently prescribe them for his

⁶⁸ Josi, 2006, p. 18

⁶⁹ Pande, 2005, p. 4

⁷⁰ Josi, 2006, p. 18

⁷¹ Sita Sharan. *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA. (Spring-Summer 1995): p. 3

⁷² Ram Dass with Bo Lozoff comp. 1976, p. 94

⁷³ Pande, 2005, p. 8

⁷⁴ See Photograph 1, Appendix 6

⁷⁵ The hagiography of Ramana Maharshi similarly portrays a young boy of sixteen who, upon leaving his family, engages in extreme ascetical practice for two to three years. Godman remarks that the results of this remained with him for the rest of his life (Godman ed. 1985, p. 1).

own followers presents an interesting picture. It raises the question, why not? Any *sādhana* that involves spending lengths of time in water must presumably demand a good deal of discipline. Even so, Neem Karoli Baba is later documented as having asserted, “I make devotees, not disciples”⁷⁶. More than this, he is said actively to have discouraged (at least most) devotees from engagement in a strict yogic lifestyle. One clear illustration, from a later period, reads as follows:

Some Westerners who came to Kainchi from Rishikesh practiced the whole hatha yoga regimen, swallowing dhotis, putting string up the nose, and so forth. Maharajji urged them to stop being so fanatic about that, saying, ‘I did all those things myself. It’s not the way’⁷⁷.

From such reportage, it could be suggested that he subsequently chose to redirect (or possibly redefine) his approach from *sādhana* of an ascetic nature to that more directly inspired by matters of the heart. If this is the case, then the decision to change his method would appear to have been an informed one and one that found its basis in his own early personal experience of the ascetical path. For this practitioner at least, *bhakti* might be seen to represent the *culmination* of his search rather than a preparatory step along the way.

More information is not available as to why and exactly when the sadhu changed direction in his *sādhana*, yet a potential hagiographical clue does exist from the next phase of the young holy man’s life. During this period it is reported that he spent considerable periods of time living in a series of underground caves, most probably in the village of Neeb Karori⁷⁸. Living the most frugal of existences, he apparently “immersed himself in spiritual practice all day. No one saw him coming out even to attend the call of nature. He came out only in the darkness of the night”⁷⁹. Different sources offer that the guru occupied himself, “in Sadhna secretly for the purification of body”⁸⁰. This included such advanced traditional yogic practices as, “coming out sometimes during the hot season to sit in a ring of fire in the hot sun”⁸¹ or emerging from the caves, “from time to time to sit in between hot fires – as a further type of tapasya”⁸².

⁷⁶ Pande, 2005, p. xvii

⁷⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 319

⁷⁸ Of this small village, the 1911 *Farrukhabad District Gazeteer* writes: “Nimkarori: This village, whose name is also spelt Nibkarori, lies... at the crossing of two unmetalled roads, sixteen miles south-West of Fategahr. Its population was 1,780 in 1901... The name of ‘Ten Million Nims’ is derived from the trees which still shade the street. The village stands on rising ground, and its woods must therefore have forced themselves all the more conspicuously on the notice of the original name-giver” (Neave, 1911, pp. 238–9).

⁷⁹ Pande, 2005, p. 4

⁸⁰ Josi, 2006, p. 18

⁸¹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 317

⁸² Williams, Nair & Osborne, 2005, p. 137

The sadhu's specific reasoning for undertaking this extreme course of *sādhana* is never mentioned in hagiographical sources. Whether members of the guru's satsang might follow or benefit from this path is also not raised as a point of discussion. It might be mooted, however, that practices of this nature are specifically designed for the acquisition and development of yogic *siddhis*. Tradition warns of the potential danger that exists in the acquiring of such powers although, as Bharati remarks, "...the built-in dialectic is the notion that there is nothing wrong with *getting* these goods, provided the aspirant does not *want* them"⁸³. As before, the motivation of the adept remains a core concern⁸⁴. It is interesting that it is from this point in the hagiography that accounts start to assume an element of the miraculous. Whether or not this was the intended goal of his *sādhana*, the holy man's extended efforts at yogic practice conceivably found their reward in the initial development of *siddhis*. Or so the chroniclers would lead us to believe.

More than this, from this juncture, the stories begin to present the young man in ways that highlight his apparently godlike nature – significantly, in relation to other people. Indeed, he is portrayed less as one who is engaged in the personal seeking of God and more as a divine channel who has, at some level at least, actually *become* God. Bearing in mind the nature and extent of the ascetical practices in which the guru had been engaged to this point in his spiritual career, the fact that he is consequently frequently portrayed or seen by his devotees in the aspect of Śiva is not surprising. Different (potentially softer) characteristics do come to the fore in subsequent hagiographical representation. Yet elements of the traditionally stern deity accompany the portrayal of this guru for the rest of his life – in the narratives of some devotees at least.

One of the very first illustrations of the guru in his "Shiva-like form"⁸⁵ is offered in an account in which – without prior permission – an attendant named Gopal entered the sadhu's cave in order to bring him a bowl of milk. Upon entry, he witnessed that, "Babaji was lying in a trance and huge snakes were playing on his chest"⁸⁶. The attendant lost consciousness at the sight and only recovered himself when the saint's touch brought him round. This story exists in a number of slight variations: in *The Divine Reality*, Gopal discovered the guru "deep in meditation with serpents wrapped around his body. He was so horrified to see Baba in his Shiva-like form that his legs gave way and the pot of milk slipped from his hands. He ran outside and fainted"⁸⁷. In *Miracle of Love*, the attendant is this time female and is coming to

⁸³ Bharati, 1976, p. 157

⁸⁴ For further discussion of the dangers of *siddhis* that are mishandled, see 3.II.vi (pp. 169-174)

⁸⁵ Pande, 2005, p. 6

⁸⁶ Josi, 2006, p. 18

⁸⁷ Pande, 2005, p. 6

clean his cave. Finding the guru with “snakes wrapped around him”⁸⁸, she ran away frightened. “He called out to her not to worry, and as he stood up the snakes disappeared into his body”⁸⁹. With this last in mind, a later account is of note: a woman emerges from using the lavatory, “in an ecstatic state”, and claimed to have had the guru’s darshan in the bathroom. When her sister rushed in to examine the room, “what she found there was a huge cobra”⁹⁰.

Within the emic context of such depiction, it is clear that the aspect of the miraculous has assumed a level of prominence and that the sadhu is shown to possess apparent mastery over certain yogic *siddhis*. Of the acquisition of this wizard-like ability, Chidananda writes, “It is believed that he [Neem Karoli Baba] had done Upasana (worship) of Sri Hanuman and attributed many of his miraculous deeds to ‘*Siddhi*’ (psychic power) through this Upasana”⁹¹. More than this is not known, nor where Chidananda has obtained his information, for it is not replicated elsewhere. Having said this, numerous illustrations exist that would portray the guru in the same role of *śakta* in which we have already seen Hanumān operate. The apparent ability to heal, which is illustrated in the above narrations concerning Gopal, became one that his devotees subsequently came to call upon with some frequency⁹². Other reported yogic powers included the ability to bi-locate (“he had a reputation for appearing in more than one place at the same time”⁹³), the power to change the nature of material objects – such as, for example, turning water into milk or petrol⁹⁴ – and even to be able to consume copious amounts of toxic substances – including LSD and also arsenic⁹⁵ – to no apparent ill effect or indeed any effect at all⁹⁶.

Of all the miraculous abilities that may be found within devotees’ accounts, two in particular seem to stand out: *annapūrṇā siddhi* and also *aṇimā siddhi*. The first refers to the miraculous power to produce food; the second relates to the ability to change body size or shape at will. Concerning *annapūrṇā siddhi*, an early account exists of the sadhu as Talaya Baba that shows him practising his austerities in the lake. From time to time, he would feed both humans and

⁸⁸ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 174

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.* p. 167

⁹¹ Swami Chidananda. “Baba Neem Karoli – A Wonder Mystic of Northern India.” *Divine Life Society* (1999), p. 4 Accessed at <<http://www.dlshq.org/saints/neemkaroli.htm>> (6 September 2005)

⁹² *ibid.* pp. 137-161

⁹³ Williams, Nair & Osborne, 2005, p. 137

⁹⁴ See Pande, 2005, pp. 136-139

⁹⁵ *ibid.* pp. 139-141

⁹⁶ There are certain resonances between these stories of Neem Karoli Baba’s consumption of toxic substances and the mythology that depicts Śiva drinking poison churned up from the world ocean. Variations of this story include those found in the *Mahābhārata*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Skanda Purāṇa*. See *Hindu Myths. A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit*. (Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty trans.) London: Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 273-280 & p. 336

animals that happened to be close by in a manner that defies rational explanation. As the report explains:

...he would feed them in plenty with all kinds of delicious food – pure halwa, laddoo, khir – they would never have imagined tasting so many sweets together. He would get the food by putting his hand on his head or from the lake in which he was sitting⁹⁷.

Nor, by all insider accounts, was this ability a short-lived one. Writing of a later period in the guru's life, Swami Chidananda's pamphlet relates his own personal experience of how the guru worked with this particular *siddhi*. Receiving the darshan of the holy man, one of his party presented Neem Karoli Baba with "7 or 8 oranges in a little towel"⁹⁸ and placed them in an empty basket beside him. After a short while, his companion was noticeably startled:

Sri Yogeshji was taken aback and was overcome by surprise when he observed that Babaji continued taking oranges from the basket even after he had given away 8 oranges and went on distributing this Prasad to all the members of our party plus the assembled Ashram staff and ultimately he had given 18 fruits in all. From where the additional 10 oranges came into the basket is something we could not explain. Perhaps only Babaji knows this⁹⁹.

As mentioned above, the representation of *animā siddhi* proves to be similarly popular within hagiographical accounts. Providing a thematic link between the guru and Hanumān and his Rāmāyaṇic feats, this power illustrates the holy man's apparent capacity to change his body size at will ("he was sometimes huge and sometimes little"¹⁰⁰). As devotees particularly delight in documenting, he is at times reported to have shape-shifted into actual simian form ("his face became very red and his body was covered by light brown hair"¹⁰¹). Specific consideration of devotees' acceptance of Neem Karoli Baba as an *avatāra* of the simian deity will be explored in 3.VI.i (pp. 255-259) and so is not included here. However, of the phenomenon in which the holy man is reported to have changed his height or shape or weight, Josi writes:

It was impossible to know the reality of Maharajji's physique and his structure. At times he appeared very bulky, at times lean and thin and of medium height. Sometimes he grew in width and his waist was not to be seen. It appeared as if thighs grew from his belly... According to one eye-witness, he was once not able to go through a 7 ft high and 3 ½ ft wide door in Dada Mukerjee's house until he was covered with a shawl. Lying on his takhat, he was at times seen shrunk in size to the three-fourth part of its length and at times his feet were seen dangling

⁹⁷ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 132

⁹⁸ Chidananda, 1999, p. 2 Accessed at <<http://www.dlshq.org/saints/neemkaroli.htm>> (6 September 2005)

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 175

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p. 160.

out of it. There was no certainty of his weight also. At times he became so heavy that it was difficult to lend support of shoulder or hand and at other times he became weightless as a flower or cotton¹⁰².

There are a substantial number of accounts that attest to this ability, although why it was that he would choose to change the size of his body with the frequency that is strongly alluded to within the hagiography that he did, cannot be known¹⁰³. Nor exactly how he did it, of course. What is achieved through such insider representation, though, is the promotion of the superior spiritual attainments of this holy man twinned with the awareness that such 'gifts' were somehow connected with his early practice and were present from a relatively young age.

It is reported that the first of the caves in which the ascetic lived – and in which, presumably, many of these accounts are supposed to have been enacted – at some point collapsed. Consequently, a second cave was made habitable for him that was situated upon an adjacent piece of land owned by a local Brahmin named Goverdhen. According to Pande, this second cave remains in existence today. It is of additional significance in that:

Baba had a Hanuman temple built on the roof of this cave, and on the day of consecration he shaved his long matted hair and started wearing a long cotton dhoti (length of cotton fabric) instead of the loin cloth¹⁰⁴.

At the consecration of the second temple connected to him, so this account suggests, the holy man's outward attire changed from that of the ascetic to that of the householder. At the same time, his whole attitude towards his engagement with others is shown to be different than it was before. Pande writes, "After moving into the new cave, Baba started interacting more with the villagers"¹⁰⁵. With this, the next period of hagiographical transformation is ushered in, and the earlier depiction of the young ascetic (primarily engaged in his own personal *sādhana*) comes to be replaced by the image of the compassionate 'saint', the *bhakta*, the friend of the poor and needy ("always benign to people"¹⁰⁶), reported to have said, "I exist only to serve others"¹⁰⁷. It is perhaps of significance that as the depiction of the miraculous increases in the anecdotes of his life, so too does the frequency of the mention of grace. Accordingly, the ascetical practices of the young sadhu in his own pursuit of God come to be depicted as being succeeded by the grace-filled acts of the guru seen *as* God, whose purpose suddenly revolves around the compassionate interaction with others. The guru is never again shown to place such

¹⁰² Josi, 2006, p. 89

¹⁰³ Similar attributes have been associated with Anandamayi Ma. (See McDaniel, 1989, p. 195)

¹⁰⁴ Pande, 2005, p. 4

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* p. 5

¹⁰⁶ Josi, 2006, p. 20

¹⁰⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 186

importance on the austere *sādhana* of his youth – either in personal terms or in his general instruction of others. Instead, so the hagiography demonstrates, he subsequently refocused his attention onto practices of a considerably more devotional, communal and service-oriented nature.

The portrayal of the holy man in the guise of *śakta* represents a major transformative shift in the hagiographical corpus; yet, in a continually fluid manner, he subsequently comes to be shown increasingly as a *bhakta* also and, consequently, as being far more approachable as a preceptorial figure. This is illustrated most clearly in the accounts that show him interacting with others in a manner as yet unseen in the hagiography. Reminiscent in character of the young Kṛṣṇa sporting in the Purāṇic tales with his playmates on the banks of the Jamuna, what is accepted to be the characteristic humour and playful nature of the guru starts to emerge for the first time:

According to the aged devotees of the village, Babaji did many miraculous lilas there. Keeping his identity concealed, he treated the villagers as friends. He performed miraculous deeds in fun and sport such as to disappear from a branch of a tree and to appear on another in the mango grove¹⁰⁸.

Similar miracles of invisibility and trans-location (“he could be anywhere and in any place he wished with the twinkling of an eye”¹⁰⁹) are reported from this time. The young man played hide and seek with villagers and, “...when his turn came, he became invisible and was not to be found anywhere”¹¹⁰. More even than this, “While climbing trees in the forest, his pursuers would follow him up one tree only to reach the top and see him sitting on another. No one saw him leaping from tree to tree”¹¹¹. Pande concludes, “It was all a matter of amazement and fun for them”¹¹². Despite the sport and play, however, the holy man’s activities are shown to remain firmly focused on extending, “the field of his welfaristic activities”¹¹³. Reports are thus offered in which he makes a saline well sweet by emptying bags of sugar into it; extinguishes a shop fire by sprinkling a few drops of water from his *kamaṇḍal*; and brings about the repentance of a thief by making him eat a water melon¹¹⁴.

¹⁰⁸ Josi, 2006, p. 18

¹⁰⁹ Chidananda, 1999, p. 4 Accessed at <<http://www.dlshq.org/saints/neemkaroli.htm>> (6 September 2005)

¹¹⁰ Pande, 2005, p. 5

¹¹¹ *ibid.* pp. 5-6

¹¹² *ibid.* p. 6

¹¹³ Josi, 2006, p. 20

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* pp. 18-19

The most well known of these hagiographical occurrences involves the incident through which he acquired the name by which he remains most commonly known. The holy man decided to travel by train from Neeb Karori to Farrukhabad and settled himself in the first class compartment. At the sight of the ascetic seated there, however, the conductor promptly ejected him from the train. In no way dejected by this, the sadhu sat down upon the platform to witness the ensuing spectacle. Despite all efforts of the railway staff, the train simply would no longer move. The engine was running and no mechanical defect could be identified and yet, for two hours, the locomotive remained at the platform. Eventually one of the railway men made a potential connection between the removal of the ascetic and the condition affecting the locomotive. The holy man was asked to 'release' the train:

Baba said, 'I am turned out of the train and you are asking me to let it go!' An employee replied, 'Perhaps you had no ticket.' At this Baba showed them several genuine first-class tickets. Amazed they begged him to re-board the train and let it move. Baba willed it to be so and the train moved instantly. From then on Baba Lakshman Das became famous as Baba Neeb Karori, the *baba* from Neeb Karori village¹¹⁵.

As stated already, it is reported that Neem Karoli Baba stayed at, or in the vicinity of, Neeb Karori for as many as eighteen years¹¹⁶. After this time, however, he began to move around once more and, in 1934 or 1935, he is said to have visited "thousands of people in various cities and provinces"¹¹⁷ in order to carry on "his activities of Compassion and Grace"¹¹⁸. One devotee remarks, "He was a nomad, you see that. He would go roaming about"¹¹⁹. Brent comments in his study of Indian gurus, "taking to the roads in India"¹²⁰ marks a time-honoured practice for Hindu holy men who make, "their way in a pilgrimage sometimes decades long from one holy man or holy place to another"¹²¹. McDaniel too observes this characteristic¹²². In engaging in this practice, therefore, Neem Karoli Baba links himself to an entire tradition of guru practice. It is conceivably as a result of such prolific journeying that, during this time, the guru began to be considerably better known. Amongst those who are said to have taken his darshan, it is possible to list such Indian luminaries as the poet Sumitra Nandan Pant and

¹¹⁵ Pande, 2005, p. 8

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Josi, 2006, p. 21

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 263

¹²⁰ Brent, 1971, p. 17

¹²¹ *ibid.* Swami Rama's memoirs, *Living with the Himalayan Masters* (1998), is an account of a similar peripatetic journey by a young holy man. A further example is that relating to Papa Ramdas (See Ramdas. *In Quest of God: The Saga of an Extraordinary Pilgrimage*. San Diego: Blue Dove Press, 1994)

¹²² McDaniel, 1989, p. 261

industrialist Jugal Kishore Birla in addition to Jawahar Lal Nehru and V.V. Giri mentioned above in 3.I.i (p. 141).

Exactly where Neem Karoli Baba travelled during this time is not clear. One destination that he reportedly visited is Dakshineswar near Calcutta¹²³. In May 1935, and at a small Śiva temple on the banks of the Ganges, a young student Mukerjee (“sympathetic to communism – reading about socialism and revolution and all those things that were of interest to my young group of friends”¹²⁴) found himself approached by “a bulky sort of fellow, with a moustache and a small beard, and a dhoti tucked around his waist”¹²⁵. The sadhu appeared to be absolutely insistent on conferring upon him a traditional sign of initiation in the form of a mantra. Reluctantly Mukerjee finally accepted, primarily “in order to get rid of him”¹²⁶. He continued on his way but something made the young man turn back: “I walked only a few steps and when I looked back there was nobody there”¹²⁷. Mukerjee did not come to realise the identity of his early initiator for almost three decades, despite becoming the holy man’s devotee in 1955. It was only in 1964, when the guru revealed the story of their first meeting to some others that Mukerjee eventually came to understand the persona and so the significance of the earlier event. Abiding to the traditional line on such matters, he writes of this: “This shows that you do not go to him, he comes to you. This was all his grace. I did not seek the mantra from him. He caught hold of me and gave me that”¹²⁸.

3.II.iii The Strange Case of Neem Karoli Baba and Colonel McKenna

There is a further documented connection between the guru and another individual that stems from around the same period. It is reported in a number of insider sources and is significant for a variety of reasons. Once more, these accounts are primarily concerned with the apparently miraculous abilities of the guru in his interactions with others. Again, they display his supposedly prophetic powers and his compassionate purpose. However, not only is the other party involved here of Western birth, he is also a powerful man who holds a position of authority on behalf of the British regime. Moreover, owing to the Westerner’s colonial

¹²³ It is well known that Ramakrishna was based at Dakshineswar, albeit not at a Śiva temple. No explicit connection exists between Neem Karoli Baba and Ramakrishna but it is conceivable that Neem Karoli Baba was at Dakshineswar on a *yātra*. As Ramakrishna died in 1886, this would have been only fifty or so years prior to Neem Karoli Baba’s visit.

¹²⁴ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 3

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *ibid.* p. 4

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ *ibid.* p. 15

connections and associated active service records¹²⁹, a slightly different source here supplements the usual hagiographical narrative.

The precise date of the initial meeting between the guru and the military man is not known. As supported by the reportage presented below, however, it probably occurred at some point between the end of the 1920s and the mid-1930s. What can be established is that Colonel J.C. McKenna served as the British Commanding Officer of the 7th Rajput Regiment¹³⁰ of the Indian Army. He was stationed with his men in the fort at Fategahr¹³¹, some sixteen miles from Neeb Karori. Depicted in non-military sources as being a “strict disciplinarian”¹³² – indeed a “very tough person”¹³³ altogether – it is specifically mentioned within emic sources that the colonel “despised the yogis and sadhus”¹³⁴ for whom his Indian-born troops demonstrated a predilection and that he “would not even allow any soldier to visit the Hanuman temple outside the army compound”¹³⁵. Dissatisfied with the situation, “in secret”¹³⁶ some of his men visited the holy man, encamped nearby at Kilaghat. They sought his darshan and complained about the colonel’s treatment of them. It was possibly as a result of such petitioning, according to devotees’ accounts at least, that, “Babaji became determined to bring a change in the Colonel’s heart”¹³⁷.

The story of how Neem Karoli Baba succeeded in his mission takes on a number of varying published forms. It is not that these narratives actively disagree with each other as much as show a progression (or momentum) with each subsequent retelling that is potentially more revealing of the development of how insiders saw the preceptor than it is of any sense of historical credibility (or lack thereof). Writing of biographical sources in relation to Caitanya, Tony K. Stewart has noted that when narrative concordance is observed, scholars and believers see this to be ‘proof’ of the historical accuracy of an event: “agreement is tantamount to

¹²⁹ By their nature, it is clear that the service records presented by *The Indian Army List* make no mention of any personal relationship or occurrence that was experienced by McKenna. This includes any interaction between him and Neem Karoli Baba.

¹³⁰ *The Indian Army List, January 1936* confirms that McKenna was indeed acting as ‘temporary Brigadier’ for the 5th battalion of this well-known regiment at this time. This source further offers the information that the battalion wore scarlet uniforms with yellow facings. Defence Department, Govt. of India. *The Indian Army List, January 1936*. New Delhi: Govt. of India Press, 1936, p. 483

¹³¹ Of this place, the *Farrukhabad District Gazeteer* offers the following description: “To the north of the station stands the old fort, overlooking the wide bed of the Ganges; southward, on the high bank, are situated the houses of the officials. In the centre of the station is a large parade ground, flanked on the north by the barracks and on the south by the native town.” (Neave, 1911, p. 204)

¹³² Pande, 2005, p. 200

¹³³ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 35

¹³⁴ Josi, 2006, p. 20

¹³⁵ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 35

¹³⁶ Pande, 2005, p. 200

¹³⁷ Josi, 2006, p. 20

historical veracity”¹³⁸. In reverse, disagreements are seen to invalidate conclusions. In this instance, the fact that the ‘relationship’ between the guru and the colonel finds repeat hagiographical documentation has ensured its place as an important part of the insider canon relating to Neem Karoli Baba and, for many devotees, as positive ‘proof’ of its occurrence. Having said this, and as Stewart also points out, the fact that an event finds repeated representation in this way in no way guarantees that it did happen or, indeed, that it happened in the manner that is promoted. As ever in this genre, “the history is far more one of the authors, than of the subject”¹³⁹. Obviously, in commenting on this preceptor, events are considerably closer to hand than any that relate to sixteenth century Caitanya and this conceivably brings a greater sense of clarity to chroniclers’ reports. At the same time, it is interesting that none of the reports listed below are penned by those who had first-hand experience of the events that they document. At least, no connection is made explicit in this regard. Instead, the scenarios that these commentators construct demonstrate the community’s belief that Neem Karoli Baba refused to bow to external (foreign) authority. Simultaneously, he was not actively interested in being a revolutionary either. Through his maintenance of a compassionate and rather nonchalant demeanour, he is shown to be more interested in the personal connection between himself and the colonel and, simultaneously, to be untouchable (and unmoved) by British hegemony.

Of these accounts, the earliest is the simplest. *Miracle of Love* describes the guru lying on the ground in front of the fort’s main gate:

When ordered to move, Maharajji replied that it was God’s land and that he was with the CID (Central Intelligence Department). The colonel became outraged and told the guards to move Maharajji and jail him in the army stockade. Some hours later the colonel, after having been out, once again approached the gate. Again he found Maharajji lying before the gate. The colonel started to yell at the guards for failing to carry out his orders, but they assured him that they had done as he had directed. A check of the stockade revealed that Maharajji was still there¹⁴⁰.

After this surprising discovery, *Miracle of Love*’s following statement – “After that the colonel became a devotee”¹⁴¹ – is perhaps less unexpected than it might hitherto have been. The account becomes progressively more elaborate in subsequent hagiographical hands. Although he himself was posted to Fategahr long after the event concerned, and so is not a first hand witness of it, Jaidev Singh nonetheless attempts to assert a level of authorial credibility by

¹³⁸ Stewart, Tony K. “When Biographical Narratives Disagree: The Death of Kṛṣṇa Caitanya” *Numen* Vol. XXXVIII, Fasc. 2 (December 1991), p. 231

¹³⁹ *ibid.* p. 232

¹⁴⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 116

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

describing the incident as being “still ripe in the mouths of the soldiers”¹⁴² when he served there years later. What he reports is that the colonel whipped the guru for his insolence. The holy man only laughed at this – the implication being that it was not in McKenna’s hands (or power) to cause him any pain. Pande narrates a further expanded version that illustrates the meeting in an altogether more personal light. In this version, the guru is no longer discovered lying on the ground but in the colonel’s own bed. Pande describes how McKenna – conceivably (at such news) justifiably, “in a bad temper” – scolded the holy man for his actions. Once more, however, the guru appeared entirely unruffled by such aggressive behaviour. At this:

He [McKenna] was stunned to see that it had no effect on him. Instead, smiling in his natural manner, Baba just gazed at him. Under the unique influence of Baba’s smile, the colonel’s heart changed. He not only apologised and offered Baba some oranges, but also became his first Western devotee and removed all the restrictions he had imposed on sadhus¹⁴³.

In a final embellishment of this last version, Josi too describes the (now) “half naked sadhu lying on his bed”¹⁴⁴. He concurs that the colonel lashed the guru as punishment for his misdemeanour and that, despite such abuse, “Babaji went on grinning”¹⁴⁵. The author continues, “It is not known what Colonel McKenna saw in that smile that he had an instant transformation of heart”¹⁴⁶. In this depiction, however, McKenna sought to offer milk and fruit to the guru – as a devotee might as part of a darshan encounter – and so became his follower. This act of offering assumes further significance, however, for with it the previous power dynamic that has existed between the pair is shown to be suddenly and dramatically reversed. It now becomes the role of the *guru* to dismiss the officer from *his* presence. At the same time, he is reported to have offered a prophetic blessing for the military man’s future:

Babaji in his mood told the Colonel ‘Go, you will become the General’. McKenna could not believe it then, but he became a General and commanding the far-East [sic] Command, he fought against the Japanese in the Second World War. By Babaji’s Grace, even after a great massacre and the defeat of the English there, he safely went back to England¹⁴⁷.

Jaidev Singh agrees with the fulfilment of this prophecy. As discussed above, this concordance may not be taken for objective proof that it actually happened. Indeed, when one searches elsewhere than the hagiographical corpus for information supporting this prophetic

¹⁴² Mukerjee, 2006, p. 36

¹⁴³ Pande, 2005, p. 200

¹⁴⁴ Josi, 2006, p. 21

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

statement, a slightly different perspective of this final act (if little else) may be achieved. *Who Was Who 1941–1950* lists James Charles McKenna as having reached the rank of brigadier and *not* general when he died on 23 September 1943 and so the prediction of rank that Josi and Singh report above seems unlikely to have been fulfilled. Moreover, it is recorded that McKenna retired from the Indian Army on 1 April 1936 and the Army Personnel Centre of the British Army holds no records that demonstrate that he subsequently re-enlisted with their organisation¹⁴⁸. That this should be the case should not be seen as dismissive of the entire relationship, of course. McKenna is recorded as having been stationed in India for a considerable number of years – from 18 November 1898 until his retirement in 1936 – thus the possibility of some form of meeting is a plausible option. What the Scotsman might have thought of the guru is an intriguing point for consideration. In any case, Mukerjee offers the final chronological mention of McKenna when he describes how Neem Karoli Baba waited on the train station platform at Allahabad in 1942 in order, “to give darshan to the retired General McKenna, who was to pass the station in a special army train”¹⁴⁹. More than this is not to be known of how the story between them might have ended. Yet, from the perspective of establishing a date when the guru and the officer might at least have *met* – as McKenna was given the rank of colonel in 1927¹⁵⁰ – it does seem most likely that this then occurred at some point between then and his retirement in 1936. Whatever did actually happen between them, it is sure that McKenna is almost without doubt the first Westerner who *could* have held the title ‘devotee’ to Neem Karoli Baba. With such speculation, we return to the next phase within the guru’s biographical portrait.

3.II.iv The Establishment of Connections with Nainital and Vrindavan

Whilst not much may be established of Neem Karoli Baba’s journeying in the years immediately after leaving the Farrukhabad caves, rather more is known concerning his movements in subsequent decades. Much of the material that feeds the remainder of this study stems from the numerous accounts that relate to this time. From about 1940, these reports document that the holy man began to spend considerably more of his time in and around the

¹⁴⁸ “I have examined the index of our archive and can confirm that no file for a JC McKenna born in or around 1879 is held. The archive contains the records of all Army officers with service in 1922 or later and I suspect that the account of Brigadier McKenna’s Second World War service with the British Army is inaccurate.” Beverley Hutchinson (Acting Disclosures Manager) for the Army Personnel Centre. *Letter*. 4 August 2008

¹⁴⁹ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 75

¹⁵⁰ According to *Who Was Who*, McKenna joined the Indian Army as a 2nd Lieutenant in 1898; he rose to the rank of Lieutenant in 1901; Captain in 1907; Major in 1915; Lt-Colonel in 1921 and Colonel in 1927. He was awarded the DSO (Companion of Distinguished Service Order) in 1916 and, upon retiring in 1936, the CB (Companion of the Bath). *Who Was Who Vol IV: A Companion to Who’s Who Containing the Biographies of those Who Died in the Decade 1941–1950*. London: Adam & Charles Black, 1967, pp. 731-2

villages and wooded slopes of the Kumaon hills and in the small and picturesque town of Nainital that serves as “the headquarters of the district”¹⁵¹. Described in the 1904 *District Gazetteer* as, “a great and populous settlement”¹⁵², Nainital is a former colonial hill station that is still known locally as the ‘Lake District of India’.

By all accounts, the guru remained as elusive as he had been in previous times and was known to disappear from the area for months on end. Despite not being settled in any conventional sense, his connections with this particular vicinity were to deepen and to last until the end of his life. Together with the town of Vrindavan in his native region of Vraja, as will be investigated shortly, Nainital is the area with which he has been, and still is, most closely associated. Certainly, a considerable proportion of his devotees come from this region. Moreover it is also the locality in which he erected most of the temples that continue to exist in his name. That this should be so is possibly of significance. According to local history and folklore, these forested Himalayan foothills were frequented by a large number of saints and sages over many centuries¹⁵³. Of the generations immediately preceding that with which we are here concerned, Sombari Baba and Hariakhan Baba were two local adepts, of whom current inhabitants of that area still talk with reverence and regard – and whom Neem Karoli Baba also apparently respected greatly¹⁵⁴.

As touched upon above, Neem Karoli Baba established two small Hanumān temples at Babania in Gujarat and also at Neeb Karori¹⁵⁵ slightly earlier in his life. The first temple that he had constructed in the Nainital region, however, was only built in the early 1950s, yet its creation marks the start of the consecration of a total of four local temples in his name. On a site about a mile outside the town, this first rather extensive temple was erected on Manora hill, directly adjacent to supposedly haunted ground and on a gravel hill considered too weak to support any buildings. Consequently its construction and the subsequent consecration of its various *mūrtis* between 15 July 1952 and 30 May 1955 were deemed to be miraculous¹⁵⁶. *Mūrtis* exist in this sprawling compound that are dedicated to Hanumān, Śiva, Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa, Kartikeyi, Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. The first *mūrti* to be installed here, however, was to

¹⁵¹ Nevill, H.R. *Nainital: A Gazetteer Being Volume XXXIV of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*. Allahabad: Govt. Press, United Provinces, 1904, p. 304

¹⁵² *ibid.* p. 309

¹⁵³ Nainital itself is “mentioned in the Skanda Purana under the name of Tririkhi-sarovara or Triseswar, the lake of the three Rishis – Atri, Pulyastya and Pulaha” who are said to have performed a *yatra* to one of the local mountains. (*ibid.* p. 306)

¹⁵⁴ Upon Neem Karoli Baba’s first visit to the Sah family home, the first question the guru asked was which cot it was that Hariakhan Baba had once slept on during a visit some years before; he then immediately proceeded to lie upon the same bed. (K.K. Sah. “KK Remembers” in *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA (Summer 2004): p. 3)

¹⁵⁵ See Pande, 2005, pp. 336-338

¹⁵⁶ See Josi, 2006, pp. 26-31 and Pande, 2005, pp. 340-343

Hanumān. A continuous repetition of the *Rāmacaritamānasa* and the *Hanumān Cālīsā* – “that continued for many years”¹⁵⁷ – is said to have accompanied all further building work and is consequently deemed to have “purified the piece of land and its atmosphere”¹⁵⁸. Neem Karoli Baba named the place Hanumangarh.

The lengthy construction of this site marks the next turning point in how the guru finds portrayal in the hagiography. In many ways, the focalisation of interests and stability that the construction of Hanumangarh provided signified the start of the Neem Karoli Baba community in the Nainital region. Once he had a physical home (albeit one that he rarely used), devotees were able to locate their interactions and connections with the guru in a manner that was previously not possible. The bonds between them became more demonstrable and, for many devotees, the situation became more settled. Mukerjee comments:

The importance of this temple was heightened because it provided the first suitable place for the devotees to assemble. They were rewarded by getting to spend some time with Baba as well as having a place for religious congregations, prayers, worship, and bhandara. Baba’s visits were few and far between, but for some of the devotees, the temple became a hive for them to swarm around¹⁵⁹.

Mukerjee proposes that the implication of this was not lost on the guru either. He speculates:

This may have inspired Baba to create other such hives in different parts of the mountains to provide people with facilities – creating a network of such good institutions with their powerful inspiration and opportunity for good work – the life with God¹⁶⁰.

The truth in Mukerjee’s proposition may not be qualified. It is nonetheless clear that the remaining ten to fifteen years of the guru’s life saw the construction of a further three temples in the surrounding area – Bhumiadhar ashram and temple, Kakrighat Hanuman temple and Kainchi Dham ashram and temple. None of these are quite on the same physical scale as that at Hanumangahr, however.

The smallest of these temples, Bhumiadhar ashram and temple was the immediate successor to Hanumangahr and it is located in a small hillside village with panoramic views over densely wooded slopes below. Consisting of little more than a roadside shrine to Hanumān and a bright, neighbouring room in which Neem Karoli Baba would sometimes stay, Bhumiadhar was established in 1961 from the house and adjacent land that was offered for such a purpose

¹⁵⁷ Pande, 2005, p. 341

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 163

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

by a devotee named Pooran Singh. At this point, “Baba moved to Bhumiadhar and brought a *murti* of Hanuman for the benefit of the local people”¹⁶¹. The guru brought with him one of the attendants¹⁶² from Hanumangahr whose responsibility it became to look after the temple. This included tending a new Hanumān *mūrti*, brought from Jaipur, which was officially installed in 1965. As will be seen in 3.III.iii, Bhumiadhar would also serve as the setting for the initial meeting between Neem Karoli Baba and Ram Dass two years later in 1967.

Almost at the same time as the establishment of Bhumiadhar, the Kakrighat Hanumān temple was being constructed on a site by a mountain river further along the road towards Almora, close to a Śiva temple where Vivekananda is said to have had a “unique spiritual realization”¹⁶³. The small complex is positioned near an old steel bridge, now in ruins, that was once used by pilgrims going on foot to Badrinath. It remains a most peaceful temple setting that was also “formerly the place of spiritual activities of Somwari Baba”¹⁶⁴. A small stone circle (in which he is thought to have cooked his kedgerree away from the mountain winds) remains intact amongst a few whitewashed *samādhis* of other former holy men from this region¹⁶⁵. Amidst the gardens of lemon trees and red and pink bougainvillea bushes, an ancient banyan tree – considered by locals to represent the energetic powers of this local holy man from earlier in the twentieth century – stands at the heart of the small complex. The thickly twisted branches of the tree offer shelter to both Sombari Baba’s Śivalinga temple and also what is now known as ‘Maharaj-ji’s kuti’, a small stone hut to which the guru retreated for quieter periods of reflection. Neem Karoli Baba had a *mūrti* of Hanumān brought and installed on the terrace above the banyan tree. Other than this deity representation, not much more is there. Having said this, as recently as May 2008, Siddhi Ma brought a black marble *mūrti* of Neem Karoli Baba here to have installed along with some of the guru’s ashes.

From 1962 – and so at around the same time as Bhumiadhar and Kakrighat – Neem Karoli Baba also began construction at a fourth site, Kainchi Dham ashram and temple. It is an

¹⁶¹ Pande, 2005, pp. 343-344

¹⁶² The attendant was known as Brahmachari Baba. He appears to have had an unusual relationship with Neem Karoli Baba. Unlike with almost all other followers, the guru was extremely (and in this instance ascetically) prescriptive concerning the spiritual direction of this man:

“He also instructed him to serve all beings. Baba asked him to let his beard grow and giving him the name of Brahmachari, made him a sadhu. [Under instruction from the guru] Brahmachari undertook various spiritual practices; he stood continuously, day and night, for six months, he observed silence for years, and for eight years, he did not eat any grains, but subsisted only on a diet of fruit and vegetables” (Pande, 2005, p. 344).

¹⁶³ Josi, 2006, p. 4

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.* p. 41

¹⁶⁵ Related by Jaya Prasada at Kakrighat temple on 25 November 2008. Part of the day included a *bhandārā* hosted by a local village man who served traditional kedgerree of lentils and potatoes in Sombari Baba’s honour.

attractive complex set into a thickly forested hillside, by a mountain stream, and at a site that, according to Pande, “since time immemorial... has attracted saints and enlightened souls”¹⁶⁶. Of all the temples in the Nainital region that are associated with Neem Karoli Baba, it is this last that has become the best known. It is widely held that Kainchi was the guru’s preferred place to stay in this area. Thus, even though it occupies a secluded location 3,500 feet up in the hills and is closed for some months each year because of the uncompromising nature of mountain winter weather, the temple at Kainchi Dham nonetheless manages to welcome thousands of visitors each year¹⁶⁷.

The temple at Kainchi Dham is constructed around a *havana-kuṇḍa* that is, once more, said to have been tended by Sombari Baba and it is at this place that the first *mūrti* – that to Hanumān – was eventually installed. Also integral to the temple is a small cave in which Sombari Baba would meditate. To this day, the cave is kept as a shrine to him and the name of Rām is immaculately inscribed onto its walls in glossy orange paint. The temple has been extended over a number of years and, indeed, continues to grow still. During Neem Karoli Baba’s lifetime, a number of *mūrtis* were installed. Other than that to Hanumān, representations from this period may be found there that are dedicated to Laxmi Nārāyaṇ, Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa, Kartikeyi, and Vindhyavasini Devī (goddess of the Vindhyachal hills). A *Śivalinga* was also consecrated at this time¹⁶⁸. After his death, a life size *mūrti* of Neem Karoli Baba was consecrated on 15 June 1976 and is housed in a marble temple, situated directly opposite what continues to be known as ‘Maharaj-ji’s office’. This is a room containing a wooden cot upon which the guru would often rest. Treated as any other shrine might be, the room is tended to daily as if the holy man were still in physical residence: the wooden boards of the floor are swept, the water in the *lotā* is changed, the blanket smoothed and, frequently, elaborate or sacred designs (including the depiction of the name of Rām) are created using fresh flowers and petals upon the bed itself.

Aside from these temples in the Nainital region, Neem Karoli Baba established a number of temples in other regions during the 1960s and early 1970s. That these buildings even exist bear further testimony to the peripatetic nature of the guru. Also constructed around this time, therefore, are temples consecrated slightly further afield at Panki in Kanpur (1961), Simla (1966), Lucknow (1967), and Delhi (1971). An additional temple in the holy town of

¹⁶⁶ Pande, 2005, p. 344

¹⁶⁷ According to www.neemkarolibaba.com, the Indian website dedicated to the guru and his temples, more than one lakh (100,000) people are fed at Kainchi during an annual *bhaṇḍārā* in June. In 2009, K.K.Sah considers the same number to have been in attendance. K.K. Sah. *Telephone Conversation*, Nainital – London, 18 June 2009

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* See pp. 344-349

Vrindavan was erected by the guru's instruction. Unlike those described above, it is potentially of significance that this temple was constructed in the Vraja region of the guru's birth and within a particular culture of which he would have very much been a part. Moreover, unlike the other temple settings that had been created by this time, the hosting town was (and still is) located at one of the most sacred *vaiṣṇava* sites in the whole of India.

The site that Neem Karoli Baba selected for the construction of his Vrindavan complex is less immediately picturesque than that which is afforded by the mountain scenery surrounding Nainital. At the time of building this was, in fact, merely a piece of unused scrubland on the outskirts of Vrindavan town where, according to Pande, "nothing much grew apart from some acacia shrubs"¹⁶⁹. The plot was situated upon a dusty unpaved pilgrimage path known as the *Parikramamarga*¹⁷⁰. A local holy man with whom he was friendly apparently assisted Neem Karoli Baba in the selection of the site. The guru considered him to be a great saint¹⁷¹. In 1968, a Hanumān temple was constructed together with a number of other rooms including a double storey *dharamśālā* rest house for visitors. A special satsang and kirtan hall were added two years later in 1970. Innovatory for his time, Neem Karoli Baba is said to have been the first local guru to have amplified the musical offerings from the kirtan hall with loudspeakers that faced directly onto the road¹⁷² – one might imagine as aural encouragement for the pilgrims who passed by the gate on foot. As the guru engaged kirtan *vālās* to chant continuously day and night throughout the year, such an addition to the local community must have been a most noticeable one¹⁷³.

The Vrindavan temple came to play a particularly important role in that it hosted the guru's funeral pyre. This fact alone ensures that this temple, along with Kainchi Dham, should be approached as one of the two most important sites for our consideration. It may be observed, however, that Neem Karoli Baba had considerably greater interest in the construction and establishment of his temples than he ever did in the running of them. Pande states that, even as more temples were constructed, "[Neem Karoli Baba] had no desire or attachment for them.

¹⁶⁹ Pande, 2005, p. 355

¹⁷⁰ At the time of the construction of the complex, Neem Karoli Baba predicted that the temple's plot would subsequently become the centre of town. As the area has since become considerably busier and the dust path of the *Parikramamarga* has been a metalled road for at least the past fifteen years, devotees hold this prophecy to have been fulfilled.

¹⁷¹ Related by Shyamdas during a visit to 'Little Maharaj-ji' (*Meeting*, Vrindavan, India, 5 December 2008). This holy man is now extremely elderly. He continues to live in his own modest ashram only two hundred metres further along the same road and is known locally and variably as 'Hanuman Das', 'Maharaj-ji' and, by some Western devotees of Neem Karoli Baba at least, rather wryly as 'little Maharaj-ji'.

¹⁷² Related by Kabir Das and Shyamdas. *Meeting*, Vrindavan, India, 5 December 2008.

¹⁷³ Today many other local Vrindavan temples amplify their kirtan. This practice has become so popular that, in recent years, a nocturnal noise order has been imposed on the entire area by district officials.

As soon as each temple was completed, he would turn its management over to a trust”¹⁷⁴.

Krishna Das revealed in a recent interview, that whilst the temples were run by this trust, “the properties themselves belonged to the government”¹⁷⁵.

Should his lack of attachment towards the complexes be verifiable, the guru’s exact purpose in their establishment raises an interesting question. By the time that Neem Karoli Baba began to construct temple complexes, he had assumed a preceptorial responsibility for a large number of devotees. The collective practice that revolved around the construction and then the maintenance of these physical spiritual homes might be seen to have provided a focal point, designed to take individual devotees beyond the immediately personal relationship they experienced with their guru and to lead them instead to a wider-community based reliance. A principal purpose of the establishment of an interlinking temple community in his name would therefore be to serve as a form of spiritual family support for Neem Karoli Baba’s absence and, simultaneously, also to serve as preparation for the point of his death.

3.II.v A Consideration of the Later Years

For his final years, Neem Karoli Baba could easily have chosen to live a more settled life than had hitherto been his wont. There existed a number of options of where to stay in the form of temples or the houses of his followers. The devoted ministrations of his attendants in either dwelling type would have afforded him a greater physical comfort in these latter years than life on the road. Yet, in his later years as much as before, Neem Karoli Baba refused to stay in any one place for too long. *Miracle of Love* comments, “He seemed to be on a continuous religious pilgrimage”¹⁷⁶. Alternatively, he would at times simply wander off into the Kumaon forests and hills without warning or notice of when he might return. Typically reported as having inclined towards the lifestyle of the wandering sadhu, in the “final years of his life he was in continuous movement. Like a river”¹⁷⁷.

Why the guru chose to act in this way in his final years is interesting. With devotional interest about him reaching new heights, maybe he disappeared from public view primarily to retreat from the excessive attention and the responsibilities that the guru role entails. Alternatively, his ongoingly peripatetic lifestyle could point to a continuing adherence to the principle of non-attachment or to an abidance by the practice of *sannyās* that traditionally marks the fourth stage of the Hindu’s life. Some devotees have pointed to this behaviour as illustrative of a

¹⁷⁴ Pande, 2005, p. 10

¹⁷⁵ Rosen, 2008, p. 20

¹⁷⁶ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 318

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 253

belief in the concept of “*Vasudhaiv kutumbakam*”¹⁷⁸. This views the world to be one family. They therefore suggest that he saw everywhere as being his home and everyone as being related to him. Chidananda writes of the guru, “He endeared himself as a family member in the homes of many of his sincere devotees and true disciples”¹⁷⁹. In relation to this, Neem Karoli Baba is reported to have said:

The whole universe is our home and all residing in it belong to our family. Every woman is a mother or sister and every man a father or brother. This is all God’s family¹⁸⁰.

Certainly, in the memory of many devotees and associates, wherever and whenever Neem Karoli Baba did appear in these final years, people clamoured to see him. In *Living with the Himalayan Masters*, Swami Rama writes about the “well-known master, Nim Karoli Baba”¹⁸¹ whom he describes as being, “very mysterious in his ways”¹⁸² and with whom he spent some time as a young man. He reflects:

This sage was adored by many people in Northern India. People did not give him rest. They travelled with him from one mountain and village to another¹⁸³.

Bhagavan Das spent several months accompanying the guru in 1966 and 1967 before any of the rest of the Western devotees had yet met their preceptor. The American similarly describes how the holy man continued to be welcomed by his followers in a very enthusiastic manner:

Everyone was always so happy to see Maharaji. The moment he’d arrive, the festival would begin. All the mothers would get the pots of curry going and the food would start happening as the tea was poured... Everywhere, everyone flipped over him. When Maharaji would walk into the bazaar, people would fold down around him. They were on the street with their heads at his feet. ‘He’s here! He’s come! He’s come!’ All the businesses shut down instantly, and everybody ran out into the street. All the kids raced after him¹⁸⁴.

It is not clear why the guru managed to elicit such an extraordinary response, in particular in the Nainital region. The fact that his increasing fame inspired people to want to spend time in his presence is one suggestion. As Charles S.J. White points out, the privilege of offering hospitality to saints is an old custom in India¹⁸⁵ as well as a “socially unifying experience”¹⁸⁶.

¹⁷⁸ Pande, 2005, p. 11

¹⁷⁹ Chidananda, 1999, p. 4

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 107

¹⁸² *ibid.* p. 109

¹⁸³ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Bhagavan Das, 1997, pp. 52-53

¹⁸⁵ White, 1972, p. 874

He comments, “Everywhere the presence of a saint is a source of joy, mingled with excitement. He affords to his devotees not only a sense of attraction for himself, but the common devotion to the saint creates a bond among the devotees”¹⁸⁷. This may certainly be seen in relation to Neem Karoli Baba. Conceivably the more elusive this guru became, the more determined his followers were to discover his whereabouts. After all, so it could be posited, they never knew how long this would last; nor, once he had disappeared again, when (or even if) they might see him again¹⁸⁸. Accordingly, the hagiographical depiction of the final years of Neem Karoli Baba’s life is filled with accounts that portray an ever-more enthusiastic and ever-growing body of devotees – and an ever-more slippery principal protagonist. As Bhagavan Das’ above report indicates, many of these stories show how devotees followed their guru as he went about his visits until, together, they would number a substantial crowd. Josi describes a scene of this sort, in which devotees find themselves in a frenzy of devotion:

Oblivious of themselves, these devotees followed Baba crazily to each and every house and the atmosphere there reverberated with the chanting of holy songs... the devotees unmindful of their family, jobs, occupation and business were lost in celestial bliss. Someone went into Bhakti-bhav (super-conscious state of a devotee) or the other into Jada Samadhi (inert state in Hath yoga)... Someone danced with the intensity of emotion, the other lost consciousness; someone silently shed tears, or sat non-plussed. Babaji Maharaj’s divine presence had peculiar impact on people – no memory of physical body, no awareness of disheveled [sic] clothes... And Babaji... charmed each and every one like Shyamsunder (Krishna) of Maharaas¹⁸⁹.

3.II.vi Concluding Thoughts on *Siddhis*, *Sādhana* and the Emerging Significance of *Rām-nām*

*When something is boiled in a closed vessel, there comes a stage when the vapor will push up the lid and, unless force is used, the vessel cannot be kept covered any more. In a similar manner, when, while being engaged in japa or some other spiritual exercise, a wave of ecstatic emotion surges up from within, it becomes difficult to check it. This ecstatic emotion is called bhāva. It emerges from deep within and expresses itself outwardly*¹⁹⁰.

*Maharajji’s body pulsed with Ram*¹⁹¹

In the consideration of the guru’s later years, what remains to be investigated more closely is the evolving role that his own personal *sādhana* potentially came to signify. As already acknowledged in 3.II.ii, the early ascetical forms of practice did not accompany the guru

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.* p. 875

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ The potential purpose for such behaviour will be considered in 3.III.vi

¹⁸⁹ Josi, 2006, p. 24

¹⁹⁰ Bhajji, *Mother as Revealed to Me*. This biographical extract relating to Anandamayi Ma is reproduced in McDaniel, 1989, p. 200

¹⁹¹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 362

throughout his life. Although not explicitly acknowledged by insider commentators, the extreme *sādhana* seems curiously and suddenly absent immediately after the period in which he is reported as living in the Farrukhabad caves. Why this should be is not addressed. Whilst the hagiographers continue to portray the young sadhu in the aspect of the *śakta* and yogi, the ascetical practices remain an integral part of the narrative. Yet, once he starts to be shown as the more compassionate *bhakta* (particularly in relation to others), the *siddhis* remain intrinsic to many of the accounts in which he features. The underpinning *tapasyā*, however, seems no longer needed. In the depiction of the mature guru figure of the final decade or two, Neem Karoli Baba is portrayed as wielding an extraordinary amount of power that appears to be no longer actively supported by spiritual practice, at least not in the manner in which it once was. The potential for this is disturbing (for both practitioner and for his students) and, should the guru's reported handling of *siddhis* truly have been as unsupported as it first appears, then it deserves consideration¹⁹².

The Hindu tradition is full of warnings of the dangers of the employment of yogic *siddhis* or other miraculous means of interaction and operation that are not supported by the weight of serious practice. Even in those few instances when certain legendary holy persons (for example Kṛṣṇa Caitanya or Rāmprasād) are promoted as exhibiting spontaneous *siddhis* or ecstatic experiences¹⁹³, it continues to be maintained that supernormal powers are managed (and thus made manageable) by the humility and self-discipline of *sādhana*. As McDaniel observes, “*Sādhana* is said to refine these states, to polish them like jewels. It also brings people into the tradition, giving a context and a frame to their experiences”¹⁹⁴. Without such practice, *siddhis* can become uncontainable¹⁹⁵. In turn, they serve to feed and strengthen the ego rather than to abnegate it. Such an experience was reported by one of Neem Karoli Baba's first Western devotees, Bhagavan Das. Having spent seven years in India, during which time he was often engaged in intense periods of practice, he returned to the West. At that point his spiritual training ceased to be paramount. Describing the seduction of yogic *siddhis* no longer supported through *sādhana*, he offers laconically, “I got to play out my power trip, which I see as what I attained from going after *siddhis*. I got the *siddhis* and then the *siddhis* got me”¹⁹⁶. Yet, it would appear that this was not the case for Neem Karoli Baba. At least no reports whatsoever suggest that he ever had a crisis of faith or of the execution or application of it. If

¹⁹² Such a situation might “...give rise to a host of misperceptions and even delusions, as well as ulterior motives” (Feuerstein, 1992, p. 243).

¹⁹³ See McDaniel, 1989, p. 258

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Bharati regards those practitioners who seek *siddhis* as an end in themselves as “magicians [and] sorcerers” rather than as true yogis, commenting that “their status is considerably lower in the general image” (Bharati, 1976, p. 158).

¹⁹⁶ Reported in Johnsen and Jacobus, 2007, p. 45

this is true and had he been as lacking in practice as it initially might seem, then it would mark a most unusual (and potentially even dangerous) situation.

On closer inspection, however, the situation is revealed as being somewhat different. Whilst the majority of commentators overlook it, the fact is that an understated but significant transformation occurred within the guru's own spiritual practice. When one examines the circumstances more rigorously, it may be surmised that far from abandoning *sādhana* altogether, the guru transfigured his own personal practice into ways of being that were so integral to his manner of living as to become less immediately obvious than the ascetical methods – such as sitting in water for long lengths of time – had previously been. Accordingly, as the years unfold within the hagiographical corpus, Neem Karoli Baba is slowly and quietly revealed to have become entirely absorbed in the practice of *Rām-bhakti*. A poem by Tulsīdās offers the opinion that, "...my mind's pasture is the land of Ram's devotion"¹⁹⁷ and this was ostensibly the case for Neem Karoli Baba also. Even Shyamdas, whose personal experience of the guru remains more aligned with his Kṛṣṇa-like aspect, nevertheless agrees, "Ram is his front man"¹⁹⁸. In his direct path approach to the divine (and whatever the situation of the early years), the mature Neem Karoli Baba felt no need for a guru of his own or for any human intercessionary assistance in deciding his course of *sādhana*, or practice. That this should be the case is, of course, in clear contrast to all those around him.

When, how or why this guru came to be associated with the tradition of *Rām-bhakti* is not known; although, there must have been some point of exposure to this practice in the form of instruction or introduction. Who brought the various texts of Vālmīki or Tulsīdās (or, indeed, to a lesser extent of Kabīr also) to his notice, remains out of reach. His personal devotion nevertheless appears to have been long-standing. The first temple associated with him in Gujarat was consecrated to Hanumān. Moreover, Swami Rama remembers: "Nim Karoli Baba loved Rama, an incarnation of God, and was always uttering a *mantra* which no one understood"¹⁹⁹. Although not explicitly stated, the fact that the *mantra* to which he refers was to Rām might be guessed at without too much difficulty.

The reports relating to the guru's later years further demonstrate the commitment with which he applied himself to his personal practice of *Rām-bhakti* and of *Rām-nām* in particular. It is said that Neem Karoli Baba was so drawn to *japa* (or repetition of the name of the divine) that he was almost continually engaged in the utterance of the name of Rām. This was the case

¹⁹⁷ Allchin, 1964, p. 173

¹⁹⁸ Shyamdas. *Email Correspondence*, 10 April 2007

¹⁹⁹ Swami Rama, 1998, p. 109

even when he was fully involved in conversations with others or occupied in different activities entirely. Bhagavan Das remembers, “he was constantly repeating ‘Ram’ (God) all the time. He never stopped”²⁰⁰. In the absence of a more traditional *mālā*, he tapped his fingers against the thumb of the same hand to count his repetitions. First thinking the manner in which Neem Karoli Baba used his fingers to be indicative of a “nervous tick”, Ram Dass was surprised to see that this mannerism was in fact part of the guru’s own personal spiritual practice: “I thought what a nervous person. Then I realised he was using his hand as the beads, ‘Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram...’”²⁰¹.

The salvific potential that devotional quarters of the Rāmāyaṇic tradition consider to be held within the name of Rām has been examined already in 1.V.ii. Its significance in relation to Neem Karoli Baba should not be overlooked here. When one considers the predilection that this guru allegedly displayed towards the *Rāmācāritamānasa*, then the parallel *sādhana* that Hānuman, Tulsīdās and this twentieth century preceptor share may be observed as being of note. In one of his devotional hymns, Tulsīdās declares, “Let Rām’s Name alone be your refuge, banishing all miseries; Put both love and trust in Rām’s Name”²⁰². The same focus appears to have existed in Neem Karoli Baba. Having said this, the practice *Rām-nām* should not be seen as a trait unique to him. One of Neem Karoli Baba’s direct contemporaries, Swami Papa Ramdas²⁰³, was a further well-known advocate of *Rām-nām* and there exists similarly effusive hagiographical representation of this holy man²⁰⁴.

It may be observed that Neem Karoli Baba’s practice gradually became as much a written as an oral practice. One particular photograph²⁰⁵ shows the guru repeatedly inscribing what appears to be the name of Rām into a copy of the Radhakrishnan translation of *The Principal Upanisads*²⁰⁶ – in doing so thereby creating an appealing, if irresolvable, theological situation.

²⁰⁰ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 52

²⁰¹ Ram Dass. *Being Free Together*, Breitenbush Retreat, 1994. Ram Dass Tape Library, Audio CD Track 11

²⁰² Hymn 254. Allchin, 1966, p. 248

²⁰³ Whilst both holy men share the same *sādhana*, Ramdas (1884-1963) does not share the same philosophical positioning of Neem Karoli Baba. He talks similarly of the roles of love and surrender, but nevertheless describes himself, first and foremost, as a *viśiṣṭadvaitin*. Of himself, he explains: “Ramdas is not a pure *advaitin*. He believes in the co-existence of *dvaita* and *advaita*” (Satchidananda. “My Beloved Papa, Swami Ramdas.” Divine Life Society. Accessed at <http://www.dlshq.org/saints/papa_ramdas.htm> (14 August 2009)).

²⁰⁴ Swami Satchidananda of Ananadashram in Kerala writes of Papa Ramdas, “The *mantram* “OM SRI RAM JAI RAM JAI JAI RAM” was ever on his lips and in his heart. Besides chanting the divine Name, Papa’s practice was to look upon everything in the world as forms of Ram--God--and to accept everything that happened as happening by the will of Ram alone” (*ibid.*).

²⁰⁵ Most probably from the 1960s. It should be acknowledged that the guru was known to inscribe the name upon anything that was at hand including scraps of paper or, in this instance, a book also. It seems unlikely that there would have been more significance in the choice of book than this.

²⁰⁶ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 16

His practice of writing the name of Rām was extended over any number of materials. K.K. Sah remains in possession of a scrapbook that he crafted to commemorate the construction and the consecration of the Hanumangarh temple in the 1950s. The guru must have read this volume for, on many of its pages, he has inscribed the name of Rām in blue ballpoint pen.

The written practice reached its zenith in the form of the diary to which Neem Karoli Baba applied himself in the very final years of his life. In many ways this daily log represented more of an extension, or development, of his existing practice than anything new. Yet, as will be seen immediately below, it was not possible for devotees to appreciate such a fact until after the event of the guru's *mahāsamādhi*. The contents of the diary might be seen to represent the sole legacy of the guru's written 'teachings'. Simultaneously, they potentially offer a posthumous and wry comment on the '*līlā*' of human experience – or maybe on his devotees' anticipation. In *Paths to God*, Ram Dass reveals the following:

Every day he would close himself up in his room and write two pages in his diary. Now, you might wonder, 'What would a guru's diary be like? What would he write in it?' Would it be 'I saw this many people today... I gave them 'the touch'... I spent the afternoon with Krishna and Rama and Christ... Christ is much better looking these days'? What would he put in his diary? After Maharajji had left his body, we were finally shown the diaries. For each day, there would be the date, and the name of the place where Maharajji was staying; and then there would be two pages where the major events of the day were written: 'Ram, Ram, Ram...' – on and on, for two pages. The name of God was all that seemed to have been relevant that day. And the next day. And the next²⁰⁷.

Upon examination of the use of the divine name in relation to Neem Karoli Baba, several points are raised that concern both the purpose of *sādhana* in general and then the execution of it. The most immediate consideration here is that, rather than being viewed as a time-bound exercise with a specifically intended personal outcome, *sādhana* might concurrently serve as a continual and open-ended practice – as much for a supposed saint as for any other man. As Bhagavan Das reflects, ongoing adherence represents a necessary part of preserving the purity and integrity of any practitioner's spiritual attainments: "Spiritual life is not a once and for all game. It's an ongoing process. My guru had attained, but he never once stopped repeating, 'Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram'"²⁰⁸.

From this viewpoint, the underlying motivation for *sādhana* may be viewed differently also. Rather than being solely a means to reach a supposed destination (that is, personal spiritual

²⁰⁷ Ram Dass, 2004, p. 11

²⁰⁸ Johnsen and Jacobus, 2007, p. 46

transformation or the maintenance of inner realisation), *sādhana* may be more closely appreciated in terms of its process or journey. It becomes a justifiable mode of spiritual expression in its own right. Ram Dass commented at a 1994 retreat that, whilst the guru continued to observe the *sādhana* of *Rām-nām* until the end of his life, he was not performing “practices out of need, it was practices out of celebration. He was just *celebrating* it all”²⁰⁹. Ram Dass does not clarify exactly what the ‘all’ is that he considers the guru to have been celebrating. Yet, from his words, the implication is that he feels Neem Karoli Baba to have been using his spiritual practice in order to celebrate existence itself.

One final point for deliberation concerning *Rām-nām* remains, which is potentially revealing of how Neem Karoli Baba viewed the purpose of *sādhana*. Outwardly at least, *japa* is a straightforward technique: much of its point is to train and refine the focus of the practitioner’s mind until it may rest single-pointedly upon contemplation of the divine. Just as Hanumān may be seen to have ‘refined’ his former wider interests in matters of grammar and scholarship and martial art solely to that of being the bearer of *Rām-nām*, so this guru may be regarded in a similar fashion. When one considers the length and extremity of Neem Karoli Baba’s earlier forms of ascetical practice, the progression to the simple repetition of a single one-syllable name seems remarkable. From this, so it might be argued, both the *vānara* and the guru illustrate the belief that the essence (or potency) of *sādhana* rests more in the integrity of its connection to the divine than in any elaborate or ceremonial application. More on Neem Karoli Baba’s relationship with the ceremonial will be appraised in 3.IV.iv (pp. 208-212), but it is incontrovertible that the repetition of the divine name here represents a more accessible and exoteric salvific path than any of those that the holy man formerly explored.

3.II.vii The *Mahāsamādhi* of Neem Karoli Baba

It is perhaps unsurprising that the final days and hours of this guru’s life were characteristically enigmatic. Much conjecture has since ensued amongst the devotees who happened to be present. Every word has been analysed, every memory pored over, every action dissected for potential meaning. The truth is that no one knows for certain what happened; at least not why it happened in the way that it did. What *is* known is that, shortly before he ‘left his body’, Neem Karoli Baba actively chose to leave Kainchi Dham, apparently declaring, “Today, I am released from Central Jail forever”²¹⁰. He went instead back to the Vraja culture of his birth. He travelled first to Agra, where he attended an appointment with a heart specialist who maintained that he just needed some rest, and then towards his temple at

²⁰⁹ Ram Dass. *Being Free Together*, 1994, Audio CD Track 11

²¹⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 372

Vrindavan. Till this day, speculation is rife about whether he chose to 'drop his body' in Vrindavan as a mark of preference over his home at Kainchi. Such discussion becomes more or less meaningless, however, as he did not reach the Vrindavan temple alive.

Neem Karoli Baba died, instead, in a small green-tiled emergency room²¹¹ at the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Vrindavan. With a medical history of problems concerning his heart that was never really either clear nor resolved²¹², Neem Karoli Baba had apparently been complaining of pains in his chest. Unconscious by the time he reached the hospital, he was diagnosed upon his arrival as having entered a diabetic coma. The doctors gave him a number of injections and placed an oxygen mask over his face. He is said to have come round briefly to ask for water from the Ganges and several times to have uttered, '*Jaya Jagadisha Hare*' ('Hail to the Lord of the Universe') "each time in a lower pitch"²¹³. Then he is reported to have become peaceful and died. Of the end Pande writes, "Baba merged himself with infinity by cardiac arrest"²¹⁴. *Miracle of Love* reports that, "No one at the hospital had recognized him" and that his son and one other then, "placed the body in a taxi and took it to the Hanuman temple (It was about 1.15 on the morning of September 11th)"²¹⁵. *All India Radio* broadcast news of his demise that night and the next morning also.

Accounts of the following day at the temple show all too clearly the heightened state of emotions that all who were present seemed to experience. Upon hearing the news of their guru's death, Larry and Girija Brilliant drove from their home in Delhi and found themselves in Vrindavan before many of the others had yet had a chance to arrive. As Girija recalls:

We just sat next to his body which was on ice, because the mothers hadn't come and we were waiting for the devotees to come. We didn't want to have the cremation without them, but it was really hot²¹⁶.

To this, Larry adds, "We were waving flies off his body"²¹⁷. Once the remainder of the devotees had arrived, so Girija continues:

²¹¹ This room is still in existence, although it is no longer in use as an emergency room. Today it appears to be in use as a telephone room and as a room in which relatives of patients may rest.

²¹² Larry Brilliant, a medical doctor himself, recalls having spoken to the guru's cardiologist not long before his death: "at the empirical level, I knew he wasn't well. I knew he had had chest pains and was taking heart medicine – and he was playing with it." To this, his wife Girija adds, "We all knew something was dreadfully wrong" (Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 01:02).

²¹³ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 373

²¹⁴ Pande, 2005, p. 284

²¹⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 373

²¹⁶ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 01:03

²¹⁷ *ibid.*

The pain of all the devotees was so powerful it was almost like being in this transformed state. It was hard to explain – like we were all in another dimension... The mothers who were with him were the worst: they were wailing and weeping and yelling and fainting for days and days. We were all really in a totally different state of mind, you know, vague – almost like a psychedelic. It was just a different reality. No one could sleep, we were all walking around, plus it was 110°. They had to carry his body around²¹⁸.

After some dilemma as to how to officiate at the ceremony, that same evening the guru's body was processed about the town in a litter on top of a car, watched by many hundreds of onlookers, at an event that was covered by the local press. The occasion was fraught with emotion. Larry Brilliant continues:

We had some very funny things. We rented this 1956 Chevrolet station wagon that had decals on the back of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Disney characters in Vrindavan – this ancient city! God *knows* where they found that car! A bier was placed on top of the station wagon and he was covered with flowers and we drove him through the town... As we drove around, kids were throwing coins and flowers – and at first, it was a gentle throwing of the flowers and coins, then some of the kids would go up to the rooftops and throw coins pretty hard – *on his body!* And it was chaos. Only in India is there chaos like this!²¹⁹

At about 9pm that same evening, Neem Karoli Baba's body was finally cremated upon a sandalwood pyre in the temple at Vrindavan, at the place where the *yajña* is usually performed. As a good number of the more distant devotees had yet to arrive at the ashram, the cremation fire was kept burning for considerably longer than would normally have been the case – up to two days in length by some reckoning²²⁰. In this way, so it was held, any late arrivals would not feel that they had missed the ceremony. After such a long cremation, a large amount of ash remained to be collected by devotees, This was taken in *kalāsa*, or pitchers, to sacred sites of pilgrimage, including Varanasi, Haridwar and Prayag, where they were immersed in the water of the Ganges river²²¹. Later, portions of the ashes were also installed at his temples. In its edition of 12 September 1973, the Vrindavan newspaper printed a report of the “cremation ceremony of the earthly body of the famous and ‘wonderworking’ saint, Baba of Neem Karoli”²²². The article included the speculation that he may have been “between 250 and 300 years”²²³ at the time of his passing.

²¹⁸ *ibid.* 01:04

²¹⁹ *ibid.* 01:06

²²⁰ Related by Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Akbarpur, India, 6 December 2008. Kabir Das was present at the cremation, having driven that day from Kainchi.

²²¹ Pande, 2005, pp. 285-286

²²² Reproduced in Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 380

²²³ *ibid.*

Bearing in mind the subject at the centre of this drama, it may not be altogether surprising that some of the details that surround his *mahāsamādhi* are not quite as clear as the above paragraph would lead one to suppose. Despite assertions in *Miracle of Love* that no one at the hospital had recognised the guru, one porter at the hospital (who insists he had been there on that night in 1973) clearly remembers Neem Karoli Baba having been brought in and remains adamant that he had been dead upon arrival²²⁴. Chidananda too muddies the waters when he writes that, “the last time that I had the good fortune of meeting revered Baba Neem Karoliji was in the month of October 1973”²²⁵, in other words the month *after* he died. This date has since been altered to October 1972 in its reproduction as part of Josi’s *Premavatar*, yet this cannot be seen as conclusive proof that Chidananda did not intend to write October 1973 in the first instance – however unlikely that may seem.

A considerable number of reports maintain that, after the cremation, Neem Karoli Baba was subsequently seen in all manner of guises and locations. The entire third part of *The Divine Reality* is concerned with the apparently miraculous events that were reported at the time of, and in the wake of, the guru’s death. The fact that devotees consider their guru’s presence to be an ongoing one has been investigated in 2.IV.i. Clarity surrounding the end of his life remains as characteristically vague as it has been for the rest of his life. (As Rameshwar Das offers, “that time was so intense and such a blur because being with Maharaj-ji was like being in such an eternal space that you couldn’t imagine that that body wouldn’t be there... but then there was a pile of smoking ashes at Vrindavan”²²⁶.) It seems therefore appropriate to offer as conclusion to this biographical approach, the words of another locally acclaimed holy man. Of Neem Karoli Baba’s *mahāsamādhi* and entirely in accord with traditional beliefs on such matters, Yogiraj Devraha Baba maintains:

Baba’s death was not a reality. He has played with death so many times. Where can he go? He is alive and will ever remain so²²⁷.

²²⁴ Related in person during a visit to the Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Vrindavan, 6 October 2007

²²⁵ Chidananda, 1999, p. 2. Accessed at <<http://www.dlshq.org/saints/neemkaroli.htm>> (6 September 2005)

²²⁶ Rameshwar Das. *Interview*, 2006, 01:13

²²⁷ Pande, 2005, p. 290

3.III Assaying the ‘Unknowable’ Nature of Neem Karoli Baba as a Mode of Interaction

Saints are always busy teaching you or someone else when you are with them, and there cannot be anything meaningless or superfluous in their behaviour, however we might misunderstand them. We may not know for whom the teaching is meant, but there is always someone to whom it is directed and they understand it. The saints are actually the teachings and scriptures personified. They do not teach by quoting or reciting the scriptures, but by living and practicing them, and sometimes a little acting.

Mukerjee²²⁸

And then he [Neem Karoli Baba] pointed at me like, ‘Watch it baby; you lie, you’ll pay. Captain Karma will get you.’

Ram Dass²²⁹

3.III.i Concerning the Role of the Unknowable in Guru-Disciple Interactions

To this point in our approach to Neem Karoli Baba, the investigative focus has remained to a greater extent upon the man himself. The material in Part Two has examined how he might be observed within the institutional framework of the *bhakti* guru. That presented so far in Part Three has explored how he chose to live his life as a holy man in Northern India during the first three quarters of the twentieth century. What has had less specific attention is what might be seen as the instructive modalities that Neem Karoli Baba adopted in relation to his followers – in other words, his teachings. In many ways, this chapter and the next two mark a transition (perhaps expansion) of focus to incorporate just that. The potential role of Neem Karoli Baba’s ‘unknowable’ nature and behaviour in relation to his interactions with others is considered first in 3.III. Chapters 3.IV and 3.V proceed with an appraisal of the more knowable, at least more tangible, aspects of his guru role.

From the preceding discussion, it is apparent that Neem Karoli Baba did not choose to embark upon lecture tours, “gave few verbal teachings”²³⁰ and wrote not much more than the name of Rām. Devotees have chosen to take from this pedagogic reserve a sense of the mysterious and the miraculous and view the guru’s behaviour in this respect as illustration of his lack of worldly attachment. Their assumptions could, of course, be correct. Simultaneously, this preceptorial stance could indicate a deficiency of natural eloquence or expressive statement on the part of Neem Karoli Baba – or indeed of interest also. In the fostering of his devotees’ spiritual development, might not a greater (or more explicit) promulgation of his teachings have been useful, to serve in particular in the years following his death? Having gone to the

²²⁸ Mukerjee, 1996, p. 257

²²⁹ Ram Dass with Stephen Levine, 1987, p. 156

²³⁰ Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 271

lengths that community voices say that he did to establish a temple network to succeed him and to support the ongoing prospects of his satsang, some more concrete pointers of teaching might have been exceptionally sustaining to followers post-1973. Having said this, it is part of the myth of the man that he is continually presented as operating in ways that were obfuscated, confusing or ‘unknowable’ to all around him. This is in relation to points of initial interaction, processes of surrender, modalities of ongoing instruction as well as of matters of love and personal attachment. His ‘unknowability’ represents a common thematic thread: it separates ‘him’ from ‘us’ and acts as a devotional acknowledgement of his spiritual superiority. In many ways, however, it binds all the narrative (both insider and outsider) together.

It is apparent that not everyone who arrived at one of the guru’s temples would become his devotee, nor might they even wish to become one either. According to reports, some would come, yet “seemed to have ‘no business’ with Maharajji”²³¹. A devotee comments, “Maharajji, when he liked a person, expressed it from the heart. When he didn’t want to see the face of a person, he would cover his face with a blanket”²³². At other times, he would not be seen at all. It is interesting that the earliest outsider account of the guru also depicts him in this elusive light. At the end of the 1950s, British woman Anne Marshall attempted in vain to meet with Neem Karoli Baba²³³. Her testimony implies that, as his devotees would have us believe, any interaction with the guru remained on his terms and according to his mood or inclination. She writes:

The Baba [Neem Karoli Baba] is himself credited with all sorts of miraculous powers. His special *forte* is making himself invisible to people he does not want to see him. What a useful accomplishment this must be! ...Naturally I tried to meet Nim Karauli Baba, but I was unsuccessful. When I went to his ashram near Naini Tal, either he was not there or else he did not choose to make himself visible to me²³⁴.

The reasoning behind the guru’s accessibility (or lack thereof) is never explained in this or in any of the emic sources. Insiders would adhere to the traditional line though that, “Maharajji would not reveal himself to everybody”²³⁵ and this is, presumably, what happened for Marshall. Upon being asked whether he has yet had the guru’s darshan, one visitor replies, “I

²³¹ Ram Das comp. 1995, p. 17. Warriar discusses the same issue in relation to Mata Amritanandamayi. (See Warriar, 2005, p. 65).

²³² *ibid.* p. 61

²³³ Marshall travelled all over India seeking out guru figures and, pertinent to this context, she chose as the title of her memoirs, *Hunting the Guru in India*. After two years she abandoned her mission. Should one correlate the title of her publication with the attitude she may have had on this quest, her lack of success might be understood more clearly.

²³⁴ Marshall, Anne. *Hunting the Guru in India*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1963, p. 142

²³⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 61

don't know. Is he the fat one sitting over there?"²³⁶ For another, who had "come half way round the world to be with him"²³⁷, all she experiences at their first meeting is, "an old toothless and corpulent man, wrapped in a plaid blanket, and a bunch of people making a big to-do about nothing"²³⁸. One further illustration of the individual nature of the guru-disciple contract is provided by Shyamdas. He describes arriving at Neem Karoli Baba's Vrindavan temple doorstep in 1972, accompanied by a woman with whom he had been living in Quebec. Formerly a Playboy bunny, this woman was (to the Indian eye at least) still not appropriately attired for a temple environment. Once at his temple, they both experienced the guru in an entirely different way from each other:

For me it was very personal, it was a custom made path for me. And [for] the girl who came with me – who wasn't wearing enough clothing – she saw Maharaj-ji as a kind of overweight guy with a blanket and left Vrindavan with kind of like, 'Eh, why did he tell me to put clothes on?' She ended up going down to Pondicherry and lived in the Aurobindo ashram for many years. [But] she never really got the Maharaj-ji 'hit' – ever – and she *met* him!²³⁹

As is amply demonstrated by this woman's subsequent life at the Aurobindo ashram, it is not that such arrivals at Neem Karoli Baba's temples were necessarily unsuited to the spiritual life, nor even to the path of the guru. A more appropriate manner of interpretation would be that, "this particular guru was not their way"²⁴⁰. As to why this might be, Shyamdas speculates that there seems to have existed certain eternal connections between Neem Karoli Baba and his devotees: "in some way [we were] a group of souls that Maharaj-ji was designated to deal with. He obviously didn't deal with everyone – like the girl I came with..." To this, his interviewer, fellow-devotee Rameshwar Das, drolly adds, "He didn't get the easy cases either!"²⁴¹

Why the guru would choose one seeker with whom to engage and yet, at the mere sight of another, feel compelled to cover his head with his blanket, is simply not for us to know. This eccentric behaviour might merely have been part of what Lutgendorf has described as Neem Karoli Baba's "quixotic and highly charismatic"²⁴² nature. Nevertheless, what is apparent is that, if the guru *did* decide to initiate a connection between himself and a newcomer to the temple, the element of the unknown or of the unknowable may be seen to have played a principal role in the association – at least as far as devotees are concerned. Perhaps, therefore,

²³⁶ *ibid.* p. 17

²³⁷ Braun (Ram Giri), 1995, p. 45

²³⁸ *ibid.*

²³⁹ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 00:55

²⁴⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 17

²⁴¹ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 01:08

²⁴² Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 271

this should be regarded as a conscious pedagogic technique. Feuerstein agrees that a guru's eccentricity in such circumstances could serve a distinct purpose:

Given this declared objective [personal illumination], the eccentric ways of the crazy-wisdom masters may seem legitimate enough. These teachers seek to create chaos in the disciple in order to break down all these emotional-mental patterns that prevent enlightenment, or authentic being²⁴³.

It is conceivably illustrative of the 'chaos strategy' that Feuerstein here proposes that no real pattern may be established in the unconventional forms of interaction that devotees record with this guru. On occasion the dealings between them are played out directly on the physical plane with both participants sat before each other; at other times, the connection is seen as being executed in the realm of the 'dream state' (over the course of either a single dream or a series of them). Sometimes the guru is shown to have pulled through threads of knowledge that reach back to a previous time and thus (by all common reason) should have been information out of his reach. At other moments he is depicted as reading the heart and mind of the follower in such an extraordinarily intimate manner as to seem to step outside the bounds of what might conventionally be possible. By all accounts, Neem Karoli Baba's handling of information that should have been simply unknowable to him (or, alternatively, his mysterious interaction through the vehicle of the seeker's dream world) commonly manoeuvred the aspirant into a position of re-perception of how he thought or felt his world to be as to turn simply everything on its head. For some devotees this appears to have been an immediate process; for others, the time scale seems to have been more protracted, lasting weeks, months or even (on occasion) some years to come to completion – and so, it might be argued, to spiritual fruition. Once the supplicant has arrived at the point of his discomposure, however, and so finds nowhere left to stand, the *initial* experience of spiritual surrender could be (and often was) thereby affected. Moreover, according to many devotees, the ongoing nature of such experiences ensured that they *continued* to surrender to the moulding and shaping that they felt they were receiving at their guru's hands.

A point that needs consideration here is the establishment and maintenance of appropriate boundaries between guru and aspirant. Much of this process is, by its very nature, exceptionally intimate and the potential clearly exists that lines might be overstepped²⁴⁴.

Feuerstein notes, "crazy-wisdom adepts have been known to far exceed the boundaries of both morality and the law"²⁴⁵ in a manner that "raises serious questions"²⁴⁶. The laws to which this

²⁴³ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 247

²⁴⁴ See Kramer & Alstad, 1993 p. 55

²⁴⁵ Feuerstein, 1992, pp. 247-248

²⁴⁶ *ibid.* p. 248

or any other guru is ultimately responsible is an important issue: as an enlightened being, should the 'divinely-inspired' preceptor be seen as accountable to a code that has been established by a mundane court of law? Should the teacher uphold horizontal codes of conduct as much as vertical?²⁴⁷ If not, why not? Ultimately, observance of both value systems needs not be incompatible; indeed, it is an essential consideration if the aspirant is to be treated with the respect that, as a human being, is surely his right. Once more, acknowledging the dual responsibilities of the teacher is of foremost concern. If a guru is fluent in both 'codes', then the issue of appropriate boundaries between the preceptor and his charge becomes instinctive instead of imposed. Within the shadowy interactive medium that is in operation here, the adept's motivation is key. This is particularly true where the reasoning for (and mechanics of) pedagogy remains hidden from view. Yet, if a teacher's actions are truly inspired by a pure concern for the seeker's progress, then, as Feuerstein would concur, the teacher will know how far to push the edges of his student and, importantly, exactly when to stop. This does not preclude harsh treatment, but it does ensure that it "should always be appropriate and tempered by compassion"²⁴⁸.

As will be appraised in 3.III.v, devotees considered Neem Karoli Baba to have consistently acted from a place of compassionate concern for them. At the same time, however, he is known to have displayed unpredictable outbursts of anger and to have acted in challenging ways, the reasoning for which was not always clear. The fact that he was documented as having engaged in sexual activity with at least one female devotee is undoubtedly cause for question. The issue of whether a sexual liaison of this kind is ever truly justifiable within the boundaries of acceptable guru-disciple practice is an exceptionally moot point²⁴⁹. Whether both parties involved do so in the understanding that the sexual act between them is a spiritual or physical engagement, there is an essential asymmetry in the dynamics of power between them that must, surely, impact upon the situation. It raises questions of coercion and control. As Kramer and Alstad ask, "how can a disciple refuse who is committed to serve and obey?"²⁵⁰ Inevitably, sexual interaction is a situation that is ripe for manipulation or abuse of some kind. In *The Light at the Center* Bharati discusses the "hardline attitude toward sex"²⁵¹

²⁴⁷ Kramer and Alstad comment on what they perceive to be an unacceptable position of enlightenment that seeks to provide its own authority and "cosmic moral law" in the form of karma. (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 310)

²⁴⁸ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 248

²⁴⁹ Kramer and Alstad would see there to be no justification for sexual interaction to occur. Comparing guru-figures to father-figures, they consider activity of this nature to be "similarly incestuous" and therefore similarly damaging to aspirants, culminating in aspirants' "feelings of shame and betrayal" (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, pp. 94-95).

²⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. 94

²⁵¹ Bharati, 1976, p. 135

that most commentators²⁵² demonstrate towards the matter of sexual relations between a guru and his student. He notes that:

Mystics have been punished and pardoned for sloppiness, lying, even for stealing or hurting other people. But sexual acts are not forgiven, unless they have occurred in the acknowledged service of a consummatory goal²⁵³.

It is arguable that, should the sexual act be seen as having a purpose beyond the merely physical, it could (in some instances) perhaps be seen to represent an acceptable form of spiritual instruction²⁵⁴. In reference to the incidents that are reported here, however, Bhagavan Das has remarked, “People forget he was also just a man”²⁵⁵. This would lead one to assume that the arrangement was (in the eyes of the latter devotee at least) a physical exercise for the guru more than it was a spiritual undertaking. Should this have been the case, then it represents an unacceptable breach of the guru-disciple contract and a preceptorial “betrayal of trust”²⁵⁶. Yet, this is not how the female devotee involved (whose testimony has been considered in 1.IV.iv) has portrayed it to be. She has maintained that the relations between herself and the preceptor (that she revealingly describes as “darshans”²⁵⁷) were a positive and transformative experience. Moreover, the imagery that she uses would suggest that she held there to be an element of spiritual purification and transformation involved also. In this light, the matter might be viewed somewhat differently. Ultimately, whether the guru saw it as an opportunity to liberate or to manipulate his devotee may not be known. The situation remains controversial nonetheless and Neem Karoli Baba’s ‘unpredictable’ and ‘unconventional’ behaviour must give cause for some concern.

²⁵² Whilst Feuerstein maintains a liberal attitude towards most of the eccentricities and vagaries of the behavioural patterns of the Hindu adept, he appears less convinced of the role of sexual engagement in the guru-disciple relationship. In his 1992 study, he provides only two short pages to the consideration of Neem Karoli Baba. This material is entirely concerned with the nature of the guru’s alleged sexual indiscretion and assesses no other aspect of this preceptor’s life or teaching.

²⁵³ Bharati, 1976, p. 135

²⁵⁴ Proponents of the *Vama Mārga*, the left-hand tantra tradition, would certainly agree here.

²⁵⁵ This was related to the present author by Bhagavan Das before the start of a kirtan event held in London. (Bhagavan Das. *Kirtan*. London, 23 October 2006)

²⁵⁶ Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 94

²⁵⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1979, p. 293

3.III.ii The Unknowable as Potential Means to Effect Initial Disciplic Surrender

*The satguru, with steady grip,
Put an arrow in his bow, then let it go.
And I, exposed, was struck. My body
Like a forest burst in flames.*

Kabīr²⁵⁸

It could be maintained that initial surrender to the guru followed by the observation of non-attachment (one might say a continual letting go or a continual surrender to him) represent two of the foremost pillars of the teaching of Neem Karoli Baba. As will be seen in the pages to come, devotees observe these pillars as being located in a sense of love. In many ways, this love acts as a leitmotif that is expressed throughout the insider accounts portraying relations with the guru. In effect, of course, this is the essence of the *bhakti* guru-devotee relationship and it receives ample illustration here. In his thesis, Ram Giri writes of his own experience of just this:

So I gave myself to him from that hidden place behind all egocentric thought where the soul, the true essence dwells. For a moment my heart stopped and I thought, 'Is it safe?' But immediately I remembered his radiant love and the doubt created by fear melted away... to hold onto my fears, my doubts and my arrogant smallness would have been laughable in the presence of such love. It was time to throw caution to the wind. The time for jailbreak was now²⁵⁹.

Neem Karoli Baba is reported as remarking that “surrender gets the guru’s grace”²⁶⁰. If the extraordinary and unknowable experiences are accepted as being key in the facilitation of disciplic surrender (both immediate and ongoing), so, potentially – if one follows the guru’s own words here – such occurrences might be seen as instrumental in the *securing* of his grace. The importance of the devotee’s initial point of surrender to the guru, and then his or her ongoing personal egoic relinquishment into the preceptor’s hands, could therefore hold exceptional weight. Again, considerable emphasis is placed upon the necessity of the guru’s motivational purity. Once more, devotees assume this teacher’s complete benevolence. That which is perceived as being unknowable by the devotee might consequently be seen as representing a powerful potential tool in his hands. Girija Brilliant’s diary from 3 November 1971 suggests that, from the devotees’ perspective, there was at least some conscious awareness of the process in action:

²⁵⁸ Cited in Gold, Daniel. *The Lord as Guru – Hindi Sants in North Indian Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 108

²⁵⁹ Braun (Ram Giri), 1995, pp. 44-45

²⁶⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 141

I love him, I struggle so – but it is all his doing, I must learn to surrender fully, to accept all as coming from His Grace. Am I not in his presence because he wants me here?²⁶¹

The spiritual catalysts that mark the initial moment of disciplic surrender are manifold and complex. To this day, devotees of Neem Karoli Baba often refer to their initial dealings with the guru as somehow ‘being pulled under his blanket’. Krishna Das, for example, remembers: “He threw his blanket over me and it was the sky with all the stars and all the universe wrapped in it”²⁶². The highly nuanced imagery of the blanket is very much connected to this movement²⁶³: it reasserts the emic understanding that interaction remained a matter of the guru’s choosing and provides a bond that links supplicants’ initial experiences (and their evaluation of them) with the preceptor. Simultaneously there is a wry, even proud, recognition of the unconventional manner in which he was known to greet or interrelate with new devotees. At the very first meeting with his guru, Bhagavan Das went to *pra-ṅām* at the feet of the seated master. As he bowed down before him, “Maharaji threw his blanket over me and popped me on the head”²⁶⁴. Bhagavan Das reflects, “He drew *me* to him”²⁶⁵. Ganda writes of his own experience in a similar vein, “I was drawn to Maharajji by Maharajji Himself to the point of complete surrender”²⁶⁶.

Whilst consistently extraordinary in their representation, the manner in which the guru is shown to have operated in these situations is not without a sense of humour. One devotee, Gangadhar, recalls being consumed with questions of whether this might truly be *his* guru, before their meeting in 1971. Having first erroneously *pra-ṅām*-ed to the gardener and then also to the gatekeeper – believing each in turn to be Neem Karoli Baba – Gangadhar was finally taken to meet the guru himself. When he saw him, the holy man was, “chattering and seemed to be in continuous motion, filled with life”²⁶⁷. Yet, as Gangadhar continues:

I remember my first thought when I saw him: The poor old man is blind! Instantly, Maharaj-ji turned to me and BUGGED his eyes out. I could feel something in my chest, kind of like Superman’s x-ray vision. Guess he’s not blind! ‘Where’s your guru? What happened to your guru?’ he asked, like it was

²⁶¹ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*. Entry for 4 November 1971

²⁶² Johnsen, Linda and Maggie Jacobus. *Kirtan! Chanting as a Spiritual Path*. Saint Paul, MN: Yes International Publishers, 2007, p. 23

²⁶³ In relation to the Mata Amritanandamayi movement, for example, devotees have described her as a ‘divine angler’ who ‘hooked’ her followers or as a ‘cosmic magnet’ who attracts *celās* to her like iron filings. (Warrier, 2005, p. 66)

²⁶⁴ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 46

²⁶⁵ Bhagavan Das. *Interview*, London, 15 November 2005, 00:07

²⁶⁶ Ganda, 2002, p. 47

²⁶⁷ Gangadhar, “The Day I met Maharaj-ji” in Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple. *Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA (Fall 2004), p. 3

the biggest joke he'd ever heard... And in my mind I wondered, 'Who is this guy and how does he know all of this?'²⁶⁸

The answer to Gangadhar's question is that it is categorically impossible to *know* how (or even if) the guru was able to be aware of many of the things that it was reported he did. In a 2005 study of gurus, Williams, Nair and Osborne comment "It was apparent that he [Neem Karoli Baba] knew people's minds and understood their problems intuitively"²⁶⁹. Albeit not writing from a direct insider perspective, these authors are nonetheless unquestioning of the guru's abilities. If, as Bharati considers, "There is no outsider qualified to check and tell whether the mystic's experience is genuine or not"²⁷⁰, perhaps no further insight into this phenomenon may be contributed. Having said this, in Girija Brilliant's diary of the time, one entry offers a slight (and intriguing) glimpse into the guru's potential view of the situation. In it, she records the holy man turning to a new arrival to ask him whether he knows another young man present. When he answers that he does not, the guru tantalisingly remarks, "I know both of you. When you know God you know all things"²⁷¹. This assertion of omnipotence represents a strong statement indeed.

Two hagiographical instances exist that illustrate how the guru utilised supposedly unknowable information about newcomers²⁷². Breaking through the barriers of their cynicism in this way, he is seen to effect a dramatic and lasting disciplic surrender in the manner that Feuerstein refers to in 3.III.i (p. 181). Feuerstein adds to this his opinion that, "The whole point of mysticism or spiritual esotericism is to undermine conventional reality so that transcendental Reality can shine forth. Spiritual life is intrinsically deconstructive"²⁷³. It is of interest that, in both cases, the men subjected to intellectual deconstruction were highly educated (at their point of meeting the preceptor) – certainly more so than the majority of aspirants who ended up at the temple. Larry Brilliant was a medical doctor and Ram Dass (still then Richard Alpert) a psychology lecturer who had only recently departed from Harvard. Whether or not the process was executed with some awareness on the part of the guru, in both instances (so it would appear) the instrument of the seeker's mind was used as a weapon upon

²⁶⁸ *ibid.* pp. 3 & 7

²⁶⁹ Williams, Nair & Barry Osborne comp. 2005, p. 139

²⁷⁰ Bharati, 1976, p. 84

²⁷¹ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 27 November 1971

²⁷² It is clear that issues of disciplic surrender are not bound by nationality. Both Indian and Western devotees have described their experiences with Neem Karoli Baba in this respect in the hagiography. Having said this, the sources that are referred to for the purposes of this section (and the next also) come from testimony of the Western satsang. As such incidents stand outside general Western interactive convention, the non-Indian chroniclers of these events describe them with an intensity that is enhanced further by virtue of their own birth culture. Experiences of Indian narrative origin will be more frequently incorporated in the sections and chapters that follow.

²⁷³ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 247

itself – and to shattering effect. In recognition that the point of disciplic surrender is immensely personal, the words of the men concerned are incorporated here at some length.

In 1972, Larry Brilliant was already leading what, even for those counter culture times, would have been perceived to be an alternative lifestyle, including living with self-proclaimed ‘cosmic clown’ Wavy Gravy at the Hog Farm ashram in California. Brilliant was nevertheless entirely unprepared for the scene that he found surrounding Neem Karoli Baba when he followed his wife, Girija, to India to meet her guru. He comments:

The idea of going to see a fat man in a blanket and touch his feet, did not appeal to me. But yet I wanted to be with Girija, and I understood that Ram Dass had been ignited by this source of fire, so I certainly wanted to go. I certainly was happy I went, and I became this ardent devotee and I became completely immersed in Maharaj-ji – but there was a period when I wasn’t certain²⁷⁴.

For some days upon his arrival the young doctor felt both isolated from “all these crazy Westerners wearing white clothes”²⁷⁵ and, simultaneously, totally ignored by the guru. Over the course of a week he became progressively upset, detached and, as a result, increasingly depressed. Finally, he decided that his “wife had been captured by a crazy cult”²⁷⁶ and that their marriage must be doomed. Despairingly, he went to reflect upon the situation by the edge of the lake in Nainital. Larry Brilliant continues:

And then I did something that I had never really done in my adult life. I prayed. I asked God, ‘What am I doing here? Who is this man? These people are crazy. I don’t belong here.’ Just then I remembered the phrase, ‘Had ye but faith ye would not need miracles. ‘Okay God, I don’t have any faith. Send me a miracle’²⁷⁷.

Believing that he should leave as soon as possible, early the following morning the young man proceeded to the temple at Kainchi to say goodbye to the guru. As he approached the veranda, he stooped momentarily to pick up an apple that had fallen from the guru’s still empty tucket. All at once, Neem Karoli Baba emerged from the Radha Kuti²⁷⁸ and sat down, “in such a way that his feet pressed down on the man’s [Brilliant’s] hand. Baba then pressed his already bent head with his hand”²⁷⁹. Straight away the guru asked the American whether he had been at the lake (saying the word in English) the day before. Upon hearing the word ‘lake’, the Westerner began “to get this strange feeling at the base of my spine and then my whole body tingled”²⁸⁰.

²⁷⁴ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:43

²⁷⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 8

²⁷⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 9

²⁷⁸ One of the temple buildings

²⁷⁹ Pande, 2005, p. 201

²⁸⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 9

Then he leaned over and spoke quietly, 'Were you talking to God? Did you ask for something?' When he did that I fell apart and started to cry like a baby. He pulled me over and started pulling my beard and repeating, 'Did you ask for something?' This really felt like my initiation... A trivial question, such as, 'Were you at the lake yesterday?', which had no meaning to anyone else, shattered my perception of reality. It was clear to me that Maharajji saw right through my illusions; he knew everything²⁸¹.

The exact nature of the transmission here is not entirely clear nor, indeed, even the manner through which it was enacted. Whether the interaction with the apple represented an intrinsic or coincidental part of proceedings remains part of the mystery. It nevertheless seems fair to say that 'something' happened to Brilliant that day.

Ram Dass' own initial meeting with Neem Karoli Baba is well known. Without any logical way of 'knowing', the guru told Alpert how his mother had died of problems that involved her spleen and that he, Alpert, had been thinking about just that whilst out under the stars the previous night. On hearing this information, Ram Dass writes in *Be Here Now*:

Well what happened to me at that moment, I can't really put into words. He looked at me in a certain way at that moment, and two things happened – it seemed simultaneous. They do not seem like cause and effect.

The first thing that happened was that my mind raced faster and faster to try to get leverage – to get a hold on what he had just done. I went through every super CIA paranoia I've ever had:

'Who is he?' 'Who does he represent?'

'Where's the button he pushes where the file appears?' and 'Why have they brought me here?'

None of it would jell.

It was just too impossible that this could have happened this way... My mind went faster and faster.

Up until then I had two categories for 'psychic experience.' One was 'they happened to somebody else and they haven't happened to me, and they were terribly interesting and we certainly had to keep an open mind about it.' That was my social science approach. The other was, 'well, man, I'm high on LSD. Who knows how it really is? After all, under the influence of a chemical, how do I know I'm not just creating the whole thing?'

But neither of these categories applied in this situation and my mind went faster and faster and then I felt like what happens when a computer is fed an insoluble problem; the bell rings and the light goes on and the machine stops. And my mind just gave up. It burned out its circuitry... its zeal to have an explanation. I needed to get closure at the rational level and there wasn't anything. There just wasn't a place I could hide my head about this.

And at the same moment, I felt this extremely violent pain in my chest and a tremendous wrenching feeling and I started to cry. And I cried and I cried and I cried. And I wasn't happy and I wasn't sad. It was not that kind of crying. The

²⁸¹ *ibid.*

only thing I could say was it felt like I was home. Like the journey was over. Like I had finished²⁸².

What happened in either of these two cases is impossible to ascertain. Nor could the two Western participants have understood the workings of it either – certainly not to any real extent. As previously cited in 2.I.i (p. 84), the thirty-ninth *Nārada-Bhakti Sūtra* states, “To come into contact with a great soul is indeed extremely difficult; it is impossible to know them fully; yet it is infallible in its effect”²⁸³. It might be argued that, whilst neither Brilliant nor Ram Dass was aware of the precise mechanics of the situation, the effect on both men was nonetheless infallible. Whether the journey had indeed ended, as Ram Dass speculates, or rather whether this marked the start of an altogether new journey, the lives of both were irrevocably transformed from that moment on²⁸⁴. In this context, seemingly unknowable information is used by the guru to deconstructive effect. Its pedagogic purpose here is thus clear.

3.III.iii Disciplic Surrender Enacted Without Neem Karoli Baba’s Physical Presence

For other devotees, conceivably with slightly different karmic requirements, the initial point of disciplic surrender appears to have been enacted via altogether different means. A significant proportion of such incidents have been attributed to events that were played out either on the plane of the lucid dream state or, in any case, without the physical presence of the guru. Even without a consideration of the shadowy nature of the interactive medium in operation here, the feature of the unknowable again remains a primary feature in the hagiography. What follows below are three slightly differing illustrations of this that represent the experiences of devotees Jai Uttal, Shyamdas and Hanuman Das. As before, in recognition of the personal nature of this material, the words of those concerned are cited at some length.

In terms of exactly how the connection was established between supplicant and guru, it may or may not be of significance that the three men featured here were either younger or, at least, less worldly-wise than either Larry Brilliant or Ram Dass at their point of initial contact. Moreover, in all three of the following accounts, there appears to have been a greater focus on the experience of the heart, or (as in the case of Shyamdas) on the movement of kundalini than before. The heightened states reported here thus appear to have been facilitated without any preliminary need to side-step the rational cognitive mind. The first two men experienced their

²⁸² Ram Dass. *Be Here Now*. Kingsport, Tennessee: Hanuman Foundation, 1978, In chapter entitled, “Bhagwan Dass”, without page number

²⁸³ Chnimayananda, 2005, p. 72

²⁸⁴ The contributions to service, in particular, of Brilliant and Ram Dass will be investigated in 3.IV.v and 3.V.ix

interaction with the guru during the dream state although both had either already met him ‘in the body’ or had read about him prior to the occurrence. In the case of the last, however, Hanuman Das (then Jon Kane) underwent a life-altering transmission experience merely at the sight of Neem Karoli Baba’s picture in the back of a Volkswagen bus in Massachusetts. At this point, he had not heard of the guru before.

We commence with the disciplic surrender of Jai Uttal. Although he had been with Neem Karoli Baba in Vrindavan some weeks previously, it was only at the point at which he truly began to pine for the return of the absent guru that the young American (at this point in Allahabad) had his own point of personal revelation. This was the result of a dream experience. Jai Uttal relates:

I went to bed that night and I had a dream in the middle of the night that I was waiting at the train station in Allahabad... and the train comes into the station and Maharaj-ji steps off the train onto the track and he’s all alone and he’s wrapped in this white-ish, grey-ish blanket. So he steps off the train and opens his arms and his blanket and embraces me and I embrace him. And in the dream we are both weeping and weeping at finally being connected again, at being reconnected. And in the dream there was a sense of timelessness... a sense that we had been connected for millennia but that I hadn’t known that in this life and finally I was back home in his arms. It was so moving. And then I woke up and I was really in an ecstatic kind of place, a euphoric otherworldly kind of place. And I looked at the clock and it was 1:20 or 1:25 am or something and after a while I went back to sleep. Then, in the morning, I went over to Dada’s²⁸⁵ again, except this time everything was different: people were talking very softly and I said, ‘what’s happening?’ They said Maharaj-ji had come into the train station last night by himself at 1:25 in the morning... but the thing was, the dream was so powerful to me that I *knew* that he was my guru. I still, to this day, couldn’t say what guru means... but from that moment I knew that he had been taking care of me for lifetimes and lifetimes and lifetimes. But when I went to Dada’s in the morning there was the affirmation – I don’t think I *needed* the affirmation – but getting the affirmation just knocked me out²⁸⁶.

Jai Uttal had already spent some time in the guru’s physical presence prior to this experience. In contrast, Shyamdas had not yet been to India when, as a boy of seventeen and still living with his parents, he read *Be Here Now*. He began to have unusual dreams that featured Neem Karoli Baba and, at some point during these nocturnal visitations, the guru apparently instructed him to come to the subcontinent²⁸⁷. Two years later, the young man had got as far as Afghanistan. Once more, the guru is reported to have acted through the dream state medium. This time, Shyamdas (then still Stephen Schaffer) experienced what he describes as, “a

²⁸⁵ Dada Mukerjee’s house at 4 Church Lane, Allahabad was a regular port of call for Neem Karoli Baba. Of the practice of offering accommodation in this manner White comments, “The greatest honor for Hindu family members is to have such a saint stay with them” (White, 1972, p. 874).

²⁸⁶ Jai Uttal. *Interview*, 2005, 00:30

²⁸⁷ Rosen, 2008, p. 58

massive kundalini awakening... It was like being plugged into a twenty billion volts of electricity, pouring through my body, and Maharaji appeared to me, too”²⁸⁸. Of this occurrence, Shyamdas offers an interesting reflection on the necessity of adequate personal preparation: “I guess it was clearing up some subtle energy, burning away lifetimes of karma, so I could make a proper entrance into Vrindavan”²⁸⁹.

Shyamdas eventually arrived in Vrindavan in 1972, a town that, in many ways, has remained a spiritual home for him ever since. By travelling with other Western devotees of Neem Karoli Baba, he succeeded in meeting the guru without much delay. Once more, however, what this aspirant considers to have been the true interaction between himself and the guru was not played out upon the manifest plane. One night early on in their acquaintance, Shyamdas had a dream in which the apparition of Neem Karoli Baba appeared before him. He granted him what he describes as “the *darshan* of Vrindavan”²⁹⁰:

Not that Vrindavan as we see it, but the Vrindavan that is divine, eternal, celestial, beyond the Abode of Liberation. He gave me the *darshan* of Vrindavan where every blade of grass... was like a trillion *samadhis*... This wasn't a flash, it wasn't a dream, it wasn't a vision – it was truly *darshan*. It could not be attained through practice, this is not a *samadhi* practice: you could enter *samadhi* for one hundred years and maybe not see this. I understand it now when they talk about it, but it was much later that I read about it – and these sorts of things are way beyond *samadhi* or beyond *mukti*... Maharaj-ji gave me a glimpse into *That*. Maharaj-ji's *grace* allowed me to see, I guess, what he's into as well²⁹¹.

Shyamdas summarises the experience as “perhaps the greatest gift I have ever received”²⁹² and, from the course of his subsequent career, the event may be seen to have inspired a lifelong passion for *bhakti* practice and the study of its principles.

The final illustration introduced here has been chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, the full disciplic connection between student and preceptor occurred over a protracted period of time. At the same time, the subject had no prior awareness of who Neem Karoli Baba was, nor of the supposedly miraculous manner in which he is said to have operated, nor, even of the nature and / or function of the guru figure in general. As will be explored more fully below, a further feature of this narration rests in the other characters involved. Hanuman Das describes his initial contact with the guru:

²⁸⁸ *ibid.* p. 60

²⁸⁹ *ibid.*

²⁹⁰ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 00:14

²⁹¹ *ibid.*

²⁹² *ibid.*

Well, it was in 1968, I was hitchhiking in Massachusetts and hadn't ever heard of Maharaj-ji... I don't know if I even knew what a guru was yet... I got picked up in a Volkswagen van, got in the back, and it was a nice couple – probably in their late 30s or somewhere about there. I'm sitting there and they have a little picture of an old man on their dashboard and I was drawn to look at the picture, and the more I looked at it, the more emotion I was feeling to the point where I finally was just overcome and sobbing out loud. And the woman turned to me and she said, 'Oh, what's wrong?' and I said, 'I don't know – who's that picture of?' And she said, 'Oh, that's our guru, Neem Karoli Baba'. When she said that, I completely broke down. It felt like, even though I didn't know I was searching for anything, I had found what I was searching for. And from that moment on, he's been the only purpose of my life²⁹³.

Hanuman Das recalls being let out of the van two hours further down the road, “still crying”²⁹⁴. He did not have any further contact with the guru for another year and a half. At this point, however, the second half of the story comes to be played out:

In late '69, I was writing to communities all over the country because I was thinking I would like to live in community. And one of the places I wrote to was the Lama Foundation. I didn't ask them anything about Neem Karoli Baba, didn't know who Ram Dass was – I'd never heard of him – and I never got a response to coming to live in the community. But one day in the mail I got this box. And I took it home and opened it up, and there was this picture of this same man who had been with me *constantly* since I had seen his picture before – and it was the original version of *Be Here Now*²⁹⁵.

The immediate transmission resultant upon his exposure to the dashboard photograph is apparent here. Moreover, to Hanuman Das at least, the experience was one that then unfolded over the course of eighteen months and that appeared to consist of two definite parts: an initial being 'broken open' and subsequent sense of being 'pieced together' (possibly of being 'brought home') once more. Hanuman Das proceeded to become an influential member of the Taos ashram community and from this position, his connections with the Lama Foundation and his establishment as a burgeoning teacher in his own right²⁹⁶, it may be taken that the occurrence was as life-altering for this man as it has been for the others featured above.

What remains something of a mystery here is the identity of the couple in the van. Hanuman Das certainly never met them or heard of, or from, them again although he is in the position to know most of the Western devotees of this guru – in particular those residing in America. Nor does he have any idea of who they might have been. The riddle takes on a more interesting

²⁹³ Hanuman Das. *Interview*, Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Temple, Taos, NM, USA. 7 December 2005, 00:04

²⁹⁴ *ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *ibid.* 00:05

²⁹⁶ See Parker, John W. *Dialogues with Emerging Spiritual Teachers*. Fort Collins, CO: Sagewood Press, 2000, pp. 235–254. This chapter is dedicated to Hanuman Das.

dimension when one considers the year in which the event took place. As Hanuman Das' account demonstrates, *Be Here Now* – the vehicle through which Neem Karoli Baba truly came to the notice of the Western public – had not been published by the moment at which the young man climbed into the Volkswagen bus. Furthermore, Ram Dass himself only met the guru in 1967 and (with the exception of Bhagavan Das) supposedly remained the only American to have had physical interaction with him until that point. Nor is there any note in the Indian sources as to who this couple might have been. It is, of course, perfectly plausible that the couple might have acquired a photograph of the guru via means other than direct meeting. However, that they should have been in possession of his picture – moreover, that they should have been aware of his name²⁹⁷ – presents as curious nonetheless. As ever in relation to this guru, the combined elements of the unknown and that which is essentially unknowable feature as consistent hagiographical hallmarks.

3.III.iv Matters of Love and Personal Attachment

The real way you spell guru is L-O-V-E.

Krishna Das²⁹⁸

Bhakti as emotion is not only devotion, but sharing – a love relationship in which the devotee both gives and receives²⁹⁹.

Having examined experiences of surrender to Neem Karoli Baba, attention now turns to the matters of love and personal attachment that are consistent features within the hagiography. Neem Karoli Baba is reported as having said, “You can leave me. I won’t leave you. Once I catch hold of you, I don’t let go”³⁰⁰. This is a stance conventional within the guru tradition, of course. It nevertheless brings us once more to consideration of the concept of guru-disciple *samskāras* that are meant to stretch over a number of lifetimes. In his study of the Indian guru, Brent reports one preceptor who turns to a surprised newcomer with a pronouncement that, “I have known you since your birth, during many births. I have always been with you”³⁰¹. Feuerstein too recognises the ongoing nature of the relationship. As he states, the disciple is always free to leave the partnership but, for the preceptor, the association is one that is more or less unbreakable. He comments, “the connection, once established, cannot easily be severed.

²⁹⁷ Ram Dass was instructed by Neem Karoli Baba not to reveal his identity or whereabouts for as long as he was alive and consequently always simply referred to him as ‘Maharaj-ji’.

²⁹⁸ Walsh, Kellie. “The YJ Interview with Krishna Das. Messenger of Love.” *Yoga Journal* Issue 233 (November 2010): 116

²⁹⁹ McDaniel, 1989, p. 3

³⁰⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 399

³⁰¹ Brent, 1971, p. 19

Any seeker should be completely aware of this fact and the tremendous lifelong responsibility that discipleship means, for both the guru and the devotee”³⁰².

An apposite illustration of Feuerstein’s thesis is presented below. Krishna Das relates a story in which elder devotee, K.C. Tewari, is reluctantly summoned to see Neem Karoli Baba:

Tewari came from Nainital to Kainchi and started abusing Maharaj-ji. ‘Why did you bring me here? I was happy in Nainital and had no intention of coming here, but you dragged me.’ Maharaj-ji yelled right back, ‘I have nothing to do with it. I drag no one here, but you and I have been together for 83 lifetimes. It just has to happen!’³⁰³

Neem Karoli Baba’s flash of irritation here might be seen to reveal an exceptionally precise grasp of what, to anyone else, would be information that lies simply beyond the reach of knowing. However, this chronicle depicts two further important points for consideration. Firstly, the devotee is shown to be unafraid to voice his discontent at having been summoned (although he comes to the ashram nonetheless); indeed, he appears entirely comfortable expressing his feelings to his guru. Secondly, the loyalty with which the relationship has been played out is evidenced on both sides: “you and I have been together” exclaims the guru and, in this statement, any sense of hierarchy that might have existed between them disappears. Upon such insider evidence, any bond that has succeeded in keeping a pairing together for such a substantial number of incarnations would have to be born out of, at the very least, a deep affection and mutual appreciation. Feuerstein notes that the “image of the guru as a tyrant who enslaves his disciples is but a caricature”³⁰⁴. The mutuality of regard between the adept and his student (in this devotee’s portrait at least) would bear witness to such a statement.

Throughout the community’s sources, a common theme is the intensity of devotion that *celās* (for the vast majority of the time) displayed towards Neem Karoli Baba. Even in instances where the exact purpose in doing the things that he did remained unclear to the observer, the underlying benevolence of his motivation remains unchallenged. This could be seen as somewhat naïve on the part of devotees³⁰⁵, yet the hagiographical voice remains constant in its adoration of the guru whether Neem Karoli Baba is seen to exhibit more forceful or

³⁰² Feuerstein, 1992, p. 154

³⁰³ Krishna Das, “The Hidden Yogis” in *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM (Summer 1999), p. 7

³⁰⁴ Feuerstein, 1992, p. 154

³⁰⁵ Kramer and Alstad would go further than an explanation of naivety on behalf of the devotee. They would suggest it to be indicative of the authoritarian hierarchy that is inherent to the relationship: “Just as there is no way for humans to question a remote God, there is really no way for a non-enlightened being to question the words and answers of a presumed enlightened one. This is why gurus can get away with anything” (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 311).

controversial behaviour as much as it is in depiction of his more obviously compassionate acts. Neither is it contended by insiders that the perceived fruits (unknowable as they may be) of such challenging behavioural patterns are reserved for the sole benefit of the devotee. In the case of a display of the guru's displeasure, for example, Pande blithely proffers, "eventually it was seen that his anger averted the misfortunes of people and acted as a blessing in disguise"³⁰⁶. Why he should have come to that conclusion is, however, not specified.

Aside from the dictates of *bhakti* convention on how to regard one's guru, it could be suggested that a foremost reason for the vigour of Neem Karoli Baba's positive reception was the fact that he was seen to return the affection that was shown to him. That much might be evidenced in the interaction between the preceptor and Tewari presented above. Other insider reports would agree. Josi comments, "Maharajji himself transmitted his ever-flowing love for them [devotees], which completely overwhelmed them"³⁰⁷. A sense of abandonment is certainly characteristic of devotees' comments in this regard: "He knows the language of our hearts"³⁰⁸, remarks one. Another claims "Maharajji was love incarnate"³⁰⁹ and a further devotee asserts, "the love of the whole universe [poured] through him"³¹⁰. Krishna Das refers to his guru as having been the embodiment of love³¹¹. *Miracle of Love* comments:

It was just this quality of love that bound us to Maharajji. Within and beyond the apples, the kindnesses, the kidding, the comings and goings, the abuses, was the love. Now and then he spoke of love, but always, he *is* love³¹².

Without doubt, this manner of interaction is reminiscent of Tulsīdās' Rāmāyaṇic portrayal of the nature of devotion: here Neem Karoli Baba's devotees relate to their preceptor as Hanumān is shown to feel about Rām. The hagiographical corpus is filled with illustrations of what might be seen to be the guru's tender hearted and compassionate response to his followers. Frequently appearing as stirred as them, he is portrayed as moved to tears (or to what might be described as either ecstatic or *samādhi*-like states) by the actions, words and sentiments of *celās*. In turn, so one devotee reports, "You almost wanted to give up your breath to him if you could"³¹³.

³⁰⁶ Pande, 2005, p. 18

³⁰⁷ Josi, 2006, p. 23

³⁰⁸ *ibid.* p. 248

³⁰⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 251

³¹⁰ Anasuya. *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA (November 2003), p. 7

³¹¹ Krishna Das, 2007, p. 4

³¹² Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 248

³¹³ *ibid.* p. 26

3.III.v Observing Unknowability as a Potential Means to Address Attachment

[Neem Karoli Baba] was characterised by a total non-attachment to anything on earth. Even as freely blowing wind is unattached to anything he was also unaffected by his environment, even as the pure blowing breeze.

Swami Chidananda³¹⁴

When one considers the intensity of affection that was in operation here (and, to follow tradition, one is presumably thinking in terms of lifetimes rather than years), the issue of the potential spiritual pitfall of such fervent personal attachment comes to the fore. Shyamdas describes the devotees' "firm attachment to him that emerged out of a state of *prem*, of love"³¹⁵ before adding, "Maharaj-ji's form is very important for this satsang. You may use the form to jump into *nirvikalpa samadhi*, or anything else you want to do, but the form is really key"³¹⁶. Larry Brilliant is in agreement here, "The people that knew Maharaj-ji in the body, were attached to him in the body"³¹⁷. At the same time, another commentator writes, "Maharajji was the only being I've ever met who would seem to do anything to get you free"³¹⁸ and it is known that, as far as Neem Karoli Baba was concerned, he considered excessive personal attachment between a guru and his charges to be a major obstacle. This was both for the purposes of bringing about initial spiritual realisation and then for the maintenance of its purity³¹⁹.

Neem Karoli Baba is reported as having pronounced, "Attachment is the strongest block to realization"³²⁰, moreover, "Lust, greed, anger, attachment – these are all the paths to hell"³²¹. The process of surrender, therefore, may be seen as only part of the spiritual journey suggested here. Once the aspirant had found the means to 'let go', ongoing vigilance had to be maintained to ensure that the devotee continued to have no place to stand in terms of his or her personality and so become bound once more. According to insider sources, this might be observed as attachment in relation to him, to each other or, as is the case for one devotee, to

³¹⁴ Chidananda, 1999, p. 4

³¹⁵ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 00:59

³¹⁶ *ibid.*

³¹⁷ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:38

³¹⁸ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 287

³¹⁹ *Miracle of Love* proposes that a succinct way to convey Neem Karoli Baba's teachings about non-attachment is contained within a particular *śloka* of the *Ashtavakra Gita*. A modern translation of this *śloka* (*AG XV:2*) reads:

Detached from the senses,

You are free.

Attached you are bound.

When this is understood, you may live as you please.³¹⁹

The Heart of Awareness: A Translation of the Ashtavakra Gita. (Byrom, Thomas trans.) Boston & London: Shambhala, 2001, p. 36.

³²⁰ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 183

³²¹ *ibid.*

her unborn child³²². Why it was, therefore, that other sources record him as attempting to ‘marry off’ some devotees (“Some he pressed continually to marry, asking them again and again”³²³), while conversely as breaking up other partnerships remains, of course, inexplicable. One might speculate that he saw particular situations to be more appropriate to certain devotees than to others. The situation could also be seen as one of unnecessary coercion. The absence of insider voices that question this decidedly authoritarian stance represents a disconcerting omission.

In overview, however, it is conceivable that Neem Karoli Baba’s concerns about excessive personal attachment stemmed from a greater sense of compassion than from a desire for dictatorial power. Certainly, devotees’ accounts do not betray any sense of feeling criticised by their guru in this respect. More than this, it would appear that he adopted the same criteria for himself as he did for others. At least, he is recorded as having said, “I send people away because attachment happens both ways”³²⁴. From this, it might be argued that the guru saw that he too could still be affected by personal attachment and that this would prove impedimentary to his motivation and, in turn, ability to act in his proper preceptorial function. This remains pure speculation yet, it might be posited that the guru refused to allow any of his devotees to hold what he considered to be excessive sway over him either. This was the case however much it appeared he cared for them as individuals. Thus, in her diary Girija Brilliant writes, “Maharajji loves RD so – says of himself ‘Ram Das, Guru’”. He will call RD and he runs after him like a child”³²⁵. And still, in a lecture given some years later at the Omega Institute in 1992, Ram Dass recalls that, even having travelled half way around the world from America to see him, he was summarily dismissed from the guru’s presence:

He’d throw me out all the time. He’d only let me see him for a couple of minutes and then he’d say ‘Jao!’ – ‘Go!, Split! Go somewhere else!’ – and I at first got very offended. I mean can you imagine if you fall in love with somebody and you cross the ocean bringing fruit and whatever you can bring that you could possibly offer to your beloved. And you’ve come this long way and you feel this mixture of righteousness and desire and everything and he’s all wrapped up with your enlightenment – so you can’t get there fast enough. And you get there and you kneel down and he looks at you and he pulls your beard, hits you on the head,

³²² So important does Neem Karoli Baba appear to consider this principle to be that he went so far as to warn one Western devotee of becoming overly attached to her as yet unborn child. He advised her, “You should be like a lotus flower in the water, that floats above it. You should not be attached. Do not have attached affection” (Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 27 November 1971). From this evidence, Girija Brilliant’s diary observation of the guru’s sternness – “M says he is CID of the heart” (*ibid.* Entry for 3 December 1971) – would appear to be entirely apt.

³²³ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 279

³²⁴ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 369

³²⁵ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 31 September 1971

asks you one question and then says, 'Jao!' You say 'Jao?!' He let other people stay around him and not me³²⁶.

Within the light of teachings about personal attachment, this curt dismissal is not the callous act that it might, at first glance, appear. Conversely, the modelling of non-attached interaction with Ram Dass could suggest the extent of the guru's regard for this devotee. When examined in the context of the teacher's reported beliefs in the importance of *vairāgya*, the underlying motivation seems more compassionate – albeit still rather fierce in nature. This notwithstanding, in light of the strong sense of personal connection that the majority of his devotees consistently demonstrated, the guru's continuing vigilance in this respect does indeed appear to have been born of some necessity.

In summary of the 'unknowable' nature of Neem Karoli Baba, Dada Mukerjee has commented, "That was Baba's way. He wanted to keep the mystery. He did not want to have beads or matted hair, or the glimmer of a halo about him"³²⁷. Mukerjee's recognition that the guru was keen to retain a sense of enigma in relation to his followers is significant, for it suggests several possibilities. One is that he saw it as a manner of interaction with devotees that would prove in some manner instructive or potentially also facilitative in terms of their transformation. The second is that he perceived it to be a method through which he might detract attention from the divine forces that he felt were at work through the vessel of his physical form. A third is that – in line with his professed *sahaja* state – all the mystery simply 'happened' about him without any real thought or indeed intention on his behalf. A fourth option is that, as McDaniel points out in relation to *siddhas*, the intensity of his religious ecstasy / force was preserved through its chaotic presentation. As a consequence of his unpredictable behaviour, he avoided being, "trapped in the hierarchies of purity, kinship and caste... [when] ecstasy becomes part of the universe rather than beyond it"³²⁸. It is conceivable that each these options were operational, either separately or indeed simultaneously. Just how conscious Neem Karoli Baba was of the workings and weavings of his enigmatic nature may not be established, nor whether he represented an active or rather more passive participant in the overall process. Having considered the more nebulous aspects of Neem Karoli Baba's modes of operation, we turn now to the information that may be gathered about the manner in which he stepped into the more active guru role of his final years.

³²⁶ Ram Dass. *Path of the Heart*. Omega Institute Lecture, 1992. Ram Dass Tape Library, Audio CD Track 6.

³²⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 24

³²⁸ McDaniel, 1989, p. 257

3.IV Neem Karoli Baba in the Guru Role of the Later Years

He gave no discourses, the briefest, simplest stories were his teaching. Usually he sat or lay on a bench wrapped in a blanket while a few devotees sat around him. Visitors came and went, food was given to them and a few words, a nod, a slap on the head or back, and they were sent away. There was gossip, laughter – he loved to joke. Orders for running the ashram were given, usually in a piercing yell across the compound. Sometimes he sat in silence, absorbed in another world to which we could not follow, but bliss and peace poured down on us.

Ram Dass³²⁹

3.IV.i Teachings of *Bhāva*-Realisation

Bhāva in the spiritual sense refers to intense inner experience. The deeper layers of the self are encountered and integrated, and the person maintains a vivid relationship to deity or Absolute.

June McDaniel³³⁰

It has been established already that Neem Karoli Baba assumed an increasing level of spiritual responsibility for a considerable number of others over the course of (at least) the second half of his life. The arrangements pertaining to the final decade or so reveal themselves with a clarity not evidenced before in the hagiography. The Western commentative stream that emerges from the end of the 1960s further complements this situation and provides a fresh (and foreign) perspective upon the man and the varying situations around him. Before proceeding with depiction of daily life in the temple environment and the examination of modes of interaction and instruction between the guru and his many *celās*, however, the particular manner in which the guru operated in relation to his followers should be acknowledged.

Whilst it is incontrovertible that Neem Karoli Baba appeared unusual or elusive in many of his interactive or instructive modalities, it does not necessarily follow that a constructive aim or purpose was lacking from them altogether. This is not how devotees would perceive the situation – no matter how little explicit external structure was established or adhered to in his temple community settings. Indeed, so muses Shyamdas, that the process in hand was not always clear to the observer would not point to a dearth of spiritual directive on the part of this teacher as much as indicate a difference in pedagogy from some of his peers. So he maintains, Neem Karoli Baba's seemingly 'methodless method' effectually demonstrated a wider, more encompassing approach – even of a higher nature – than that afforded by the teaching of specific techniques. He continues:

³²⁹ Ram Dass with Bo Lozoff comp. 1976, p. 93

³³⁰ McDaniel, 1989, pp. 22-23

[Certain teachers] come for specific causes: they come to teach *vipassana*, they come to teach *ashtanga*, or great teachers come to teach specific paths. That was not Maharaj-ji at all... he didn't teach specific paths, he taught *bhava*, *bhava*-realisation, and that is the pinnacle of the Upanisads. The pinnacle of vedic *dharma* is that it is not through a particular means or a lineage or through a practice, it is through devotion that is unconditional, that has its foundations in the passions of our heart³³¹.

It might therefore be argued that, rather than offer formalised spiritual instruction on *upāyas* (methods) on how best to interact consciously with oneself, with other men or, indeed, with the divine, the hagiography portrays Neem Karoli Baba as having *modelled* a way of being that demonstrated just that. The paradigm that Neem Karoli Baba potentially represented to his devotees and to observers, therefore, suggests a personalised and heart-led inner dialogue with several key principles: the nature of surrender, non-attachment and authentic compassion for other beings, as well as the personal acquisition of grace that may be secured primarily through an exploration of the art of *being* as much as through any particular act of *doing*, service notwithstanding. In other words, it might be maintained that this guru was considerably more concerned with how to *apply* oneself appropriately and consistently to matters of personal spiritual unfoldment than he was with any one technique that might serve as a vehicle in the process. As will be seen in the course of this chapter, this is not to say that he did not favour certain practices over others. Yet, the awareness that *how* is always depicted as being of more importance to him than *what* may be seen as key to any appreciation of Neem Karoli Baba's 'teachings'. In this manner, spiritual practice comes to signify an entire way of living one's life rather than anything more segmented. Moreover, and at all times, the purpose and the proceedings of such a *modus vivendi* is shown to be directed upwards towards the single-pointed remembrance of the divine – in particular of Rām. Coming 'as close to Rām as his very breath' may thus be seen to have remained a foremost consideration throughout all insider portrayal.

3.IV.ii Appraising the Satsang of “*Āo, Khāo, Jāo*” [Come, Eat, Go]: Darshan Practices in the Temples of Neem Karoli Baba

*It was one of those darshans, where you think somebody must have put LSD in the tea*³³².

In a manner concordant with his general observance of *vairāgya*, it appears that Neem Karoli Baba did not prescribe a set routine or regimen for daily life at the temples. At one time or in one temple the arrangements might be one way and, on a further occasion or in a different setting, the situation could vary and without explanation. A clear illustration of such variability

³³¹ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 00:57

³³² Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 23

may be seen in the manner in which arrangements were reportedly made in the Nainital temples compared with those at Vrindavan. According to Kabir Das, who spent time with the guru at both settings, Neem Karoli Baba was noticeably more structured in his days whilst at Kainchi and would ascribe certain hours for darshan purposes or for taking lunch in the form of prasad or for when he would send Western visitors back to their lodgings once more. To his mind, whilst in the hills, the guru appeared to display the sterner, more Śiva-like aspect of his behaviour with greater regularity – to the majority of his devotees, in any case. Yet (so this follower remembers), once he was in the Vraja plains, Neem Karoli Baba would be inclined to abandon the semblance of timetables or other similar formalities. Appropriate to the *bhāva* of the town in general, the guru would here adopt a more playful Kṛṣṇa-like manner of interaction with *celās* and so be somewhat less fierce than elsewhere³³³. Whether this consideration could be said to be one shared by all those who spent time with Neem Karoli Baba is dubitable; yet, for Kabir Das at least, this was his experience.

What is not in question here is that there did exist a good deal of fluidity both in the manner in which Neem Karoli Baba spent his own days at the temples and in the structure that he imposed upon others there. The guru himself is recorded as having pronounced, “Here the satsang is *aao, khao, jao* [come, eat, go]”³³⁴. In many ways, and on an external level at least, this is the simplest way in which to summarise the pattern of daily life at his ashrams and temples. At the times during which he was in residence there, devotees would arrive in order to receive the guru’s darshan, they would then be fed and would subsequently leave. Bearing this in mind, and paying particular attention to the first and second of these directives, what follows in this chapter and the next is a more in-depth appraisal of the darshan process followed by an assay of the feeding practices within the temple setting.

It seems fair to state that the various processes involved with the obtaining, giving and receiving of Neem Karoli Baba’s darshan remained at the heart of the great majority of dealings at the temples connected with him, at least as far as most (if not all) devotees were concerned³³⁵. Of the practice Warrior notes that, “the mere sight, or *darshan*, of a guru... leads to the transfer of certain beneficial essences and qualities from the ‘divine’ entity to the beholder”³³⁶. Darshan was not available every day but, whenever possible, people came to

³³³ Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Vrindavan, 5 December 2008

³³⁴ Pande, 2005, p. 92

³³⁵ This might be observed of most temples at which a guru is resident. Brent describes a remarkably similar scene in his study of Indian gurus: “They [devotees] greet him [the guru] by prostrating themselves, they offer a gift – fruit, a little money – then take their places in the assembly. If they have a question they will ask it; otherwise, they simply watch him, or close their eyes and go into meditation” (Brent, 1971, p. 23).

³³⁶ Warrior, 2005, pp. 67-68

these temples with an express wish to see *him*; ergo darshan was most certainly not viewed as an incidental event that might or might not happen as part of a visit. Indicative of the anticipation of this event that was shared by many of her fellow devotees, Sita Sharan writes:

Each person has come to have darshan, to experience the peace & love that is Maharaj-ji. The sound as those inner doors crash open and he appears, a giant among saints³³⁷.

Accordingly, throughout the duration that Neem Karoli Baba was in residence at a particular temple, any number of devotees could be expected to arrive at the compound. K.K. Sah remembers that, on occasion, Neem Karoli Baba would offer darshan from his tucket on the veranda at the Kainchi ashram throughout the entire day³³⁸. For the most part, the audiences were arranged in small groups or as individual sessions but not as anything that one would term large scale as may be observed with many other prominent twentieth century gurus. Some devotees would use darshan to seek the guru's advice on very practical or day-to-day matters: which crops to plant, the management of business concerns, employment prospects, matters of school or university examinations, health issues, matters pertaining to the family or the running of the household, marriage arrangements, and so on. Other comers to the temple would be more directly concerned with considerations of their own personal growth and spiritual development. Yet, as K.K. Sah distinctly recalls, Neem Karoli Baba would patiently sit and listen to the petitions and problems of his devotees with equal regard. In return, he would offer advice or guidance (both practical and spiritual) that would be individualised according to the apparent needs of the seeker concerned³³⁹.

When viewed within the wider perspective of the guru tradition, the intimate manner of interaction with and instruction of followers that was practised by Neem Karoli Baba may be held to be a very long-standing practice. Whilst it is not a strategy that is always contemporarily observed – in particular in the cases of preceptors with considerable numbers of followers – the format of this modality may be seen, and thus termed, to be Upanisadic in nature: an individual or small group arrives and 'sits down near' the guru who, in turn, is able to tailor his teachings or guidance accordingly. (As Shyamdas comments, "It's kind of

³³⁷ Sita Sharan, "From the Diary: Kainchi Ashram, Autumn, 1971" reproduced in *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA. (Fall-Winter 2001), unnumbered page. Sita Sharan is Kabir Das' sister.

³³⁸ K.K. Sah. *Meeting*, Nainital, India, 26 November 2008

³³⁹ This simple and spontaneous discourse style of teaching has been observed in relation to gurus such as Amritanandamayi Ma. Warriar compares her style in relation to the more erudite Vedanta teacher Chinmayanada (Warriar, 2005, pp. 72-73). A primary difference between Amritanandamayi Ma and Neem Karoli Baba, however, is the matter of scale. The former continues to give vast public darshan to thousands at a time, the latter saw only a handful of devotees at one sitting.

Upanisadic³⁴⁰ ... it wasn't big groups; it wasn't 700,000 people coming to kirtan – it was five or so. *That's* the tradition and it seems to me that Maharaj-ji was of that tradition too. He did not address large groups of people. As far as *I* saw, his groups were always small, Upanisadic, he was really traditional”³⁴¹.) When one reflects upon the specifically personalised quality of this method of darshan, the fact that Neem Karoli Baba was not known for giving larger lectures or elaborate spiritual discourses becomes clearer to appreciate. After all, the close or informal settings that he may be seen to have favoured do not require the same structure or ceremony that a more discursive form of instruction or interaction might have encouraged, or conceivably necessitated. In place of more formalised or grander pedagogic methods, therefore, the guru would converse with his followers and any teaching or guidance would spring from that.

Having said this, the manner in which such conversation was executed during darshan would sometimes defy devotees' reason – as was possibly only to be expected. Neem Karoli Baba was known for posing seemingly simple questions to individuals, yet handling matters in such a way as to make these inquiries feel unusual, at times even baffling. On occasion, questioning appeared to take on something of a rhetorical nature or concerned topics to which the guru already knew the answer or, indeed, for which he appeared not to be looking for a direct response at all³⁴². Sita Sharan certainly remembers this as having been the case. Her 1971 diary records the following:

‘Who are you?’ ‘Where have you come from?’ He asks anyone and everyone. Even without the answer, he already knows more about you than you ever will³⁴³.

Girija Brilliant is another devotee whose contemporary records attest to the guru's handling of information in this specific way:

M. also knows other people's minds and every so often will throw out a question or remark to let someone know. Like one morning RD came after buying some prints of M. and M. yells to him as he comes in, ‘Ram Dass went to the photographer's today’³⁴⁴.

³⁴⁰ Upon further questioning, Shyamdas has continued to maintain that the guru's manner should be termed ‘Upanisadic’, even in light of the esoteric nature of the Upanisadic corpus and its identity as *śruti* literature. (Shyamdas. *Email Correspondence*, 12 August 2009)

³⁴¹ Rameshwar Das. *Interview with Shyamdas*, 2007, 01:09

³⁴² Kabir Das. *Telephone Conversation*, Rishikesh–Vrindavan, 13 December 2008.

³⁴³ Sita Sharan, “From the Diary: Kainchi Ashram, Autumn, 1971” reproduced in *Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple Newsletter*. Taos, NM, USA, (Fall-Winter 2001), unnumbered page.

³⁴⁴ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 31 September 1971

In this way steering proceedings as and where he saw fit, the guru remained in control at all times; as a different devotee remarks, “There was no conversation around Maharajji other than with him”³⁴⁵. A further seeker comments, “Maharajji would talk to one and be hitting another and only the one who was supposed to would understand”³⁴⁶. The length of such interactions would also vary, with some darshans being extremely swift indeed. Yet, so it might be suggested, considerable potential rested within such a fluid modality that might enable a skilful practitioner to tailor advice or guidance with a good deal of precision.

As is the custom in India, most, although not all, seekers would bring Neem Karoli Baba an offering when they came for darshan. As has been documented in 2.III.ii, the practice of *dakṣiṇa* represents an important energy exchange between a guru and his follower. This convention was observed in relation to this guru also. What visitors chose to bring for him would be partially dependent upon their own material resources, but would often involve fruit or sweets or, occasionally, blankets or items of clothing that they wished the guru to use for himself. Dada Mukerjee was present on many of these occasions and, on the topic of the guru keeping these items, comments: “This seldom happened. His wants were few and as soon as these articles came, he usually gave them away”³⁴⁷. One exception to this, however, was when he chose to accept a woollen jumper from Krishna Das’ mother, Sylvia, who had travelled from America to visit her son and his guru. Neem Karoli Baba appeared delighted that she had thought to bring the garment all the distance from the West and proceeded to demonstrate his appreciation by showing the item to all present and then by wearing it also³⁴⁸. This was, nevertheless, unusual behaviour for the guru. For the most part, he was exceptionally discriminating in what he chose to accept or to keep for himself.

The guru was similarly selective as to what he would receive on behalf of the temple for the purpose of its upkeep. As will be seen shortly, the ongoing feeding practices that formed an integral part of temple living marked a considerable expense and yet it is reported that the holy man refused all financial contributions to this end unless he felt it was offered in the correct spirit. Mukerjee remarks, “If there were strings attached he would reject it outright”³⁴⁹. Thus one man’s offer of money for a *bhaṇḍārā* was rejected when, to the visitor’s horror, Neem Karoli Baba tore up the proffered hundred rupee note. He throws the pieces into the river and, turning to Mukerjee, explains:

³⁴⁵ Ram Das comp. 1995, p. 28

³⁴⁶ *ibid.*

³⁴⁷ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 114

³⁴⁸ *ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 110

You should never accept money or eat the food offered by a miser. You can never digest that! That man has so much money, but he never gives anything in charity or feeds anybody³⁵⁰.

3.IV.iii Appraising the Satsang of “*Āo, Khāo, Jāo*” [Come, Eat, Go]: Prasad and the Seva of Feeding in the Temples of Neem Karoli Baba

First bhojan (food) and then bhajan (prayer).

Neem Karoli Baba³⁵¹

Whilst persuading the guru to *receive* offerings appears not always to have been a straightforward procedure, matters of his own distribution were altogether different. A feature common to every darshan experience, therefore, was his offering of prasad to those who had come. (“Maharajji took special care to see that whoever came... was given prasad”³⁵².) This was generally apportioned by his own hand and might be in the form of fruit or sweets or, indeed, anything that earlier visitors had previously offered to the guru and that he, in turn, was subsequently passing on. Through his physical participation in the distribution, so devotees’ believed, the prasad became consecrated and representative of a vehicle for his grace and / or blessings. As it was selected and then handed out in an individualised manner – that is, the guru appeared to choose, for example, a particular orange to present to a particular devotee – prasad was further thought to have been somehow vibrationally encoded with potential teachings or favours intended solely for that recipient. One devotee’s prasad was seen as being appropriate for him alone: oranges, therefore, were not considered interchangeable.

Although not always the case, the guru’s presentation of darshan prasad signified that the audience was being drawn to its conclusion, or that it would be shortly. The guru would tell devotees to go and ‘take prasad’, by which was meant to go and be fed by members of the ashram staff. With the culmination of darshan, the practice of feeding would thus begin. Subsequently, seekers would be dismissed or ‘*Jāo-ed*’ by him – occasionally without much warning. As is traditional for such occasions, visitors would *pra-nam* before him, or touch his feet³⁵³ as a mark of their respect, and then they would leave. In accordance with his directive, they would then collect a small “packet”³⁵⁴, or occasionally a piece of paper³⁵⁵, from the prasad room, which (at Kainchi at least) was situated at the front of the temple. This would contain a couple of *pūrīs* and some potatoes or other vegetables prepared by ashramites in that room and for that purpose and visitors might eat this somewhere about the compound premises or,

³⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. 111

³⁵¹ *ibid.* p. 96

³⁵² Mukerjee, 2001, p. 95

³⁵³ See also Narayan, 1992, pp. 83-84

³⁵⁴ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 95

³⁵⁵ K.K. Sah, *Meeting*, Nainital, India, 30 November 2008

indeed, take it with them to eat at a later time. Food served in this way was known as *bhog*, or offering, as, upon the cooking of it, a small portion would first be ceremonially offered to the *mūrtis* about the temple before being re-mixed with the main part of the food once more. In this way, so it was held, all of the food would become consecrated.

This was the situation regarding the feeding provision for the majority of visitors to the temple, of which (as mentioned) there might be a good number from time to time. For those who were working at the temple or ashram or tending its grounds in some way, those actually staying in the ashram or, indeed, members of the Western satsang (who tended to remain for the whole day at the temple), a slightly more substantial meal would be fed to them. Prepared in a separate kitchen, and by cooks who had been employed specially by the temple, this was served in the dining (or *prasād*) hall, pertaining to the ashram and located at the rear of the temple grounds. Ashramites would sit on rush matting around the edges of the room, in a hushed and reflective fashion, whilst (as an act of *seva*) other devotees served them amounts of fried *pūrīs*, rice, *roṭīs*, curry, *halvā* and so on onto leaf plates or into leaf bowls. The preparing, serving and eating of this consecrated food were all seen as forms of meditative practice. Neem Karoli Baba, meanwhile, supervised the entire process. As Mukerjee reflects:

Babaji kept a close watch on everyone and everything, down to the tiniest detail. He would visit the kitchens to keep people alert. Early in the morning, as soon as the *prasād* – puris and vegetables or *halva* – was prepared, he would examine it carefully to see if the right ingredients had been used, if the potatoes were well-cooked, and if the puris were well-fried. He would say that it was of utmost importance to maintain the purity and sanctity of the *prasād*. On many occasions he blurted out that he had formerly been a ‘*halwai*’ [confectioner] and he knew how things were to be prepared³⁵⁶.

Although Neem Karoli Baba’s previous life as a confectioner may sadly not be verified, what is clearer is that – whether in the form of *darshan prasād* or that of the more sustaining regular meals at the ashram – feeding practices were of great importance to the guru and in the day-to-day running of the temples (“People just never went away from him hungry”³⁵⁷). W.L. Smith has pointed out that, because of the importance of the distribution of sacred food offerings such as this, the kitchens and dining halls of such temple communities are attributed positions of significance³⁵⁸. This may be seen to be true here also. In the context of this movement, the distribution of food was so prevalent a practice that a significant number of poorer local people

³⁵⁶ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 95

³⁵⁷ Ram Das comp. 1995, p. 38

³⁵⁸ On this point Smith notes that the Jagannātha temple in Purī, for example, has a thousand cooks who man 750 stoves (Smith, 2000, p. 126).

came to depend upon it for their survival³⁵⁹. Those passing by the temples on pilgrimages were also supported in this fundamental way³⁶⁰. Neem Karoli Baba has been reported as having said with some regularity, “Food is God. Feeding the hungry is actually worship”³⁶¹ and so this form of service may be seen as having represented a major form of practice for him and thus for those around him also.

For those who did not rely upon this resource in quite this manner, “the excessive feeding and continuous preoccupation with food seemed to indicate that the food represented something more”³⁶². Although the fare was considered rather greasy and overly sweet for some people’s tastes – in particular the Westerners’ – the fact that it contained (or was seen as a vehicle for) the guru’s blessing was not contested. Prasad of all varieties was seen to represent more than just food. Maintaining such an attitude, some devotees even acquired a taste for this fare that they would not have foreseen. Kabir Das remembers an excessively sweet and oily halva recipe that was favoured by Neem Karoli Baba. One part semolina grain to two parts ghee to four parts sugar, the dish contained so much clarified butter that it would often drip through the leaf bowls and devotees’ fingers also. Yet, so this *celā* remembers, the Westerners became so “addicted” to the halva that the guru began to give them small boxes of it to take back to their lodgings with them in the evening³⁶³.

Outside of more regular feeding arrangements, Neem Karoli Baba would also host large open *bhaṇḍārās*, or public feast days at which similarly consecrated food would be served to commemorate or celebrate certain points in the spiritual calendar or particular anniversaries. On such occasions, many hundreds of visitors might arrive in a single day and, on principle, all who would arrive would be fed, regardless of their material wealth or social status. Traditional caste distinctions would thus be entirely disregarded³⁶⁴. The guru described these events as “service to God”³⁶⁵. Moreover, as Mukerjee reports, “People were well-acquainted with his statement: ‘God comes before the hungry as food’”³⁶⁶. Accordingly, and depending on the exact occasion, there might also be kirtan or even dancing to accompany the proceedings. Understandably, with such large-scale events, a considerable proportion of the temple

³⁵⁹ See Mukerjee, 2001, p. 96

³⁶⁰ See Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 38

³⁶¹ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 96

³⁶² *ibid.*

³⁶³ Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Rishikesh, India, 21 December 2008

³⁶⁴ Today, in a similar egalitarian fashion, it is common to find highly educated or professional members of the community regularly preparing, cooking and serving food and cleaning the kitchens and prasad hall for the duration of their stay at the ashram. For some celebrations this might last ten or more days at a time.

³⁶⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 46

³⁶⁶ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 96

community would become involved in the preparation, cooking, serving and clearing arrangements. Yet, whilst the temple might be thronging with people either working on or attending these occasions, darshan would not generally be available. Indeed, Neem Karoli Baba was often noticeably absent from these proceedings altogether. Early on the morning of one such a *bhaṇḍārā*, K.K. Sah remembers being woken from his ashram bed by the guru and told to come with him quickly and quietly. Leaving the compound, the pair spent the day far from the temple, only to return at nightfall when all the visitors had departed once more and *bhaṇḍārā* was entirely over³⁶⁷.

3.IV.iv Attitudes Towards the Ceremonial and the Sung

*The members of the satsaṅg express their solidarity in two ways: first by the communal singing of kīrtans, and secondly, by communal feasts*³⁶⁸.

Why the guru did not choose to be more publicly active or present upon such occasions may only be speculated upon. He was certainly involved in the organisation and supervision of labour and provisions for these feast days. It is interesting to note that this rather removed behaviour seems to have been characteristic of his participation at many of the events in the temples. At particular times, certain *pūjās*, recitations or ceremonies would be performed and yet Neem Karoli Baba was never known to have taken an officiating role in any or, at times, even be present at all. In *Miracle of Love*, for example, Ram Dass remembers participating in a nine-day fire ceremony at Kainchi. The guru remained in the temple compound for the length of this whole time and yet did not once attend the ritual. Nonetheless, so the American records, the guru was “constantly apprised of its progress”³⁶⁹ and, towards the end of the rite, suddenly and actively went out of his way to be rather disruptive. Calling away one of the major participants, he involved him instead in handing out prasād to some local children. Ram Dass felt perturbed by this obstreperous action; yet, his fellow devotee did not share his consternation. He reassured him, “Maharajji is beyond all ritual”³⁷⁰.

The approach to the performance of rituals at the temples that is demonstrated by this story might be seen to illustrate Neem Karoli Baba’s professed belief that, “rituals were to be honoured yet kept in perspective”³⁷¹. From insider reports, it might be seen that he neither overly encouraged nor expressly forbade devotees from participation in ritualistic practice at the temples. His attitude to this appeared to be governed as much by the inclinations and habits

³⁶⁷ K.K. Sah. *Meeting*, Nainital, India, 30 November 2008

³⁶⁸ Smith, 2000, p. 128

³⁶⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 334

³⁷⁰ *ibid.*

³⁷¹ *ibid.*

of individual followers, as by any more uniform belief of his own. What seems clear though is that he rarely actively prescribed ceremonial rites or forms as a practice and certainly not as a matter of course. Conversely, whilst he generally accepted his devotees' choice of activity with an amount of equanimity, once in a while his patience with the ceremonial would be seen to wear thin. The following is an account of such an occasion. During one traditional *yajña*, food was being thrown into the sacred fire as a form of offering. Potentially revealing of the importance that Neem Karoli Baba placed in the feeding of the hungry over the observance of the ritualistic, the guru suddenly lost his temper:

Offerings [of food] were being made to the fire, with chants of 'Swaha! Swaha!' 'Hap!', Maharajji shouted, 'What does this swaha, swaha do for them? Go out and distribute the food! What is the use of throwing it into the fire?'³⁷²

In fact, the only ceremonial form in which Neem Karoli Baba may be seen to have played any real or regular part was in the *Guru Āratī*³⁷³ that was celebrated on a daily basis at the temples³⁷⁴. After the traditional banging of gongs and blowing of a conch shell (a practice common to many temple *āratī pūjās*), devotees would sing this particular prayer to the guru. The *pūjā* was accompanied by the circular waving of a brass tray holding lighted lamps before the holy man's form. At its culmination, devotees would approach the flame (now considered to be sanctified) with outstretched hands and symbolically brush the blessings they considered to be transmitted through the light over their heads, eyes, heart or body. It should be said, however, that (even here) the guru's participation appeared more under sufferance and at the wishes of his devotees than by his own choice. K.K. Sah again remembers that *Guru Āratī* would not always be performed at the same time, but would rather be looser in timetabling than might be the case with other gurus elsewhere. He further remembers that, at Kainchi Dham at least, Neem Karoli Baba would sometimes sit on his tucket upon the veranda, permitting devotees to perform the ceremony before him³⁷⁵. A photo exists of just this: it shows him with his head patiently cocked to one side as the *āratī* lamp is being circled in the bottom left corner of the frame³⁷⁶.

Other than the seva of feeding (which it seems fair to say the guru embraced whole-heartedly) a further practice for which Neem Karoli Baba did actively demonstrate an enjoyment was that of chanting the divine name in the form of kirtan. It might even be said that he positively promoted its performance, in particular as a communal activity, and as part of day-to-day life.

³⁷² *ibid.*

³⁷³ See Appendix 3 for a translation of this prayer (p. 276)

³⁷⁴ For a devotee's description of this, see Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 172

³⁷⁵ K.K. Sah. *Meeting*, Nainital, India, 30 November 2008

³⁷⁶ See Photograph 4, Appendix 6 (p. 280)

That this is so is clear from the remarkable amount of chanting that the guru arranged to take place in the temple environments. Moreover, that (almost all of) the feeding practices at the temples would have been accompanied by the sound of kirtan adds a further layer for consideration here: both forms of *sādhana* consequently become intertwined. Having said this, it could be stated that *every* temple activity (including darshan, of course, too) would have been exposed to the sound of kirtan, in some way or other. As has been noted above in 3.II.iv, the Vrindavan temple's location upon a circular principal pilgrimage route encouraged Neem Karoli Baba to employ small groups of kirtan *vālās* to chant continuously. These were amplified twenty-four hours a day from a special purpose-built hall erected near the front of the compound and close to the road. In Kainchi Dham also, which by virtue of its position in the hills is susceptible to colder weather, the guru would nevertheless still install similar ensembles to chant for many months, but who would be permitted to rest for some hours during the coldest, darkest hours of the night³⁷⁷.

For the most part, and at either location, one of the participating kirtan musicians would take his turn to call the melody – accompanied by a harmonium, tabla or other variety of drum, and maybe small finger cymbals as additional percussion – to which his colleagues would collectively respond by repeating the same musical line. The process would be repeated indefinitely: the mantra or choice of divine name might receive some melodious variation, or the part of the vocalist might move between musicians, greater or lesser numbers of the temple visitors and ashramites might participate, but the practice in essence would not evolve further than this basic call and response modality. It is important to acknowledge the structural aspect of kirtan, for it is through the repetitive simplicity of its form that this “living experience of sacred sound”³⁷⁸ is considered able to reveal its inner potential as a typically *bhakti* form of worship – and as a meditation modality also.

Recognition of this last feature is of significance in relation to Neem Karoli Baba and deserves appraisal here. Whilst the guru was himself considered an adept in meditation, he was also known to have been discouraging of more conventional forms of sitting meditation for the majority of his devotees. On this, *Miracle of Love* states:

Maharajji often spoke about the value of meditation as a spiritual practice – and he himself appeared to be in a meditative state most of the time – yet he made it difficult for most of us to meditate while in his presence³⁷⁹.

³⁷⁷ K.K. Sah. *Meeting*, Nainital, India, 30 November 2008

³⁷⁸ Johnsen and Jacobus, 2007, p. 9

³⁷⁹ Ram Dass, comp. 1995, p. 229

The reason for this dichotomy is not entirely apparent – unless one subscribes to the reported view of the guru that, “To see God, you have to have special eyes. Otherwise you cannot bear the shock”³⁸⁰. A further devotee recalls the guru bringing him round out of a meditative state with a firm and similar warning:

I asked him why he’d stopped my samadhi, and he answered that the mind has its limitations, that I was in a physical body, and that these things are achieved slowly, slowly – otherwise I’d become a lunatic³⁸¹.

If, as these hagiographical narratives would suggest, Neem Karoli Baba did feel that the more solo, introspective meditation paths had too many pitfall potentials for him to recommend as a blanket practice, then kirtan may be seen to have offered a useful alternative. It could be maintained, therefore, that Neem Karoli Baba did not dismiss meditational practices altogether for the majority of seekers, so much as redirect how he felt they should (or could) best be observed.

The *bhakti* approach of the guru’s recommendation is clear. As with the creation of the satsang community³⁸² and its communal feeding practices, Neem Karoli Baba again promoted spiritual activity of a group practice nature that found its home at the very heart of day-to-day life in the temple environment. What is not reported here are unsupervised solo meditation practices, nor suggestions of *sādhana* that involve complex ritualistic preparations or processes for which the seeker needs to be specifically initiated or otherwise made eligible by caste (or other) considerations. Conceivably this guru had no interest in supervising individuals in this way. Alternatively, in a manner that is more about direct experience and less about either asceticism or the performance aspect of the ceremonial, Neem Karoli Baba offered a path on which devotees (of all cultures, backgrounds or inclinations) might conceivably find a method through which to connect with themselves, each other and their guru too.

In respect of the last, the enthusiasm of the Western satsang for kirtan becomes clearer. The fact that it represented an egalitarian point of access to Hindu spirituality was undoubtedly an attractor. Yet, more than this, Western devotees also recognised the value of this practice in attempting to curry favour – and therefore additional time – with their guru. The reason for their eagerness to chant the names of God in his presence (or, as the following story illustrates, just outside his window) may thus be all too clearly seen:

³⁸⁰ *ibid.* p. 232

³⁸¹ *ibid.* p. 233

³⁸² For further discussion of satsang communities, see Bharati, 1976, p. 162.

“On Krishna’s birthday celebration in 1973 all the Westerners fasted and did kirtan. At midnight they did arti to Maharajji. Through the closed window he kept telling them to “jao”. Still they stayed, singing sweet kirtan. Finally he opened the window and tears were streaming down his face. He sat still and listened for a long time. It began to rain, as if God were raining down flowers – a very auspicious sign”³⁸³.

To this day, kirtan remains a practice of choice in the temples and continues to be closely associated with Neem Karoli Baba. Ensembles of kirtan practitioners still chant at Vrindavan and at Kainchi and chanting represents an ongoing feature of everyday temple life. As a slight aside it bears further consideration that, in the years since the guru’s *mahāsamādhi*, there has been a marked increase in the interest and the practice of kirtan in the West. Of the Western practitioners who have pioneered and performed this sacred art, almost all of the leading proponents have been devotees of Neem Karoli Baba³⁸⁴. Furthermore, the majority of these are those who had ‘in the body’ relationships with the guru and so who performed kirtan to him whilst he was still alive.

3.IV.v “Love Everyone, Serve Everyone, Remember God”³⁸⁵: Additional Thoughts on Seva

Hanuman, the Son of the Wind, is our model of service. With unflagging devotion He is always ready to serve Ram who dwells with Sita in His heart. As we each find our different ways of serving, the distances between us disappear in love.

Hanuman Foundation Newsletter³⁸⁶

Serve as Hanuman served.

Neem Karoli Baba³⁸⁷

The practices of non-attachment, surrender and various methods of *sādhana* and devotion have all been explored in degrees of depth above. What still deserves some further consideration, or possibly illustration, at this point is the practice of *seva*, or selfless service. This may be held to have been an integral part of the scene that surrounded Neem Karoli Baba and that still

³⁸³ Ram Dass comp. 1995, pp. 330-331

³⁸⁴ Bhagavan Das, Jai Uttal, Krishna Das and Shyamdas are all first generation devotees who perform kirtan professionally. Second generation devotee, David Newman (Durga Das), is a further addition.

³⁸⁵ Regularly attributed to Neem Karoli Baba. According to the the Taos ashram website, these words may be seen to constitute “Maharaj-ji’s main teaching”. Accessed at <<http://www.nkbashram.org/puja%20dukan.htm>> (15 March 2009) It is of note that, in 1973 (that is, the year of Neem Karoli Baba’s death), Ram Dass released a boxed set of six records of a variety of spiritual readings (including material from the *Rāmāyana*) and kirtan. It too was titled, *Love, Serve, Remember*. Having said this, derivations of this phrase are attributed to other gurus, including Sathya Sai Baba (See Srinivas, 2008, p. 5).

³⁸⁶ Dwarkanath Bonner. *Newsletter*. Hanuman Foundation. Boulder, CO. (September 1977), unnumbered page

³⁸⁷ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 353

survives to this day. As might be observed from the feeding practices around which much of the daily life at the temple revolved, action that was directed towards benefiting the welfare of others was a primary pursuit in which devotees were encouraged to participate. Such a focus remains extant to the present day. One might say that, in continuing to run the temples and ashrams of the guru in his absence, both Dharma Narayan and Siddhi Ma (as well as the many others who continue to work there in less figurehead capacities) have devoted their lives to the principles of service – described by Ram Dass as a manner of living in which one might make one’s karma one’s dharma³⁸⁸. The practice of *seva*, therefore, may be considered to represent a hallmark of this particular guru once described as, “a perfect model for that *sadhana* he most encouraged in his devotees: selfless loving service”³⁸⁹. Moreover, it might be suggested that, in placing the objective of spiritual awareness in the service of others, the preceptor reinforced methods of socially-conscious discipleship that was an altogether different path to that offered by the figure of the *gopī*.

For the most part at least, and in place of more austere forms of *sādhana*, Neem Karoli Baba is shown to have “rather guided... [devotees] to *karma yoga*, a way of coming to God through living life as an act of devoted service”³⁹⁰. The hagiography certainly portrays the guru as prescribing service as a principal method to the majority of his followers. One devotee recalls:

I asked Maharajji about my *sadhana*, and he said, ‘To serve human beings is the only way for your salvation. You need not do *dhyān* (meditation) or *puja*. Serve all living beings’³⁹¹.

Larry Brilliant too remembers it in such a way:

What Maharajji stressed to us in a hundred different ways, is that each person has a unique path – and the job of the Guru is to read that path and explain it to you. All paths are complex, there’s no pure path... but that formula’s unique to you. But for us, he said ‘*nish kam karma yoga*’ – you should work in the world but not be attached to the results... The method he gave me was to work in the world and dedicate the fruits of the world to God. And what he also did for me, was to legitimise that as a path coequal in value to prayer, or meditation or fasting³⁹².

Ram Dass has similar memories. He writes, “In retrospect, it’s interesting to see that, from the very beginning of my relationship with Maharajji, he was guiding me towards the spiritual

³⁸⁸ Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush, 1992, p. 56

³⁸⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 236

³⁹⁰ *ibid.* p. 236

³⁹¹ *ibid.* p. 238

³⁹² Larry and Girja Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 01:15

path of service”³⁹³. Even the ascetic Brahmachari Baba, when asked whether the guru had given him any *special* teachings, “smiled sweetly and said, ‘He taught me service’”³⁹⁴.

What should be remembered here, however, is the underlying purpose of the practice that the guru recommended. Whilst the execution of this form of *sādhana* may be seen to have been encouraged for the worldly benefit of its recipients, it was those involved in the actual *doing* of the seva who were considered to be its true beneficiaries, on a spiritual level at least. Ergo the practice was seen as containing a twin purpose: to serve the inward and outward ends of both giver and receiver. With this in mind, the *sādhaka*’s approach to the performance of any actions was considered of paramount importance. *Miracle of Love* notes:

Maharajji made it clear that hard work alone was not the essence of the matter. Rather, it was work carried on with remembrance of God; that is, work done with love in the presence of God’s grace³⁹⁵.

The words that are cited at the start of this particular section – ‘Love everyone, serve everyone, remember God’ – are entirely illustrative, therefore, of the motivation, application and purpose that Neem Karoli Baba recommended in this respect. If one follows this directive, seva should be fuelled by the aspirant’s love and compassion towards the assistance and alleviation of the suffering of other fellow beings. At the same time, its principal purpose is revealed as being to lead the doer of the action to a single-pointed remembrance of the divine. Presumably, it would only be as a result of such surrendered and focussed action that the grace that is referred to immediately above might be sufficiently or appropriately invoked. As the guru is reported to have said, “The best service you can do is to keep your thoughts on God. Keep God in mind every minute”³⁹⁶.

Ram Dass represents a clear illustration of a devotee who has adhered to his guru’s directive of service. Over the past four decades he has been involved in a considerable number of service-oriented projects that, in themselves, could constitute a satisfying study; yet, as a result of the parameters of this study, they have limited space accorded to them here. Nevertheless it is worth stating that, since the first publication of *Be Here Now* in 1971, he has remained an influential spiritual teacher and author in the West and has been consistently recognised as a groundbreaker in the promotion of service-oriented and social venture network practices and as a pioneering teacher of modes of conscious living, aging and dying. Throughout his work, he has tried to remain loyal to his preceptor’s guidance. He recalls:

³⁹³ Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush, 1992, p. 48

³⁹⁴ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 237

³⁹⁵ *ibid.* p. 236

³⁹⁶ *ibid.* p. 326

I have three major instructions for my life from my Guru: Love, Serve and Remember. Love everyone, serve or feed everyone, remember God... In all cases it's my work on myself, because I am loving, serving, and remembering, but what I love and serve is a function of what I remember. What I remember is who we all are. I remember the Self – and that remembering means that my love and service towards another being are directed towards the place in them in which they are already free³⁹⁷.

The compilation of *Be Here Now* is still to be appraised in 3.V.viii (pp. 240-246) and so further investigation of Ram Dass and his contributions will be reserved until that point. What follows here is a slightly closer acknowledgement of the work of a further Western devotee, Larry Brilliant – nicknamed 'Dr America' by Neem Karoli Baba³⁹⁸ – whose own service-oriented career has been (and continues to be) equally as significant. So extraordinary has it in fact been that elements of it have come to be seen as representing part of the legacy of Neem Karoli Baba. For that reason, no study of this guru and seva would be complete without some inclusion of this material. It is presented here as an illustration of but one practitioner who was given direction in this respect by the guru.

In May 2008, *Time Magazine* declared Larry Brilliant to be amongst the one hundred most influential people in the world (and included an article written about him by former US president, Jimmy Carter³⁹⁹) by virtue of his new director status of the philanthropic arm of the internet company Google.org. Amongst many other service-oriented achievements with which he is accredited, Larry Brilliant (together with his wife Girija, a public health specialist) established the Seva Foundation in 1978 ("Dedicated to finding skillful means to relieve suffering caused by poverty around the world"⁴⁰⁰). It nevertheless remains the work prior to this with the World Health Organisation that might be considered most noteworthy. As it was employment that resulted from an explicit directive from Neem Karoli Baba, it is this with which we are primarily concerned here. It culminated in the eradication of smallpox in South East Asia in 1975. Of how this was instigated, Larry Brilliant recalls:

Maharajji said almost out of the blue... 'Doctor America, how much money do you have?' I said 'I have \$500'. He said, 'No no, I don't mean *here*, how much money do you have back in *America*'. I said '\$500 there too'. Then he began to chant in Hindi, '\$500 here, \$500 there? *You* are no doctor'. Then he would chant... '*You* are no doctor' in Hindi. Then he switched and said, '*You* are no

³⁹⁷ Ram Dass with Stephen Levine, 1987, p. 107

³⁹⁸ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:50

³⁹⁹ Carter, Jimmy. "The 2008 Time 100: Larry Brilliant" *Time Magazine* (29 May 2008) Accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1733748_1733754_1735181,00.html> (29 May 2008)

⁴⁰⁰ Accessed at <<http://www.seva.org>> (29 May 2008)

doctor' in English. And he began to tease me – because he would always pull my beard and slap my face. He said, '*You are no doctor, you are no doctor, UNO doctor... United Nations Organisation's Doctor you'll be.*' He laughed so hard and he began to giggle and giggle, and he would chant and say *UNO* doctor – he was singing a song.

Then in a very serious moment, he looked at me and he said, '*You are going to go to villages and give injections, and you're going to help eradicate smallpox. Smallpox will be eradicated – this is God's gift to humanity because of the hard work of all those dedicated health workers.*'

He said that with such a compelling clarity that Girija and I wrote it down. And years after, when smallpox was eradicated – I went to see the very last case of smallpox, I took a picture of the little girl – we made a Christmas card with her picture and then a picture of Maharajji saying his prophecy, that smallpox would be eradicated and that this was God's gift to humanity.

It became a very important part of the legend of Maharaj-ji's prophetic abilities in India (not in the US but in India). His grandson and his children and all the people around knew Maharaj-ji had said smallpox would be eradicated. But, on a practical sense, so did the governor of Uttar Pradesh, so did Mrs Ghandi, so did the Indian apparatchik.

When I was finally working for the UN – and I'd go to the villages or I'd go to see these officials – I'd go in and say, '*You must help get rid of smallpox*'. They were always very nice, they'd always say, '*Thank you very much*' and take me out to the car. They would then do nothing. Then they would on occasion see that on my UN jeep I had a picture of Maharaj-ji – and then they would say... '*Who is he, and who is he to you?*' I'd say, '*That's Neem Karoli Baba and he's my Guru.*' They'd then say, '*Why is that picture here?*' I would say, '*Because he told me that smallpox would be eradicated.*'

And you could almost feel the chill. They would say '*He told you smallpox would be eradicated? Come back into my house and have a cup of tea.*' And *everything* changed. Whether it was the governor of Uttar Pradesh or a civil servant, once Maharaj-ji had said smallpox would be eradicated, it changed the dynamics⁴⁰¹.

Although closely involved in the inception and early implementation of this project, Neem Karoli Baba did not live to see the fulfilment of his apparent prophecy. Having said this, and as Larry Brilliant rightly comments, it has nevertheless succeeded him as a part of the hagiographical legacy relating to him. In the first instance, it appears to demonstrate that the guru was held to be a man of significant power by many (including those influential within Indian political society); secondly it positions service as a potent method of his choosing. To conclude this section, the following extract comes from an article published by the Brilliants in 1978 about their experiences working with the WHO in the fight against smallpox:

'Sub ek' he had also said. '*All are one. All religions are one, all nations are one, all men are brothers.*' I suppose we've all heard that before and already know it someplace deep inside. But Nim Keroli Baba taught us that knowing that all men are brothers only starts us off. The next step is realizing there is something

⁴⁰¹ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:51 Larry Brilliant has given a longer version of events in *Miracle of Love*. See Ram Dass comp. 1995, pp. 155-161

tangible to do, specific work to try to help the helpless. Smallpox is the proof that it can be done⁴⁰².

With matters of the universal brotherhood of man at the forefront of consideration, it becomes appropriate to move our attention onto the relations that Neem Karoli Baba established with individuals from the West and, in the final years of his life, with a fully-formed Western satsang.

3.V Neem Karoli Baba and the Western Satsang

3.V.i Acknowledging the Multicultural Nature of the ‘Family of *Bhakti*’

Maharaji was a father to his devotees, a guru of householders. His entire energy seemed to be directed towards our welfare, elevation, and development. He taught ideal social and family life, and showed us that real love and affection, real brotherhood, does not only come from blood relations. There were so many differences among the devotees – caste, language, nationality – usually very great barriers in India. But here were Kashmiris, Gujaratis, south Indians, north Indians, Westerners – all part of his great family. He broke down the walls and removed the curtains of prejudice. In this family, we could be closer than with our real brothers and sisters.

Dada Mukerjee⁴⁰³

Having considered a significant number of different aspects relating to the life and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba, what remains to be investigated more specifically is the acceptance and creation of a non-indigenous satsang, which formed about the guru in the very last years of his life. Whilst it is apparent that the hagiographical accounts and opinions of this group have featured prominently throughout this study, there are nonetheless elements – in particular, regarding some of the more practical arrangements with which they were involved and also the situations surrounding their subsequent returns to their home land – that are yet to be adequately included and so will receive further attention here. The fact that the holy man accepted devotees from a wide variety of class and cultural backgrounds is held by some to have demonstrated the guru’s active break with orthodox Hindu tradition. It may be shown that this is not entirely the case. This chapter will commence with a consideration of this practice within the wider context of the *bhakti* tradition. Within this frame of reference, 3.V.ii–3.V.v will proceed with evaluation of how the Western satsang came into existence and, in 3.V.vi and 3.V.vii, how and whether they received different instruction at the hands of the preceptor than did their Indian peers. 3.V.viii and 3.V.ix will examine what might potentially be seen as

⁴⁰² Lawrence and Girija Brilliant. *Article* - “Death for a Killer Disease: How an Army of Samaritans Drove Smallpox from the Earth.” 1978. Personal typed copy. Original in personal possession of authors. Berkeley, CA, USA, p. 12. Upon its initial publication, this article called upon its readers to make donations towards the establishment of the Seva Foundation. \$20,000 was raised in this way, including a \$5,000 contribution from a then still unknown entrepreneur called Steve Jobs.

⁴⁰³ Mukerjee, 2001, pp. 77-78

Neem Karoli Baba sending Hanumān to the West, with particular reference to the book, *Be Here Now*. Published whilst the guru was still alive, and at his explicit *āśīrvāda* (or blessing), this text represents a further aspect of the guru's 'legacy'. We start, however, with more traditional considerations of the multicultural nature of what is known as the 'family of *bhakti*'.

However some devotees might choose to view the situation, the fact that Neem Karoli Baba was open to accepting seekers of different creeds and castes is not a practice that would mark him as a unique teacher. Conversely, the guru's modern day implementation of this principle weaves him into a rich devotional Northern-based tradition that stretches back at least as far as the fourteenth century. This leads directly to Banāres and the contemporaneously radical preaching of *Rām-bhakti* by Rāmānanda. From the fifteenth century onwards, Kabīr and his Northern *Sant* poet peers (for example, Sūrdās) may be seen to have promoted similar views. Tulsīdās' own theologically-radical preference for the vernacular over Sanskrit in his sixteenth and seventeenth century compositions – including the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, of course – likewise positions him as embracing the common man and as seeking to be inclusive rather than exclusive in his spiritual teachings and contributions. Awareness of this lineage of *bhakti* practice is significant. In a manner not dissimilar to that in which Dada Mukerjee writes directly above, Hawley and Juergensmeyer discuss the inclusivity that they consider to be a hallmark of certain forms of traditional *bhakti*. In their introduction to *Songs of the Saints of India*, they comment:

Here we are talking about a single family... It is usually referred to as the family of *bhakti*, a word that means passionate love for God and implies a sense of close engagement with other people. The word *bhakti* is derived from a Sanskrit root meaning "to share", and it points to the importance of relationship – both to God and to human beings – in the kind of enthusiastic, often congregational, religion it describes⁴⁰⁴.

The situation that Hawley and Juergensmeyer here describe in relation to the medieval poets of their study could easily be transposed onto the twentieth century satsang arrangements of Neem Karoli Baba. Just as did his *bhakti* forefathers, this guru too is said to have seen no real separation between people of other castes or of other religions either. *Miracle of Love* cites him as follows:

⁴⁰⁴ Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 4

All religions are the same. They all lead to God. God is everybody... The same blood flows through us all, the arms, the legs, the heart, all are the same. See no difference, see all the same⁴⁰⁵.

His apparent beliefs about *Vasudhaiv kutumbakam* (in which he is thought to have viewed the world as one family) have been included above in 3.II.v. His actions could be viewed as indicative of this viewpoint. More than once, so insider sources relate, the holy man dismissed potential segregational distinctions between seekers with a succinct, '*sub ek*'⁴⁰⁶ ('all one') or, from time to time, as calling into question existing socio-cultural protocol by means of his own example or by other means of suggestion or direction. Unsurprisingly a common method by which this is achieved appears to have revolved around the preparation and serving of food. Certain devotees (who happened to be hosting the guru) were instructed to accept into their home, and then to feed, all those who subsequently arrive in search of darshan. Mukerjee describes how Neem Karoli Baba encouraged his mother, who was "from a very orthodox brahmin family"⁴⁰⁷, to feed these people by saying to her, "Maushi Ma, this is the home of the deity. Here everyone gets his food, so I also get mine"⁴⁰⁸. Mukerjee's mother has her own process to go through before she can accept the presence of Muslims and Westerners into her house and even, contrary to strict traditional practice, finally into her kitchen also. Yet, Mukerjee explains:

with Maharajji around all those things changed... Maharajji was not forcing her to do this; her whole outlook changed. She began feeling that all were her sons and daughters... Now from where had this wider outlook come? Of course, Maharajji had done that, but all he had said was, 'Ma, give food to all'⁴⁰⁹.

In the acceptance of devotees from diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds, therefore, this guru was not breaking tradition as much as abiding by it. That some (in particular Western) devotees saw this to be otherwise demonstrates a lack of awareness of conventional practice and perhaps an inclination to set their guru above and beyond any other. Yet, for those with greater understanding of the power of an affiliation with this 'lineage', they are quick to assert the connections they perceive. In direct relation to this, Shyamdas affirms, "He was not *new*, he was *old*!"⁴¹⁰ What does mark Neem Karoli Baba out as separate from the spiritual illuminati listed above, however, is the gradual acceptance of non-native, non-Indian devotees into his satsang community, a number that, in the final three or so years of his life, contributed a significant presence that continues today. It should not be forgotten that authentic aspirants

⁴⁰⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 346

⁴⁰⁶ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:36

⁴⁰⁷ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 49

⁴⁰⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁹ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ Shyamdas. *Email Correspondence*, 10 April 2007

from the West were generally not present in India in these previous times, and it bears momentary speculation that, should they have been, then any or all of the earlier *bhaktas* mentioned here might well have embraced them as devotees also. Yet, as a product of a different century, Neem Karoli Baba was presented with different varieties of followers and with different aspects of convention with whom or with which to engage as he saw fit.

3.V.ii The Arrival of the First Western Followers

However the acceptance of Western followers might mark the guru in terms of convention, what remains irrefutable is that (over the course of some decades) he came into contact with, and then assumed a level of preceptorial responsibility for, a good number of Western men and women. The case of the first potential Western devotee, Colonel McKenna, has been investigated above in 3.II.iii (pp. 157-161). This relationship, incumbent with its connections with the Raj and the final years of the British Administration, stands alone in terms of its particular historical positioning and import. No other relational instance is documented that may be linked to pre-Partition India. In fact, it would be some years until any further Western disciplic connection is made, in what might now be termed 'modern India'. Even with this next association, the situation remains far from clear. In her 1963 memoirs, Anne Marshall brings to light a rather "flamboyant character, with long white hair and stagey mannerisms"⁴¹¹, a stage magician by the name of Michael Ivanoff whom she hears has previously been connected with Neem Karoli Baba. She continues:

Some people dismissed him [Ivanoff] as a particularly shady sort of occultist, the kind who likes to exercise the power of his personality over unbalanced females, depriving them of what little sense they once had, but all this talk may simply have been malicious gossip. Certainly one well-known Indian sage, Nim Karauli Baba, took Ivanoff to his heart and travelled with him all over India, so perhaps there was something in him after all⁴¹².

The fact that Ivanoff and Neem Karoli Baba could have travelled together, one might speculate, at some point during the late 1940s or 1950s⁴¹³, is an intriguing thesis. Yet, Marshall has more to offer when she comments:

They still correspond I know for, when I visited the Baba's ashram [Kainchi Dham], I had to translate his letters from the French⁴¹⁴.

⁴¹¹ Marshall, 1963, p. 142

⁴¹² *ibid.*

⁴¹³ Marshall's travels in India, upon which this 1963 book is based, lasted about two years. Whilst unspecified by her, these are portrayed as being recent adventures and so potentially occurred between the very end of the 1950s and 1962. By the time of her visit, she claims that Ivanoff had completed his association with the guru, and yet was still writing to him. It is therefore likely that she held this relationship as belonging to the late 1940s or to earlier in the 1950s.

Unfortunately, no other trace of Ivanoff and his ongoing connection with the guru remains and he is not mentioned elsewhere in other materials. Nor do current associates of Kainchi Dham⁴¹⁵ (asked on behalf of this study) recall ever having heard of Ivanoff, nor of the existence of his letters. Yet the possibility of the flowing-haired stage magician and the mysterious *siddha* together on the road provides a compelling image nonetheless. As mentioned above in 3.III.i, Anne Marshall did not meet the guru herself. She was, however, more successful in meeting Haridas Baba who, despite his vow of silence, communicated with her about “what sort of *yoga* Nim Karauli Baba taught and practised”⁴¹⁶ by writing his answers in English on a slate (“Surprisingly, he knew English quite well”⁴¹⁷). Presumably unaware of the *bhāva*-realisation that Shyamdas attributes to this guru in 3.IV.i, the British woman seemed more confused than anything else by what the *muni* offered in response to her questions. Nor did she feel quite ready to accept any form of guidance from him either:

Rapidly the ascetic filled up his slate. It appeared that there was no *yoga* in which the Baba [Neem Karoli Baba] was not an adept. *Jani yoga* [sic], *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *mantra yoga* and *nad* (sound) were all within his province. ‘Do you wish to study yoga yourself?’ the *muni* wrote. ‘Do you wish to go and live in a cave?’ I wish I had been brave enough to say ‘Yes’, and to see what would happen then, but I replied that I was not yet ready. This attitude brought forth the more comforting offer of a cup of tea...⁴¹⁸.

After the opacity surrounding the situation of Ivanoff, the first Western follower who it is possible to call a devotee of Neem Karoli Baba was an Englishman named Larry or Lawrie⁴¹⁹. How (or where) Lawrie came to meet the guru is not known, but the hagiographers record that he subsequently stayed at the Hanumangahr temple and ashram “for about a year”⁴²⁰, most probably in 1964. Mukerjee explains a little further: “He had been interested in India’s spiritual heritage and had come to India to learn about it. He had met Babaji, secured his grace,

⁴¹⁴ Marshall, 1963, p.142

⁴¹⁵ Prema Michau had not heard of him (questioned at Kainchi ashram on 22 November 2008); nor had Rita Green (questioned at Kakrighat temple on 25 November 2008); nor K.K. Sah (questioned in Nainital on 26 November 2008). Prema Michau also asked Siddhi Ma and her attendant Jaya Prasada whether they knew of any correspondence in French between Neem Karoli Baba and Ivanoff, yet neither had heard of this previously (question posed at Kainchi ashram on 27 November 2008). It is worth noting that, of those asked, both K.K. Sah and Siddhi Ma would already have established connections with Neem Karoli Baba by the time of Ivanoff’s alleged relationship with the guru and so, one might imagine, be in a good position to verify his existence from this time.

⁴¹⁶ Marshall, 1963, p. 143

⁴¹⁷ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁸ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁹ Mukerjee refers to the man using both monikers: as Larry in *The Near and the Dear* (1996, p. 147) and as Lawrie in *By His Grace* (2001, pp. 60-62).

⁴²⁰ Mukerjee, 2001, p. 60

and was allowed to stay in the ashram, studying with Haridas Baba⁴²¹. Not much more is known about Lawrie except that he returned to England in December 1965, when his fiancée Susan arrived in Nainital to take him back with her. The fact that Neem Karoli Baba found the money to enable them to do so is mentioned⁴²². Neither Lawrie nor what became of him once he arrived back home features in any later material. What does become more of a recurrent element, however, is the fact that Haridas Baba subsequently served as the tutor for a number of other Western devotees to whom we will turn presently.

3.V.iii The Making of a Western Satsang

Whilst Neem Karoli Baba came into contact with a small number of Western aspirants in earlier years, from the late 1960s and early 1970s the situation changed. The sudden comparative influx of Western travellers to India from this time brought potential new devotees to any number of teachers and gurus across India – and to Neem Karoli Baba also. Along with many of his twentieth century guru peers, it was from this point that the preceptor began to engage with non-indigenous devotees as a satsang element in their own right, as opposed to occasional individuals. Such a turn of events may be seen as a direct result of the onset and outward reaching of the counterculture revolution of the West in general, and of America in particular. In an editorial foreword to the transcription of two seminars given by Chögyam Trungpa in 1972, Serah Chödzin depicts contemporary America as having been a country “bubbling with social change, animated by factors like hippyism, LSD, and the spiritual supermarket”⁴²³. Ram Dass similarly describes this period in his homeland as being “a time of Divine Funk... a moment in history when there was a mushroom explosion of consciousness and a resulting increase in life force... [a time when] as we went out of our minds, we met again our own innocence”⁴²⁴. Most, although not all, of Neem Karoli Baba’s early Western satsang came from the pool of alternative young seekers to which Ram Dass here refers. What started as the guru’s acceptance of a very few foreign individuals as devotees from 1966 onwards grew, over the period of a few short years, to become a full-blown Western satsang. By 1971 or 1972 there might have been dozens of young non-native devotees in attendance at any one time – at least until the guru would lose his patience with the situation and summarily ‘*Jāo*’ them all yet again.

⁴²¹ *ibid.* pp. 60-61

⁴²² Mukerjee, 1996, p. 147

⁴²³ Chögyam Trungpa. *Crazy Wisdom*. Boston & London: Shambhala, 2001, p. vii

⁴²⁴ Law, Lisa with Foreword by Baba Ram Dass. *Flashing on the Sixties*. Santa Rosa, CA: Squarebooks, 2000, p. 7

Signifying the start of the more contemporary ‘hippyism’ connection with Neem Karoli Baba, Michael Riggs (later Bhagavan Das) was the first of the current Western satsang to connect with the guru in 1966. Bhagavan Das reflects:

When I met Maharaj-ji, the first thing Maharaj-ji said to me was, ‘You have no father. You have no father! I’m your father. I am your father. I am initiating you as my son....’ So, Maharaj-ji initiated me in 1966 in the Kumbha Mela as his son. And he initiated me with the initiation... that a father would give a 13-year-old boy⁴²⁵.

Accordingly, “on the actual day the pot in the sky spilled its nectar”⁴²⁶, the young Californian from Laguna Beach was instructed to beg for the food required for the performance of the ritual, which Neem Karoli Baba then voraciously devoured. Of the practice, Bhagavan Das speculates, “I guess he ate all of me, all the thoughts and feelings that were holding me back from God”⁴²⁷. The initiation culminated in the bestowal of an Indian name to mark the American’s transformation. Yet, despite the momentous nature of the occasion, the new moniker did not feel quite right:

Maharaji gave me a new spiritual name: Ram Dass. I told him, ‘I don’t like that name!’ It didn’t feel quite right. He was quiet for a moment and then said, ‘Okay, your name is Bhagavan Das,’ which means ‘Servant of God’ (He kept the name Ram Dass in reserve, and a few years later passed it on to another Westerner)⁴²⁸.

In fact, Bhagavan Das’ memory is not altogether correct here for it was only the following year that he met Richard Alpert (later Ram Dass) in Kathmandu. At their point of meeting, Alpert had not long left the Millbrook community⁴²⁹ in New York state from where, together with friend and former Harvard colleague Timothy Leary⁴³⁰, he had been running a series of experiments into the exploration of consciousness. A primary feature of this research had been the use of mind-altering substances, including psilocybin and LSD. Bhagavan Das initially bonded with Alpert over the course of an extended LSD session at a five star hotel in the

⁴²⁵ Bhagavan Das. *Interview*, 2005, 00:01

⁴²⁶ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 56

⁴²⁷ *ibid.*

⁴²⁸ *ibid.*

⁴²⁹ Documentary footage of this experimental community is included in Mickey Lemle’s film *Ram Dass: Fierce Grace*. DVD Video. Documentary Film. Zeitgeist Video, 2001. See also Kleps, Art. *Millbrook: The True Story of the Early Years of the Psychedelic Revolution*. Oakland, CA: Bench Press, 1977.

⁴³⁰ Ram Dass has often described his relationship with Leary and their experimental work in the psychology department at Harvard. In *Be Here Now* the opening section, entitled “Journey. The Transformation of Dr Richard Alpert, Ph.D into Baba Ram Dass”, includes his observations on just this. Ultimately however, and as a result of their controversial research, the pair lost their posts at the university. In the introductory lecture at Naropa, Ram Dass comments on this: “Harvard was getting a little concerned because we had just ordered a half million dollars of LSD from Switzerland.” (Ram Dass. *The Yogas of the Bhagavad Gita*, 1974, CD 1: Introduction, Track 7)

Nepali capital, despite the fact that he found him “gangly and somewhat geeky. He had a lot of pencils and pens in his pocket. And he had a strange edge about him that I thought came from the professors’ world”⁴³¹. After some time, and a trip overland back to India in a borrowed Land Rover, Bhagavan Das nevertheless provided the introduction for the academic to meet his guru in Bhumiadhar in 1967. This marked the second and – in terms of bringing the guru to wider Western notice, at least – the most significant connection with a Western *celā* from this ‘hippyism’ period. Following the initial and dramatic point of disciplic surrender, documented above in 3.III.iii, Ram Dass stayed at the ashram at Kainchi Dham and in the surrounding Nainital region for a further five months⁴³². He lived as a “yoga renunciate”⁴³³ with Bhagavan Das and three Indian sadhus – Khor Das, Haridas Baba and Brahmachari Baba. Of this time, Bhagavan Das comments, “Ram Dass worked hard during this transformation”⁴³⁴ and that he “did a lot of spiritual practice with great sincerity. He spent a lot of time alone”⁴³⁵. As Ram Dass remembers:

At no point was I asked, do you want to stay? Do you want to study? Everything was understood. There were no contracts. There were no promises. There were no vows. There was nothing.

The next day [after their meeting] Maharaji instructed them to take me out and buy me clothes. They gave me a room [at Kainchi Dham]. Nobody ever asked me for a nickel. Nobody ever asked me to spread the word. There was no commitment whatsoever required. It was all done internally⁴³⁶.

At some point, however, Neem Karoli Baba placed Ram Dass under the direct tutelage of Haridas Baba⁴³⁷. Over the weeks that followed, the foreigner proceeded to undergo a period of intensive spiritual instruction in (amongst other things) *prāṇāyāma*, hatha yoga and meditation. As such techniques were not yet known to him, the American was not initially in a position to appreciate the comprehensive and traditional nature of such guidance. Only months later did he realise that, throughout this time, Haridas Baba, “had been teaching me Raja Yoga

⁴³¹ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 145

⁴³² A photograph exists from this time that shows Ram Dass and Bhagavan Das (holding a kitten in his arms) sitting either side of K.K.Sah upon a roof terrace at his family home. The photograph remains in the personal collection of K.K. Sah in Nainital. It is reproduced in Appendix 6 (p. 322). A very similar photograph (albeit without the kitten) exists in Bhagavan Das’ memoirs. (Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 138)

⁴³³ *ibid.* 1997, p. 155

⁴³⁴ *ibid.*

⁴³⁵ *ibid.* p. 157

⁴³⁶ Ram Dass, 1978, unnumbered page in chapter entitled ‘Ashtanga Yoga’

⁴³⁷ Since the early 1970s, Hari Das Baba has lived in the West. His yoga, retreat and conference centre, the Mount Madonna Center, is in Northern California and is home to a resident community of karma yogis as well as to the ‘Hanuman Fellowship’.

very systematically”⁴³⁸. Bhagavan Das adds, “Saint school had been tough, but he’d made it. Now he was part of Maharaji’s team”⁴³⁹.

It is of interest to note that, throughout this initial period, Ram Dass and Bhagavan Das appeared to be viewed – and, in turn, treated – rather differently by Neem Karoli Baba and, so, consequently by all those around him. Although he had come from a position of considerably greater social standing in the West and was, of course, also the older of the two, Ram Dass seems quite content to describe himself as having been the “novice”⁴⁴⁰ in the arrangement. In *Be Here Now* he remembers how, “whenever there was a scene I walked last”⁴⁴¹ and “I was always in the back and they were always teaching me”⁴⁴². In contrast, so he writes, his much younger compatriot “turned out to be very high in the scene”⁴⁴³. Indeed, Ram Dass recounts, Bhagavan Das would be the one to drive the Land Rover car around with Neem Karoli Baba ensconced in the passenger seat. He (Ram Dass), meanwhile, would be sat meekly in the back seats, “with the women and some luggage”⁴⁴⁴.

When Ram Dass returned to America in 1968, he brought with him his guru’s *āśīrvāda* to write a book, “which until that moment I had had no thought of writing”⁴⁴⁵. At the same time, however, Neem Karoli Baba also gave him a clear directive: “I was specifically told when returning to the United States that I was not to mention Maharaji’s name or where he was, or anything”⁴⁴⁶. The book in question was *Be Here Now* and, finally published in 1971, may be seen as having been responsible for introducing a significant proportion of the Western satsang to the persona and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba – albeit obliquely and without the use of any name more specific than ‘Maharaji’. Offering no more explicit information than this, Ram Dass thus held to his guru’s instructions. The American went so far as to warn any spiritual speculators away from attempting to locate the guru in person. As he advised his readers, the few Western seekers who had somehow succeeded in finding Neem Karoli Baba as a result of “the clues in my speech and their knowledge of India”⁴⁴⁷, “were thrown out immediately... very summarily dismissed”⁴⁴⁸.

⁴³⁸ Ram Dass, 1978, unnumbered page in chapter entitled ‘Ashtanga Yoga’

⁴³⁹ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 155

⁴⁴⁰ Ram Dass, 1978, unnumbered page in chapter entitled ‘Ashtanga Yoga’

⁴⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁴² *ibid.*

⁴⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. xi

⁴⁴⁶ Ram Dass, 1978, unnumbered page in chapter entitled ‘Ashtanga Yoga’

⁴⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ *ibid.*

In spite of this, three of Ram Dass' own immediate students refused to be demurred by the sparsity of available information. Jeffrey Kagel (now known as Krishna Das) was one of these three. He reflects on the growing sense of longing to meet the guru that he experienced: "I was at a point where I had to go. I was being pulled too strongly, aggressively, spiritually"⁴⁴⁹. He continues:

You see, Ram Dass had not given us details on where to go. This is because Maharaji had told him not to talk about their experiences together; Maharaji didn't want a bunch of us Westerners to come. Of course, all Ram Dass *did* was talk about him – he couldn't stop talking about him. But he never told you who he was, what his name was, and where you could find him. It was all quite secretive⁴⁵⁰.

What followed truly marked the start of the coming of the Western satsang for, once the first of Ram Dass' students had been given permission to come for the darshan of Neem Karoli Baba, then the pathway became clearer for others in similar positions. Unable to give any information himself, Ram Dass could only encourage Krishna Das to write to Nainital to fellow-devotee, K.K. Sah. Having acted as the translator at the very first meeting between the American and Neem Karoli Baba, Sah had subsequently established a close friendship with Ram Dass. The pair certainly corresponded with regularity when the latter had returned to the United States (and remain in contact with each other to this day). Wanting to honour this particular relationship, therefore, Sah proceeded from his home in Nainital to the ashram at Kainchi in order to petition the guru for permission for Ram Dass' students to visit. Neem Karoli Baba was at first adamant in his refusal of the request, but K.K. appears not to have been discouraged. Krishna Das continues:

Now you've got to understand, K.K. grew up in Maharaj-ji's lap from the time he was eight years old and his quality of devotion with Maharaj-ji is that of a spoiled child with his grandfather. There's no awe, you know, it is just the most sweetest, most natural thing... So, years later, K.K. tells me what *really* happened that day. He comes in the room with Maharaj-ji and he puts the letters on the tucket next to him. Then he sits down in front of him, starts peeling an apple and cutting it up into pieces and feeding it to Maharaj-ji. Maharaj-ji's eating the apple and talking to these people over here and, at one point, he notices the letters and he says, 'What's that?' K.K. says 'They're some letters from Ram Dass' students. They want to come see you.' 'No! Tell them not to come! What do I have to do with *them*?' So K.K. began to pout and he stopped feeding the apple to Maharaj-ji... Maharaj-ji would push his [K.K.'s] head up like this and say "Kailash, what's the matter?" – and K.K. wouldn't look at him and he'd look away like this [looking down sullenly]... and when Maharaj-ji took his hand away, K.K. put his head

⁴⁴⁹ Rosen, 2008, p. 17

⁴⁵⁰ *ibid.*

back down and pouted more. So, after a while, Maharaj-ji throws his hands up and then says, 'Alright tell them what you want, tell them what you want!'⁴⁵¹

Subsequent to this meeting, Sah wrote back to Krishna Das somewhat circumspectly: "As you know, Maharaj-ji doesn't encourage people to come to him, but his doors are always open, and if you are travelling in India, you can come and have his darshan"⁴⁵². Krishna Das remarks, "All I saw was a green light"⁴⁵³. It was therefore with what they considered to be more direct permission than it in fact was, that Jeffrey Kagel, Jim Lytton and Daniel Goleman embarked for India in August 1970. It was as a result of their connections with Ram Dass, that they met first with Swami Muktananda in a flat in London and there received his darshan. The experience of this has been included above in 2.III.iii. Travelling onto India, they broke their journey with a short stay at Muktananda's ashram in Ganeshpuri (not far from Mumbai), before proceeding onto Delhi and then Nainital. Their first experience with Neem Karoli Baba was at Kainchi Dham. Of this meeting, Rameshwar Das (Lytton) remembers:

We got to see Maharaj-ji for a couple of minutes and he enquired a little bit about us and then he said, 'Go take prasad.' And I don't know what the other two were feeling but I was completely out of my body because I was getting this flashback to the first time when I had met Ram Dass – and that complete change of consciousness was happening again. It was fairly cosmic, it was very intense. So they took us over the way – where we could see Maharaj-ji from a distance – and put down these leaf plates. I remember that I had three piles of potatoes and seventeen puris – which would ordinarily kill a grown man, I guess – but at least it ground me a little bit I think! And then we were brought back in to see Maharaj-ji and he was talking to us for a while... He asked us a lot about our families and this and that. I remember him asking me where my sweater had come from. It was just the most mundane details. I said my mother had given it to me... It was all just *leela*⁴⁵⁴.

K.K. Sah reflects that, after this initial meeting, Neem Karoli Baba remarked to him that the three young men were 'good people'⁴⁵⁵. Certainly they must have made something of an acceptable impression, for it is from this point on that other Westerners (at first) slowly began to arrive and were gradually permitted to take the guru's darshan.

Whilst participation in any part of the newly burgeoning Western satsang would undoubtedly have made for an interesting experience, it may be argued to have been even more the case for those who arrived in the first full year of its existence, that is in 1971. The reason for such a

⁴⁵¹ Krishna Das. *Interview*, 2005, 00:24

⁴⁵² Rosen, 2008, p. 17

⁴⁵³ Krishna Das. *Interview*, 2005, 00:22

⁴⁵⁴ Rameshwar Das. *Interview*, 2006, 01:02

⁴⁵⁵ K.K. Sah. *Meeting*, Nainital, India, 29 November 2008

statement is primarily that – and as Girija Brilliant reflects below – with fewer Western devotees present, the guru had more time to spend with them. She expands:

He was also talking to people giving teachings – *much* more than he did the next year – where he would actually talk to us about diet or about prayer or these saints and the things we should do. And the next year, when I got to meet more and more people, he did that less often⁴⁵⁶.

Girija Brilliant herself arrived in September 1971. In between attending *vipassana* meditation courses, she remembers a meeting in Delhi that led her to Nainital for the first time:

At one of the courses, I met a woman who became Mirabai and her husband and about 4 or 5 other people – and we got to be really good friends. When I was back in Delhi at American Express, I ran into Mirabai's then-husband and, when he went to get his passport, Maharaj-ji's picture came out and I was asking about who he was. Our impression was that it was much more about *Ram Dass* as the teacher – and so *who* the teacher was, was a little vague to us. So when I asked him about it, he said, 'It's not really about Ram Dass but about *Neem Karoli Baba*. *He's* the teacher. Would you like to come?' So I took the train with him to Nainital. Ram Dass was there, and at that point there were probably thirty Westerners staying at the Evelyn Hotel. And when I got there it was lunchtime. It was an old British hotel in the mountains. It was dark and painted green inside, not lit very well⁴⁵⁷.

On this first occasion, Girija Brilliant stayed for four months before returning to America. The following year, however, she travelled back to be with Neem Karoli Baba, this time accompanied by her husband, Larry. The moment of Larry Brilliant's own disciplic surrender (in 1972) has been depicted above in 3.III.iii.

As might be surmised from the material presented throughout Part Three, Western followers initially came to be part of Neem Karoli Baba's non-indigenous satsang by a number of different means. Yet, once they had arrived and settled into the routine of the temple community, the majority subsequently attempted to stay close to the preceptor for as long as he would tolerate before he invariably '*Jāo-ed*' them once more. This was a practice he was wont to do whenever the Western group became too large (as many as sixty or more on occasion by 1972⁴⁵⁸) or, also, when he simply did not feel like seeing them, for reasons best known to himself. On just this, *Miracle of Love* states:

⁴⁵⁶ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:32

⁴⁵⁷ *ibid.* 00:29

⁴⁵⁸ Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Akbarpur, India, 6 December 2008

When he felt that people were, as he put it, 'eating his head', he would simply go into a back room and close the door, or send everyone away, or get in a car and leave without a backward glance⁴⁵⁹.

A further point when the Western satsang was dismissed was the short but intense period of the Indo-Pakistan crisis of late autumn of 1971. Whilst at the ashram in Vrindavan, Western devotee Kabir Das remembers seeing Pakistani military aircraft flying overhead in the direction of Agra⁴⁶⁰. He also recalls that Neem Karoli Baba summarily 'Jāo-ed' all the Western devotees shortly afterwards. Nevertheless, so Kabir Das reflects, a certain amount of negotiation ensued that saw the Western satsang relocated (albeit without their guru) to the comparative safety of Nainital and so, for the most part, not sent back to the West.

3.V.iv Experiences of Integration

More specific investigation into the daily routines of the Western satsang forms the basis of 3.V.vi and so will not be entered into here. What should be considered at this point is the manner in which the Western satsang community was held by the Indian devotees and also the ways in which this sometimes disparate group of Western aspirants interacted with each other. It is clear that some of this satsang would have been 'authentic students' from the start, but a fair proportion would have been travellers on the 'hippy trail' in search of adventure very different from anything available to them in their own countries. In particular for those of American citizenship (of whom there were a significant proportion), their travels in India must have contrasted vividly with the situation back home and the ongoing Vietnam conflict. Whether its omission is a deliberate one or not, it is interesting that this is mentioned nowhere in the hagiography. It is nevertheless quite possible that at least part of the attraction of staying in India under the auspices of Neem Karoli Baba was that, in doing so, the young American men would have been able to avoid the draft. This consideration must have impacted on how these men (and their wives and female friends) received Neem Karoli Baba and his community. Perhaps it is little wonder then that the guru is portrayed by these *celās* in the role of a saviour? Perhaps their unquestioning acceptance of his behaviour and his ways is easier to appreciate in the light of the events back home?

For whatever reason that they sought to be associated with Neem Karoli Baba, it is clear that the introduction of the young and often alternative-living Westerners caused some sense of contention amongst factions of the traditional Indian satsang. Drugs, sex and the unstructured existence of travelling had their part(s) to play amongst this satsang in a manner not

⁴⁵⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 18

⁴⁶⁰ Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Vrindavan, India, 5 December 2008

experienced by their Indian counterparts. This undoubtedly contributed to the indigenous guardedness that some foreign devotees report. Kabir Das is one who remembers an amount of friction between the two groups and is adamant that, till the end, the majority (although not all) of the Indian satsang were unforthcoming with any practical information concerning the guru's whereabouts. This included the last day in Kainchi Dham. Kabir Das recalls going into the ashram on 11 September 1973 as he might have done on any other day and yet, a skeleton staff notwithstanding, it was suddenly totally deserted. The Indians who remained were visibly upset and yet none would tell him – nor any of the other few Westerners present – what had occurred in Vrindavan. All they would share was that something terrible had happened. Kabir Das and the two people he was living with at the time left for Vraja without delay, first hitch-hiking and then hiring a car to drive through pouring rain to reach Vrindavan late in the day. The first they knew of Neem Karoli Baba's death was when they saw his recumbent body being paraded through the streets on the top of an Ambassador car⁴⁶¹.

Yet, this experience of non-integration is not reported by all the Westerners. Others have remarked on the kindness that they encountered at the hands and in the homes of the Indian satsang. Krishna Das, for example, frequently refers to K.C. Tewari and his wife as his Indian parents and, even though both passed away some years ago, has maintained close relations with the family⁴⁶². Remaining with the 1970s, however, it is conceivable that the fact that the Westerners mostly chose to dress in Indian clothes, attempted to engage with Indian spiritual culture and that they displayed an obvious connection to Neem Karoli Baba did succeed in endearing them to certain quarters of the Indian satsang, at least. Girija Brilliant certainly remembers this to be the case. Of the way in which the new arrivals were treated, she remarks:

Looking back, considering how we were then, they were extremely tolerant and very loving. We were doing our best to really be proper and we would buy saris to try and look Indian, but of course we didn't have a lot of money and we were buying saris that the really simple village people would wear... [But the Indian devotees] were extremely sweet to us, and they were all so touched we had come so far to study Hinduism. They were really moved by that – especially in those days when our country was considered such a wonderful modern place. They were very touched we came to study⁴⁶³.

Whether the fact that Girija Brilliant was a married woman who, together with her doctor husband, had come to study made her more acceptable to those whom she encountered is arguable. One might imagine that she appeared less threatening to the communal status quo

⁴⁶¹ Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Akbarpur, India, 6 December 2008

⁴⁶² In November 2008, for example, Krishna Das attended the Indian wedding of the Tewaris' granddaughter.

⁴⁶³ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:32

than did other single or 'wilder-living' individuals. Having said this, some Indian devotees – for example the Tewari and Sah families – actively took it upon themselves to assist the Westerners in their devotional studies. Girija Brilliant continues:

His devotees who lived in Nainital would take care of us; they were our teachers. They were the first ones to teach us aarti, so he [K.K. Sah] gave us all sheets of paper with this on in phonetics, and we practiced and then we wanted to sing aarti to Maharaj-ji⁴⁶⁴.

The challenges implicit in the weaving of a multi-cultural satsang into one spiritual family are not difficult to appreciate. Yet the trials were most probably not there for cross-cultural reasons only. As is conceivably the case with many groups of seekers and in all sorts of traditions, tensions would at times arise within the Western satsang also. For the most part, there would have been an ongoing stream of Westerners both arriving and departing. Should this constant flux have been experienced as unsettling to the dynamics of the community, it would probably have been entirely understandable. This is particularly true when one considers the elusive nature of the guru himself and how even the most long-standing Western devotees lived in a state of apprehension of being dismissed from his presence. Thus, as increasing numbers of Western aspirants followed the holy man from temple to temple, different groups inevitably both emerged and dissolved during different periods and in different locations. Moreover, as is possibly only inevitable living in such unusual circumstances, individuals would periodically fall in and out with each other – or, indeed, with all of their peers. Upon her arrival at the Evelyn hotel, for example, Girija Brilliant was surprised to see that Ram Dass was in a bad temper:

Ram Dass was inside wearing sunglasses, because he was very angry at all the Westerners. He wasn't talking to *anybody* – so my concept of Ram Dass was totally thrown out of the window, because he was just being so *strange!* Really big cloud of anger, because he felt the other Westerners were not using their time well. Frittering their time away around a great teacher⁴⁶⁵.

Yet, so devotees continue to promote, the unconditional love that they felt was exhibited by Neem Karoli Baba (towards all sides of his satsang) served as a primary facilitative factor in allowing the group to cement. In the film documentary, *Fierce Grace*, Larry Brilliant comments on the fact that what he experienced as being so extraordinary about Neem Karoli Baba was not that the *holy man* loved everybody but that, when he was in the guru's presence,

⁴⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ *ibid.* 00:29

Larry suddenly felt that *he* loved everyone also⁴⁶⁶. In this same vein, and as a concluding contribution to this section, we return once more to the comments of Krishna Das:

Now, on a certain level, there wasn't always a lot of love between his followers, because we weren't made into a homogenous group of any kind... we were all disparate individuals, and so we saw things differently, but that's ok... He loved us as we were, and he could see everything about us too, which made his love really special – he loved us in spite of ourselves. He wanted us to accept ourselves for what we are, with all our shortcomings. He didn't want us to be anything else... in order for God to love us. No. He showed us unconditional love and what it really means⁴⁶⁷.

Whether the sense of acceptance that Brilliant and Krishna Das here observe has been easier to appreciate in hindsight than it was at the time is arguable. Certainly the unconditional love of the guru and the facilitative power within this sentiment has become an established part of insider theology in the decades since his death. With the ever-changing flux of people, dynamics and boundaries in those few short years at the end of the guru's life, however, it is quite likely that both contributors were (at the time) less able to be so magnanimous to the quirks and foibles of their peers.

3.V.v The Bestowal of Names and Mantras

As may be gathered from elsewhere in this study (in particular 3.II.vi), the use of divine names and words appears to have held exceptional significance for this guru. It therefore bears some consideration that Neem Karoli Baba chose to re-name some (although not all) of the Western seekers with Indian names and to give Sanskrit mantras to a small proportion also. In light of the fact that the early initiation ceremony reported by Bhagavan Das from the 1966 *Kumbha Melā* (3.V.iii) appears not to have found replication elsewhere in the hagiography, this becomes especially true. In the absence of any more formalised process of investiture, the informal processes of naming and the giving of mantras may be seen as acts of importance. This certainly represents the views of the Western devotees, who viewed the purpose of the naming process as “to awaken us to our deeper selves”⁴⁶⁸. In this regard, Ram Dass (a title that means ‘servant of God’) comments: “I have found that name to be very much a reminder of my path – and that I am slowly growing into the name”⁴⁶⁹.

With this sort of focus placed upon the instructional potency of a name, it is unsurprising that many of the young Western devotees became increasingly eager to receive such a token of

⁴⁶⁶ Lemle, Mickey. *Ram Dass: Fierce Grace*. 2001, DVD Chapter 6

⁴⁶⁷ Rosen, 2008, p. 23

⁴⁶⁸ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 324

⁴⁶⁹ *ibid.* p. 325

recognition from their guru. Girija Brilliant (formerly Elaine) longed to receive an Indian name for herself. Daily entries in her diary noted the circumstances of how and when fellow members of the Western satsang received their new appellations, whilst she was still to be named. She managed to remain hopeful, however:

Maharaj-ji full of warm love today, sitting in the sun, joking, laughing, tossing Prasad to Linda. She's hugging his knee. Later he gives her the name Mira, which puts John through changes [makes him feel uncomfortable?], as her husband poisoned her to keep her from Krishna. John tells M., 'I don't want to be the husband that keeps her from God' but M. says, 'No, her real husband was Krishna, so you are Krishna.' And John smiled. Linda just beaming. She has been so patient, loving and full of devotion since she's been with M., even though he said little to her. And M. rewards her beautifully. He wiggles his toe and winks as I kiss him. He just loves us all so much; the heart is full and fuller. My ego (wanting to be baptized by my guru) has decided that M. will give me a name too. I'm next chronologically re arrival. Hope so. I would love to have a name before he leaves [Kainchi for Vrindavan]⁴⁷⁰.

In fact, only three days later, Neem Karoli Baba directly turned to her and asked, "Why don't you ask for a new name?"⁴⁷¹ She does as he suggests. In response, so she continues: "M. gives me name of Girija. Pats me on the head"⁴⁷². From the final lines in her diary entry for that day, it is clear that the young woman felt overwhelmed by the experience: "I can't even look him in the face, only his feet. What else is there to say? He fills my heart completely"⁴⁷³.

It is potentially significant that the names that the holy man gave to male Western devotees for the most part had the suffix '*das*' (meaning servant of), yet those of the female devotees were not given the suffix '*dasi*' (which would be the appropriate gender equivalent). The Western women were instead endowed with the names of goddesses from the Hindu pantheon or of female saints – Sita, Radha, Janaki, Annapurna, Mira and so on. Why this should have been so is unknown. Having said this, one suggestion for this disparity in the naming process might be that the guru considered the utilisation of names as being different for men than for women. Neem Karoli Baba is reported as having said, "Women are more open to love God"⁴⁷⁴. One might speculate that he found it more necessary to remind Western male devotees of what he saw as their true status in relation to the divine through the use of the term '*das*'. Yet, for women, potentially it was different. This discrepancy did not go unobserved by the satsang. One female devotee comments, "perhaps we most needed to see ourselves as goddesses, as the

⁴⁷⁰ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 6 November 1971

⁴⁷¹ *ibid.* Entry for 9 November 1971

⁴⁷² *ibid.*

⁴⁷³ *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 288

shakti whose first service is to her lord – who is God”⁴⁷⁵. A further proposal could be that he simply loved women, or perhaps feminine energy, and wished to honour it in such a way. A different diary entry from Girija Brilliant is potentially illustrative of this last point. Turning to a mixed gender group of Western devotees, the guru appeared moved by them: “M. So beautiful, loving, called us ‘*sub ma*’ (all mothers)”⁴⁷⁶. As a final point on the use of gender, Bhagavan Das says of his guru, “Maharaji was ‘Ma’”⁴⁷⁷.

Names aside, whether he was interacting with Western or with Indian followers, it is clear that Neem Karoli Baba was not accustomed to offering mantras – a further traditional initiation custom that, as Bharati notes, “is regarded with considerable respect”⁴⁷⁸. Conversely, in particular when it was demanded of him, the guru may be seen to have been dismissive of such requests: “Once a devotee asked Maharajji what mantra he should use. ‘The mind can’t concentrate. Use any mantra – use it, use it,’ repeated Maharajji”⁴⁷⁹. Having said this, it is known that he did bestow personally selected mantras upon at least a proportion of followers, and this included some Western devotees also. Whilst Dada Mukerjee was given a (non-specified) mantra in a Śiva temple in Dakshineswar in 1935, Bhagavan Das reports having been given the *Gāyatrī* mantra as part of his initiation at the 1966 *Kumbha Melā*⁴⁸⁰. In 1971, Girija Brilliant decided that she too would like a mantra. She first asked for one on 31 October, to which the guru is reported to have answered, “he will think about it”⁴⁸¹. After a month of waiting she attempted once more. This time she asked the translator, Gurudhatt Sharma, to petition the guru on her behalf:

I tell Sharma I would like a mantra. Later M. calls me up. Asks me, ‘Who was Girija?’ I say, ‘Shiva’s spouse’. He says, ‘Your mantra is Om Namaha Shivaya.’ Asks if any other saint has given me a mantra. I say, ‘No’. ‘Is it not good to say your husband’s name?’⁴⁸²

As is customary in the Hindu tradition, devotees generally speak little (if at all) of being invested with a mantra. It is considered that, in sharing the specific details with another, a portion of the personal blessing intended for the recipient may be lost⁴⁸³. It might therefore be suggested that the issue of the giving and the receiving of mantras concerning Neem Karoli

⁴⁷⁵ *ibid.* p. 325

⁴⁷⁶ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 24 October 1971

⁴⁷⁷ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 51

⁴⁷⁸ Bharati, 1976, p. 162

⁴⁷⁹ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 327

⁴⁸⁰ Bhagavan Das, 1997, p. 66

⁴⁸¹ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 31 October 1971

⁴⁸² *ibid.* Entry for 30 November 1971

⁴⁸³ Neem Karoli Baba is himself reported to have said, “You should not talk about your wealth, wife or sadhana or they will go away” (Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 123).

Baba has received less commentative attention than it otherwise might in hagiographical materials. This is equally applicable for both Western and Indian satsang groups. In any case, having considered the wider issues relating to the formation of the Western satsang, it now becomes possible to appraise how the guru interacted with them on a more day-to-day basis. In the two sections that follow, 3.V.vi addresses how daily life for this non-indigenous group was structured, in particular in comparison with their Indian counterparts; 3.V.vii then investigates further the specific instruction that the Western satsang received.

3.V.vi Practical Matters of Everyday Life

Once the Western satsang was established in larger numbers than just the early individual seekers, reports claim that Neem Karoli Baba did not generally permit members of this group to remain overnight in the temple ashrams. He instructed instead that they should be housed elsewhere, from where they might come to and from the temple grounds as he permitted. Accordingly, when the preceptor was residing at Kainchi Dham, most of the Westerners stayed at the aforementioned Evelyn Hotel. Built into the face of the hill and overlooking the lake in the centre of Nainital, the hotel was owned and run by the Sah family⁴⁸⁴. From this base, most of the devotees took a bus or went in taxis every day to and from the temple located about twenty kilometres along the Nainital-Almora mountain road, while a few walked over the hills on a rugged local footpath, on a route that lasted about three hours.

When the guru was at Vrindavan, however, the matter of accommodation initially proved more complicated. As orthodox practitioners were still commonly of the belief that foreigners were contaminating to Hindu purity, the Western satsang often found it difficult to find lodgings in such a holy town. In her diary entry for 31 October 1971, Girija Brilliant remarks of her arrival in Vrindavan: "First night battle with bed bugs, itchy hell, absurd but awful"⁴⁸⁵. It is said though that, upon discovering that his followers were sleeping in any insalubrious environments that would take them (for example, in basements or upon roofs), Neem Karoli Baba contacted the family that had financed the erection of the Hanumān temple within his complex. As the owners of a guesthouse called the Jaipuria Bhavan, the family were instructed to turn the entire establishment over to the housing of the Western satsang on the occasions when they were in Vrindavan with their guru⁴⁸⁶. Girija Brilliant's diary notes that she moved into these lodgings on 27 November.

⁴⁸⁴ The Evelyn Hotel continues to be owned by the Sah family. Presently, it is managed by two brothers, Sailesh and Guddu Sah.

⁴⁸⁵ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 31 October 1971

⁴⁸⁶ Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Akbarpur, India, 6 December 2008

Once at the temple, the guru appeared to treat the Western satsang similarly to the native Indian devotees, in that daily life in his presence was likewise structured around the principles of ‘āo, khāo, jāo’. Yet, as this group did not have local homes to which they could go, nor the responsibilities of employment or family that Indian followers might have had, they were generally permitted to spend their entire days within the temple precincts. At Kainchi Dham, at least, this would mean that they were accustomed to receive darshan twice in one day, with the second occasion being just before they were dismissed at five in the afternoon and directed to take the bus returning for Nainital. Girija Brilliant’s diary records such a day:

Leave the taxi at the road to the Hanuman complex where he stays, wash the fruit (Prasad), do devotions in the temple and wait to give him Prasad, then run up to him.

After darshan we sit on mats on a porch across and watch him see a constant stream of devotees. We are given Prasad of puris and potatoes (one set in a cardboard box) and then served the same on plates. [Gurudhatt] Sharma is the server and totally one with Maharaj-ji. He also translates.

Sometimes M. will call up people and talk to them, or we will sit all day, or sometimes go to a house behind the temple and sit on mats and meditate or talk just before the last bus at 5pm, when M. calls and we say goodbye with another short darshan⁴⁸⁷.

As may be seen from this contemporaneous source, other than their individual and group focus towards receiving darshan, the Western seekers were often without any other real structure to their days at the temple. Indeed, most accounts from this group bear witness to the fact that the most prevalent occupation of many of the Western devotees was discussion concerning either the particular nature of the darshans that they had just received or, alternatively, in coming up with ways in which to persuade Neem Karoli Baba to spend more time with them. As stated above, learning kirtan to sing to him was one such option. This then became extended to learning *caupāi* from the *Hanumān Cālīsā*, which, as a strategy, might also be seen to have had some success. One devotee writes of this:

He loved to hear the Hanuman Chalisa sung by the Westerners early in the morning. He was very happy with it, and in the middle he’d start joking and making everyone laugh⁴⁸⁸.

⁴⁸⁷ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Undated yet opening entry, Fall 1971

⁴⁸⁸ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 350

3.V.vii Additional Thoughts on the Instruction of the Western Devotees

[Neem Karoli Baba] *used to say the Westerners had the 'five-limbed yoga' - which was drinking tea, gossiping, sleeping, walking about and eating sweets.*

Girija Brilliant⁴⁸⁹

The generally unstructured behaviour of the non-native devotees appears not to have gone unnoticed by the guru. As Girija Brilliant's quotation points to, he conceivably found such aimless (and altogether 'un-Indian') behaviour rather amusing. Certainly, for some time at least, it became Neem Karoli Baba's habit to call for individual members of the Western satsang to come out from the back of the ashram, where they were sitting about, and have them 'perform' for other Indian visitors. Exactly what they would perform would depend upon the talents or skills that the guru perceived them to have. Some might be called upon to sing *bhajan*, recite portions of the *Hanumān Cālīsā* or tell certain supposedly entertaining (yet potentially embarrassing) anecdotes about themselves⁴⁹⁰. This situation could appear rather cruel or, at least, not demonstrative of this guru's apparently compassionate mien. Once more, however, this does not find mention in the hagiography, and devotees would appear to see it in a different (and, again, instructive) light. Krishna Das remembers:

We quickly became a part of the official 'show'. When Indian devotees came to see him, Maharaj-ji would often call us and have us sing the Chalisa. No matter how many times we did it, he would always look totally surprised – as if it were the first time he had ever heard it. With a look of joy and amazement on his face, he would laughingly tease his Indian devotees for their lack of sincerity and devotion, saying, 'Look at these people. Out of their love for God, they have left everything behind in America while you wicked greedy people come to see me out of your own selfish desires!' Of course it was all part of his unique way of teaching everyone their own special lesson⁴⁹¹.

Over time, it is also possible that the unstructured ways of the Western satsang came to represent a source of irritation for Neem Karoli Baba. Certainly, at some point the group began to become more integrated into the day-to-day running of the temple and were ascribed certain tasks or acts of *seva* to perform. These were of both a practical as well as more overtly spiritual nature. The fact that Westerners who were working on behalf of the kitchen, as Girija Brilliant describes below, would have contravened usual Hindu conventions of caste purity should not be overlooked. Whether it might be considered to have been a teaching in its own right or merely a means of keeping the group occupied in a useful fashion is not clear, but it represents a significant statement nonetheless:

⁴⁸⁹ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:32

⁴⁹⁰ Kabir Das. *Meeting*, Akbarpur, India, 6 December 2008

⁴⁹¹ Krishna Das, 2007, p. 4

He started having us work, so we had singing, then we'd help make food because we were now with the regular devotees. So we were up in the upper part... peeling potatoes and cooking and doing stuff like that. He'd keep us busy, and then tell us to do 108 Hanuman Chalisas or go and sing⁴⁹².

Once this instructive process had been initiated, it appears that the guru began to prescribe additional structured group activities. According to Girija Brilliant, the guru would, "quietly tell us [the Westerners] to go and read it [the *Rāmacaritamānasa*]"⁴⁹³. Furthermore, as she continues, "once he gave us copies of the Bible – so, on a Sunday, he'd send us off to go and read the Bible"⁴⁹⁴. Correspondingly, for a certain period of time, Ram Dass read sections of the Gospels to the assembled Western satsang on the terrace at the Evelyn Hotel on Sunday mornings. "Because Maharajji wanted to get rid of us, he'd send us over there to read the Bible... He gave us crosses, they were all broken and were really funny"⁴⁹⁵.

In addition to using this as a ploy to structure the time of the Western satsang away from the temple, to Girija Brilliant's mind at least, this act had further significance. In this instruction, so she believes, Neem Karoli Baba, "was trying to show us that quality of love and devotion that Christ and Hanuman had were the same"⁴⁹⁶. She continues:

He really loved Hanuman, so much. He had all these little statues and little temples down the road. He would talk about Hanuman and have us read the *Sundara kand* every Tuesday⁴⁹⁷. So we'd have the Bible on Sundays and we'd have Ram Dass read us the *Sundara kand* on Tuesdays. He had a beautiful reading voice. And that quality of Hanuman's love for Ram is how we would feel about Neem Karoli Baba. We'd say Maharaj-ji is Hanuman in disguise. We had all of these versions of reality of who he *really* was. But I would say definitely Hanuman and Ram were the points in our devotion⁴⁹⁸.

The fact that the majority of Westerners present happened to have been Jewish and not Christian at all does not seem to have made much of an impression upon Neem Karoli Baba. Nor, consequently, did it represent much of a problem for the Westerners either, who mostly chose to understand from the situation that he was simply, "trying to make us feel comfortable – because most Indians feel that all Westerners are Christian"⁴⁹⁹. When one sees the number of imposing Christian churches that were built in many parts of India during the course of the

⁴⁹² Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:32

⁴⁹³ *ibid.* 00:33

⁴⁹⁴ *ibid.* 00:32

⁴⁹⁵ *ibid.* 00:34

⁴⁹⁶ *ibid.* 00:36

⁴⁹⁷ The fifth book of the *Rāmacaritamānasa* that depicts the heroic feats of Hanumān, the *Sundara kāṇḍa* is often recited on Tuesdays (and / or Saturdays). These are the days traditionally given over to the deity's remembrance and worship.

⁴⁹⁸ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:33

⁴⁹⁹ *ibid.*

British administrative period (including in Nainital, incidentally), then such a belief is not difficult to appreciate. In addition to his general encouragement to read the Bible, Neem Karoli Baba is depicted as having spoken specifically about Christ to the Western satsang and with some regularity (“He talked a lot about Christ and all those different teachings at that time”⁵⁰⁰). Ram Dass wrote in 1976:

We left Christ in the West but found him at Maharaji’s feet. Maharaji loved Christ as much as he loved Hanuman. Though he was born a Hindu, he always talked to us of Jesus⁵⁰¹.

The regularity with which Christ’s name is mentioned is clear from Girija Brilliant’s 1971 diary, and in a number of different ways. At some times, the guru is shown to refer to Christ as part of everyday conversation (on asking about her husband’s profession, the guru also asks whether Larry believes in Christ and wears a crucifix⁵⁰²); yet, at others, he may be seen to utilise explicitly Christian text or teachings for his own instructive purpose. A potential illustration of this may be evidenced when Krishna Das injured his knee. In direct relation to the damaged joint, so Girija Brilliant documents, the guru created a Christian context for his Jewish *celā* to perceive it as a teaching greater than the immediately physical:

M. spends much time with Krishna Das who hurt his knee, goes through his book [his Bible] and points out passage for him in 2 Corinthians⁵⁰³ (M. supposedly doesn’t read English).

‘And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations there was given to me a thorn in the flesh... for this thing I besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for the strength is made perfect in the weakness [sic]. For in nothing am I behind the chief apostles, though I be nothing’⁵⁰⁴.

⁵⁰⁰ *ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ Ram Dass with Bo Lozoff, 1976, p. 97

⁵⁰² Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 3 December 1971

⁵⁰³ The full text (from the St James Edition) is included here. The parts that are cited in the diary entry are italicised for ease of identification. In this portion, Paul is speaking.

“7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong.

11 I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you: *for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.*

12 Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs and in mighty deeds.” [II. Corinthians 12 (7–12)]

⁵⁰⁴ Girija Brilliant. *Personal Journal*, Entry for 7 November 1971

The circumstances that surround this potentially extraordinary incident – during which the non-English speaking guru is nevertheless shown to point out a scriptural passage written in that language with considerable precision – are sadly lost. Indeed, on recent questioning, Krishna Das had initially forgotten the occasion entirely. Yet, as he slowly brought it to mind once more, he appeared startled at the potency that he considered the teaching to bear even now, some thirty-seven years on⁵⁰⁵. More on the reasoning behind this method of instruction to the Westerners is, however, not to be known.

3.V.viii Sending Hanumān to the West

'Watch out!' said Hanuman. 'Beware, I am on Rama's service, and his kingdom is all the world...'

*Ramayana*⁵⁰⁶

The material that remains for consideration in this appraisal of the Western satsang marks a slight change in direction. More or less for the first time in this entire study the investigation necessitates a departure from strictly Indian soil. It is clear that the Western (mainly insider) commentative voice has been included throughout this analysis. It is nevertheless true that its vision has remained looking East. At this juncture, however, the perspective needs finally to turn towards the West also. Only in doing so may the full implication of Neem Karoli Baba's comment that his satsang might be summarised by "*ao, khao, jao* [come, eat, go]"⁵⁰⁷ be addressed, in particular in relation to his Western satsang. Whilst the first two elements of the guru's statement have been afforded adequate consideration in 3.IV.ii and 3.IV.iii, until now the last aspect of his instruction has been demonstrated as having held significance in terms of the practice of non-attachment both between *celā* and guru and vice versa. What needs be evaluated here, however, is the significance of the guru's imperative '*Jāo!*' in a farther-reaching geographical sense. By this is meant that, in viewing Neem Karoli Baba's frequently clear directive to Western devotees as to when they should return to their homelands – referred to in *Miracle of Love* as the "*maha-jao* (great jao)"⁵⁰⁸ that was "most dreaded by the Westerners"⁵⁰⁹ – the potential arises to observe that, in doing so, the guru was in fact instructing them to take their Eastern experiences and perceived teachings back into their own native Western cultural settings. In such a manner, and whether the Westerners were initially

⁵⁰⁵ Krishna Das. *Meeting*. Amsterdam, 23 May 2008

⁵⁰⁶ Buck trans. *Ramayana*, 2000, pp. 225-226. This particular version is selected here in recognition that Ram Dass particularly favoured this handling. Originally published in 1974, the text was later recorded with Ram Dass reading. The recording was released in 1991 as three ninety-minute audio cassettes.

⁵⁰⁷ Reported in Pande, 2005, p. 92

⁵⁰⁸ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 366

⁵⁰⁹ *ibid.*

willing participants in the process or not, the guru was effectively sending Hanumān to the West.

In any examination of the activities of Neem Karoli Baba's non-indigenous satsang over the past four decades, clear narrative parallels exist that may be seen to connect Hanumān's great leap of the Rāmāyaṇic legend with the efforts and aspirations of some of these Western followers. In the direct service of the master, the supplicatory devotee finds both the strength and courage to make a leap of faith across the ocean and into the unknown. More than this though – and depending on which handling of the *Rāma-kathā* one adheres to here – Hanumān's leap may further be seen to represent a necessary aspect of the individual soul's process of reclamation and of its subsequent reunion with the divine⁵¹⁰. It is conceivable that the symbolic purpose that here underscores Hanumān's great leap is relevant for at least a proportion of the Western satsang also. The point of physical departure from their guru (or at least their response to it) would have served a valid, if at times uncomfortable, instructive purpose for them too. The moment of '*Jāo!*' might, therefore, be seen to have been as potent as both '*Āo!*' and '*Khāo!*' before it.

It is, of course, not possible to make any single definitive statement about the pedagogy inherent within Neem Karoli Baba's utilisation of '*Jāo!*' – in relation to any members of his extended satsang. As before, each devotee's experience of it would have been individual to him or her. Having said this, a belief that the majority would uphold is the notion that the returning Western followers did represent or carry (at least an aspect of) Hanumān. In turn, so they consider, they might function as emissaries for their guru also. The significance of this image for the community in general is illustrated in the marble *mūrti* of Hanumān that was later brought by sea from Jaipur in 1976 to form the centrepiece at the newly established Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple in Taos, New Mexico⁵¹¹. Based upon a sketch by an American devotee⁵¹², the commission specifically requested the *mūrti* to be in the

⁵¹⁰ This is particularly the case, as in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, when the captured Sita is thought to represent the human soul. Held against her will on Lanka, she pines to be reunited with her divine lord. It is Hanumān's intercession that initiates her eventual rescue and so returns her to him.

⁵¹¹ Three photographs exist that show Ram Dass in the Jaipur workshop. All are taken from above (from what could be the position of a gallery) and have the partially finished Hanumān *mūrti* clearly positioned to the left of the frame. The first photograph shows Ram Dass looking on as K.K. Sah appears to be discussing a sketch of the figure with the craftsmen; the second shows Ram Dass inspecting the same sketch closely; the third photograph shows him, now on his own and sat in a meditative posture at Hanumān's feet. The originals of these photographs remain in the personal possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵¹² This sketch is hand drawn in what is possibly coloured pencil and shows Hanumān in Rāmācūḍāmanidāyaka form, positioned to face the viewer directly. An interesting note is that the deity's eyes in the sketch appear to be blue; once executed in marble, however, the *mūrti*'s eyes were most definitely depicted as green and are very similar in their appearance to those of Ram Dass himself.

Rāmacūdāmanīdāyaka form. An unusual pose amongst Indian statuary of this deity, this shows a flying Hanumān bearing the *mudrikā* of Rām (the signet ring bearing his name that Hanumān takes with him to Lanka as proof of who has sent him) in his hand. Under a section headed ‘Hanuman comes to America’, the official Neem Karoli Baba website comments on this choice of form, “After all, this Hanuman was going to have to fly half across the world to get to America!”⁵¹³

Whether the figure of Hanumān here is directly representative of Neem Karoli Baba or instead of the more amorphous essence of his (or Hanumān’s) teachings is unclear and makes for interesting speculation. The answer would most probably depend on which Western devotee one asked. It could be argued though that, for some followers at least, the absence they felt when no longer in the guru’s physical presence – nor any more within the protected environment of his Indian temple community – was experienced so acutely that they felt impelled to re-define their Western-based lives in response. In such a way, even outside of India, they might continue to experience an ongoing connection with their guru through their actions, beliefs and hopes. It seems fair to say that a significant amount of what has been performed over these past decades by Western devotees appears to have been motivated by a desire to remain close (or become closer) to Neem Karoli Baba himself – or, as is necessarily now the case, to the preservation of his memory. A letter dated 5 November 1970, and written by Ram Dass from his father’s home in West Franklin, New Hampshire to K.K. Sah in Nainital, offers illustration of this. In his correspondence, the American first reiterates how important his ongoing service to his guru feels now that he is away from him. Simultaneously, he recognises that his motivation is the desire to feel ever more devoted to the preceptor. Throughout it all, so he observes, “All I really do is watch God’s will unfold”⁵¹⁴. Ram Dass concludes his letter by borrowing a well-known sentiment from the *Rāmacaritamānasa* and, in doing so, reaffirms his connection with the tradition so beloved by his guru:

My only desire left is to serve Maharajji. All else falls away when I look closely at it. And even that, I know, melts back into the Hridayam⁵¹⁵. Hanuman says to Ram: When I don’t know who I am I serve you. When I know who I am, you and I are One!⁵¹⁶

Whether this was an intentional act on behalf of the craftsmen, or Ram Dass even, remains unknown. What is probably a copy of the sketch remains in the personal possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵¹³ Accessed at <<http://www.neemkarolibaba.com/ashrams/taosashram/taosinfo.html>> (5 May 2008)

⁵¹⁴ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 5 November 1970. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵¹⁵ The handwriting is not entirely clear at this point in the letter, but the word *hridayam*, meaning spiritual heart, appears to be a plausible option.

⁵¹⁶ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 5 November 1970.

It is of note that, in the years that have intervened since the writing of this letter, Ram Dass has continued to see Neem Karoli Baba as, “the very context of my existence”⁵¹⁷ in both personal and professional endeavours. Concerning the latter, in a 2005 interview he reveals the underlying incentive for these past four decades of seva: “I see Hanuman as a symbol of service: but my heart isn’t opened to Hanuman, it’s opened to Maharaj-ji”⁵¹⁸. The desired fruits of this practitioner’s service-oriented actions are thus apparent to see and, with all his focus trained upon the figure of Neem Karoli Baba, Ram Dass’ *sādhana* offers a clear illustration of *guru-kṛpā*. What makes for further deliberation is whether his practice has actually *benefited* from the physical separation from his preceptor. Indeed, so it might be mooted, should Ram Dass have spent these preceding years in his guru’s presence (at Kainchi Dham or Vrindavan, for example), he might not have applied himself with such dedication to the preservation and continuation of the guru’s living memory in quite the way that he has. It is incontrovertible that Ram Dass has made a weighty contribution in the popularisation of traditional Eastern teachings in a contemporary Western setting. Should Neem Karoli Baba have been alive for all or even a greater portion of this time, it is possible that the part played by the American in the West would have been significantly less.

A further example of a Western devotee who has dedicated himself to the practice of *guru-kṛpā* – albeit through use of a different medium – has been kirtan performer Krishna Das. It is only as recently as the mid-1990s that this *celā* began to adhere to Neem Karoli Baba’s suggestion that he should sing, yet his life is now entirely dedicated to the practice. Without doubt, there are a number of underlying motivations at play here, however the principal one appears to be that chanting offers a clear and direct path to bring him closer to his guru. Moreover, upon advice from Siddhi Ma that, when holding public kirtans in the West, he should sing as if directly to Neem Karoli Baba, his has become a *sādhana* of remembrance in much the same way as the guru himself utilised the practice of *Rām-nām*. Currently, Krishna Das travels the world offering kirtans, at which as many as a thousand or more participate in chanting the names of the divine. In this light, his personal practice may be seen as instrumental in the wider promulgation of *bhakti* teachings in the West than would most probably have been the case should Neem Karoli Baba have remained longer ‘in the body’. Whilst Krishna Das spent many years mourning the loss of his guru before he came to chanting professionally, it may be seen that he too ultimately found a way in which to bring his own form of Hanumān to the West.

⁵¹⁷ Ram Dass. *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2000, p. 203

⁵¹⁸ Ram Dass. *Interview*, Maui, Hawaii, 17 December 2005, 00:07

Bearing both of the above examples in mind, and whether before or after the *mahāsamādhi* of the guru, each devotee who returned to the West would have had to negotiate his or her own way into finding a balance between his or her Indian experiences and his or her Western way of life. Such a process would undoubtedly have been on a very personal level. As is indicated in another of Ram Dass' earliest letters to K.K. Sah, such integration may not have been an easy task. Writing in 1968, Ram Dass is concerned with how best to approach the challenge of operating appropriately as a *sādhaka* in a Western setting. In many ways acting as an early envoy for Neem Karoli Baba, the weight of the responsibility appears to lie heavily upon him. In September he writes to his friend:

Twice I went to a big city for a day but I found it very difficult. I am not yet far enough along with sadhana to be able to travel freely in the world and have the worldly things roll off my back like water from the back of a duck. All the seeds of desire (*kama*) are not yet cooked. At this point the new young tree still needs to be fenced around. In Bharat you and most others helped me much by respecting sadhakas. Here in the West there is no such respect and everyone tries to prove that what I am trying to do is nonsense. They are good people but have no idea of the spiritual path. So without satsang it is a true test of the inner fire. And though it goes up and down much... nevertheless in my heart my purpose is clear and firm... all due to the divine sharan of Maharaj-ji, who I feel to be with me much. I love Him so much that sometimes it is hard not rushing back to His lotus feet. But... the spirit of Maharaj-ji is here inside... and I feel his Ashirbad and so I see the visit to the West as a necessary part of the sadhana⁵¹⁹.

In December of the same year, he writes again and in a similar tone: "There is so much to do here and I am so inadequate to the task"⁵²⁰, before adding, "Doing sadhana here in the West is very difficult because so few people understand. So I spend much time by myself keeping my heart and mind on Ram and Hanuman and Maharaj-ji"⁵²¹.

However personally challenging it might have been for devotees on an individual basis, an unusual number of this guru's Western devotees have nevertheless gone on to make significant public contributions in the West and in a number of arenas. Why this might be so is interesting. It could be argued that, at different times and in varying ways, other members of this group have felt (and assumed) a level of plenipotentiary responsibility in a manner similar to that about which Ram Dass speaks immediately above. Another option might be that, as Neem Karoli Baba reportedly sought to model certain *bhakti*-inspired ways of being, particular

⁵¹⁹ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 9 September 1968. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵²⁰ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 30 December 1968. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵²¹ *ibid.* Some years later, Ram Dass writes similarly to the last sentence included here, "For me, my Guru, Neem Karoli Baba (Maharaj-ji) is Hanuman and is Ram" (Ram Dass with Stephen Levine, 1987, p.67).

Western devotees have looked to emulate their preceptor in a Western setting through their various acts of service. A further possibility would relate to the matters of motivation discussed above: in applying themselves to a personal *sādhana* of connecting with their guru, other practitioners have created contributions that have, simultaneously, been felt by many others. Whatever the underlying aetiology in each instance, the roll call of first generation devotees' combined achievements is considerable. A few (but by no means all) are listed here in two groups. The first relates to devotees whose practice has been primarily of a teaching, writing or compassionate action nature of service. Some of these practitioners include Ram Dass, Larry Brilliant, Daniel Goleman⁵²², Mirabai Bush⁵²³ and Lama Surya Das⁵²⁴. The second group relates to those devotees whose chosen medium has involved (although is not necessarily exclusive to) kirtan and sacred music. These practitioners include Shyamdas⁵²⁵, Jai Uttal⁵²⁶, Krishna Das⁵²⁷ and Bhagavan Das⁵²⁸.

⁵²² Since writing *Emotional Intelligence* in 1995, Daniel Goleman has written several other highly acclaimed works and has acted as a founding member of a number prestigious academic bodies dedicated to the advancement of learning practices and, in particular, of emotional literacy and intelligence within both the academic and workplace environment. Goleman has also been involved with a number of projects with the Dalai Lama, promoting dialogue and research between Western scientific and Tibetan Buddhist practice and communities.

⁵²³ Formerly the director of the Guatemala Project and the Compassionate Action Project for the Seva Foundation, Mirabai Bush is currently director of The Center on Contemplative Mind in Society in Massachusetts. This "works to integrate contemplative practice into contemporary society in order to create a more just, compassionate, and reflective society." Accessed at <<http://www.kosmosjournal.org/kjo/about/bios/mirabai-bush.shtml>> (5 May 2008). Bush has also co-written a book with Ram Dass, *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service*.

⁵²⁴ Lama Surya Das is the spiritual director for the Dzogchen Center, also in Massachusetts, a foundation that seeks to bring Buddhism into Western practice. The author of a number of books, (including the 1997 bestseller, *Awakening the Buddha Within: Eight Steps to Enlightenment*), Surya Das teaches on meditation and the spiritual path around the world. He further has ongoing links with the Dalai Lama.

⁵²⁵ Initiated into the Vallabhite lineage in 1973, Shyamdas is still primarily based in India. He nonetheless describes his mission as bringing "the Vedic literature of India and the Bhakti Yoga of Vraja to life in the West". Accessed at <<http://www.shyamdas.com/>> (5 May 2008). He has published over twenty volumes of translations and other writings on *bhakti* and is a scholar of Sanskrit, Hindi, Brajabbasha (which was Neem Karoli Baba's own birth tongue) and Indian devotional philosophy. Further involved in the practice of *haveli sangeet* (classical temple singing), he leads kirtans and *bhakti* workshops across America.

⁵²⁶ Having studied with Ustad Ali Akbar Khan amongst others, Jai Uttal is a sacred music pioneer who received a Grammy nomination in 2002 for his sixth album, *Mondo Rama*. He has since recorded a further seven albums and travels the world leading kirtans and teaching workshops in *bhakti-yoga*.

⁵²⁷ Krishna Das was described as "the chant master of American yoga" by the *New York Times* in 2000; this article further goes on to liken the "yogic hymns" of his kirtan practice to the writings of the Dalai Lama in that both apparently, "make enlightenment accessible". Ann Powers. "Tuning into the Chant Master of American Yoga." *The New York Times* (4 June 2000) Accessed at <http://www.krishnadas.com/documents/kdnytimes_06042000.pdf> (26 January 2006). Having recorded a number of successful albums of kirtan – including a recent offering, entitled *Flow of Grace*, that is dedicated to the teaching of the *Hanumān Cālīsā* and that has (as accompaniment to a slightly later 2007 edition) a book on Hanumān and devotional practice – Krishna Das also leads kirtans and workshops worldwide.

⁵²⁸ Bhagavan Das has been a counter-culture icon since his picture and story first appeared in *Be Here Now*. He has spent time with Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen amongst others. He has published a volume of spiritual memoirs and leads kirtan and workshops (including those on *bhakti* and *nada-yoga*) worldwide.

It is unfortunate that the word limitations and perspectival parameters of this study do not allow greater consideration of the varying contributions of these men and women than these few lines. Yet it should be noted that, for the most part, the work of those listed here was only performed *after* the death of their guru. Consequently, whilst it may be seen as being related to him, it may only be held to represent an indirect part of his own personal legacy. This said, by combined virtue of the fact that Neem Karoli Baba himself gave explicit direction regarding their implementation and that they were then carried out (or at least initiated) whilst he was still ‘in the body’, two obvious special cases present themselves here: the early work of Ram Dass and that of Larry Brilliant. The latter’s work for the WHO has been included above in 3.IV.v (pp. 215-217); some further consideration of Ram Dass’ *Be Here Now* follows here.

3.V.ix The Compilation of *Be Here Now*

Your book [Be Here Now] is sure to find due place of honour and would reveal many facts about the real and ultimate happiness of life which mankind needs so much. To those following the path of Sadhna, it would provide guidance and a new source of inspiration.

K.K. Sah in a letter to Ram Dass⁵²⁹

Throughout Part Three there have been several references to the book, *Be Here Now*, for which Neem Karoli Baba gave Ram Dass his explicit *āśīrvāda* in 1968 and which eventually found publication in America three years later. Now almost forty years and over forty reprints since its first appearance in 1971, this text has sold over a million copies and has achieved a level of iconic status. Philip Lutgendorf describes it as, “an American spiritual classic – a verbal and visual collage drawn from a variety of wisdom traditions, but incorporating Ram Dass’ experience of the playfulness and power of Maharaj-ji”⁵³⁰. A combination of the aesthetic of its presentation, the accessibility of its writing style and the intimacy of its tone throughout has made it a groundbreaking text of its time and ensured its popularity ever since. Moreover, during exactly the period that this book was initially published, young Western spiritual culture was choosing to turn towards a greater awareness of Eastern concerns, more or less for the first time (at least en masse). Many seekers, therefore, have since claimed that this publication acted as their earliest introduction to Eastern-style teachings. Some of these aspirants claim that the book had a transformational effect upon their everyday lives. As a considerable proportion of the eventual first generation Western satsang had their first exposure to the persona of the guru through the vehicle of this book – either through the

⁵²⁹ K.K. Sah. *Personal Letter to Ram Dass*, 27 December 1968. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵³⁰ Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 271

process of its compilation or through the reading of its published version – it could be argued that this was the case for some of them also.

No evaluation of the Western connections of Neem Karoli Baba would, therefore, be complete without at least brief consideration of the text. Whilst much of how this text has been received and utilised as a contemporary Western spiritual resource falls outside the remit of this particular study, what will be focussed upon here is the earlier process of its compilation and the ongoing direct connection with the guru prior to its public release. That this is possible owes much to the existence of original (and unpublished) correspondence from this time between Ram Dass and K.K. Sah that remains in the latter's possession in Nainital, some of which will be included here.

The very fact that it took Ram Dass three years to bring *Be Here Now* to a point of publication would indicate that it was not a text for which the American assumed responsibility lightly. The personal letters that he wrote to K.K. Sah from this period (including those cited in 3.V.viii) would attest to as much, for they display an uncertainty as to whether he feels truly prepared for the task in hand. This is revealing and certainly not the usual narrative tone that may be held to be characteristic of Ram Dass – at least not of his public persona. However, such apprehension does not persevere. Indeed over what is, in effect, only a short number of months, the letters document an important change in both Ram Dass and in his situation. Firstly, Ram Dass is shown to have grown in confidence. By remaining clear that his role was that of the devotee in relation to his own guru, he appears more comfortable stepping into the role of spiritual teacher (or spiritual friend) for other Western seekers. However *they* might have viewed him, *he* did not see himself as a guru. Instead he has promoted himself as a devotee dedicated to the service of his own spiritual master, in a manner reminiscent of how Hanumān is traditionally depicted in relation to Rām. As Ram Dass's name would infer, such a position would seem only appropriate.

The second aspect that these early letters reveal is that, within a short time, there has been a significant increase in outside interest in the work that he was doing. In the main, this is in the form of growing numbers of alternative-living young people – in other words, hippies – for whom, it is arguable, he had initially come to their attention as a result of his previous connections (and anti-establishment notoriety) with Timothy Leary and their promotion of psilocybin and LSD. Whether or not this has been the first point of notice or attraction, once they were actually with him, the interest of the seekers appears to have been redirected onto conceivably more traditional spiritual pursuits, and he introduces a number of Hindu practices that include kirtan, hatha yoga, meditation, spiritual discourse and satsang. Whilst such

techniques may be relatively prevalent within Western society today, it should not be forgotten that they were far less well known at the end of the 1960s. As Ram Dass had only recently finished his own tuition with Haridas Baba in Kainchi at this point, it is conceivable that, in his efforts to train others, he is effectually passing on the *muni*'s traditional approach to *Raja-yoga*.

It is, therefore, in a different tone altogether when – less than a year later to the letters included above – Ram Dass writes to K.K. Sah, now from his “little kuti (of 9 sides) high in mountains in New Mexico”⁵³¹ at the Lama Foundation⁵³². In the preceding months, so he explains, “Maharaj-ji has blessed me with the opportunity to help many hundreds of people in the West to work on the spiritual path. It is full time karma yoga”⁵³³. Moreover, he describes how he has spent that summer receiving the many visitors who have come to study with him at his father's estate in New Hampshire. Two of the first students to have arrived at his door were Jim Lytton (Rameshwar Das) and Jeffrey Kagel (Krishna Das).

Later in 1969, the Hartley Film Foundation released a documentary entitled *Evolution of A Yogi – Ram Dass* that was filmed that same summer in New Hampshire. It offers the first pictorial evidence of Ram Dass after his return from India and his dramatic transformation from Dr Richard Alpert⁵³⁴. A typical scene shows the former Harvard professor now bare-chested and dressed only in a white *dhoti*. In bright sunshine, and on the lawn of his father's golf course, he earnestly corrects students attempting *sarvangāsana*⁵³⁵ during a session of hatha yoga. A further sequence sees Ram Dass engaged in spiritual discourse surrounded by avid listeners. He is dressed in long white robes with a full beard and has exceptionally widened eyes. The film also portrays (in a somewhat idyllic and staged fashion, perhaps typical of its era) group sessions of kirtan and what appear to be circle dances similar to those created by Samuel L. Lewis in his Dances of Universal Peace. These are accompanied by sprightly music.

⁵³¹ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 10 November 1969. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵³² Since being founded in 1967 on Lama mountain (about twenty miles outside Taos, New Mexico) the Lama Foundation has continued to operate as a sustainable spiritual community. Ram Dass has always enjoyed a strong connection with Lama. As demonstrated in the excerpts above, *Be Here Now* was partially written whilst he was resident there; moreover, a portion of the profits from this book have traditionally been donated to the Foundation.

⁵³³ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 10 November 1969. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵³⁴ Excerpts from this original footage were later incorporated into the early sections of Mickey Lemle's 2001 film, *Ram Dass: Fierce Grace*

⁵³⁵ Shoulder stand poses

From Ram Dass' November letter, in which he describes the summer of 1969 at length to K.K., the experience appears to have been pleasurable for all concerned. Two things prove to be of particular significance here: firstly, according to Ram Dass, it is from these very New Hampshire darshans that the contents of *Be Here Now* have started to emerge⁵³⁶; secondly, he openly acknowledges that he feels he has effectively been acting as a conduit for Neem Karoli Baba to work through him in this aim:

During the summer I stayed with my father on his estate in New Hampshire. Many young people came to study with me and my father very lovingly set aside land for them to put up tents and we built a large 'Darshan' house in the woods for singing kirtan and meditating and meeting. The young people all helped my father much and he was very happy all summer. On the weekends more and more people drove from Boston (100 miles away) and from New York (200 miles) to join in Darshan, which was held on Fri, Sat and Sun afternoons... By the end of the summer 250 people came for Darshan and Prasad.

I can feel Maharaj-ji's presence so much of the time and though I have no visions or visitations I can see in the eyes and hearts of those around me that He is touching them very much. And often when I speak to a large audience I feel Maharaj-ji taking over and speaking through me. Many of these lectures (darshans) have been tape recorded and many people buy the tapes. Also the tapes have been typed and now *finally* I am doing the book, *From Bindu to Ojas*⁵³⁷, that Maharaj-ji gave his ashirbad for. From all the tapes I am selecting those parts where Maharaj-ji is speaking through me and using these for the book. So I feel that I am just publishing His book. Many friends are helping with the book who are pure in their hearts. We are going to publish the book ourselves and sell it as cheaply as possible so that many young people can have it... We are all doing the book together and all profits will go to help young Westerners follow the spiritual path⁵³⁸.

That Ram Dass views the true creator of the text as having been Neem Karoli Baba – and so considers his own personal role to be more that of a facilitator of his guru's intended purpose – is important. Certainly, in terms of viewing this book as a direct part of the guru's legacy, it bears some weight. This aside, a further aspect is made apparent through the correspondence. This concerns the fact that (as with so much spiritual practice that relates to Neem Karoli Baba's followers) the compilation of the book project has come to assume the nature of a group activity⁵³⁹. Moreover, now that Ram Dass has been receiving assistance from those around him – both at home and in India – this appears to have removed his previously

⁵³⁶ According to Marlene Roeder, long-time personal assistant to Ram Dass, the contents of *Be Here Now* also came from a series of lectures that he offered in New York, again in the summer of 1969. As with the talks in New Hampshire, these were similarly transcribed and material was later selected for inclusion in the book. (Marlene Roeder. *Meeting*, Rishikesh, 24 December 2008)

⁵³⁷ *From Bindu to Ojas* was the earliest title under which this book was produced, prior to the commercial publication of *Be Here Now*.

⁵³⁸ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 10 November 1969. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵³⁹ The parallels with the communal practices that were prescribed by Neem Karoli Baba for his satsang may be seen here without too much difficulty.

perceived burden of sole responsibility for the project and, in turn, his doubts as to whether he might manage it adequately. Indeed, later into 1970, he seems openly relieved that this should be the case. Writing to K.K., he asserts, “The work you have prepared for the book is so very useful. It feels very proper that we should all be collaborating in bringing Eastern wisdom to the West”⁵⁴⁰.

Throughout the compilation process, K.K. Sah obviously acted as an ongoing source of both emotional support and practical suggestion. Thus he writes to Ram Dass with the heartening news that, “The noble work that you have taken up there in the States has the blessings of Shri Maharaj-ji”⁵⁴¹, before gently prompting that “it would be somewhat aspiring and inspiring if the holy Ramayana is also explained gradually”⁵⁴². From the aerogramme letter that Ram Dass sends back to K.K. on 23 March 1970⁵⁴³, it is evident that this advice has been willingly taken. On the reverse of the letter, Ram Dass has drawn a simple line drawing of himself singing “Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram” whilst playing what appears to be a sitar. A number of other heads have been drawn to represent an audience.

A year after the summer camp in New Hampshire, Ram Dass finally settled on how the book should be presented and distributed. In a continually communal approach to the project, he retreated to the Lama Foundation in New Mexico (“an eclectic alternative community in the mountains outside Taos”⁵⁴⁴) accompanied by a number of artists and fellow spiritual students. Work was completed on the text and numerous elaborate pieces of artwork, in a style popular of this era, produced as illustrations. For the central core section, at least, the text was worked in so as to become an integral part of the art (rather than the other way round). Tableaux-like, these large square pages were printed by hand onto brown paper using carved wooden blocks and the pages again bound by hand. Whilst the rest of the material presented in this text was laid out in typical portrait style, the central portion – “From Bindu to Ojas” – was positioned sideways, with each image (and its text) covering a double spread. The immediate impression that is achieved by this is the suggestion that, in order to read and receive this material appropriately, one needs to adopt a different perspective on its message. It could be speculated

⁵⁴⁰ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 2 June 1970. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India

⁵⁴¹ K.K. Sah. *Personal Letter to Ram Dass*, 19 December 1969. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

⁵⁴² *ibid.*

⁵⁴³ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 23 March 1970. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India. A further point of interest of this communication is that it is here that Ram Dass initially suggests that his first two students are ready to come to India, saying, “I think Jeff and Jim [later to be renamed as Krishna Das and Rameshwar Das] should come to India in late spring and perhaps six or eight more will follow”.

⁵⁴⁴ Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 271

that the reader is here asked, quite literally, to turn the teaching ‘on its head’ or onto its side in any case. The effect of this artistic presentation is both unconventional and exceptionally striking.

Today, *Be Here Now* is reproduced by machine and presented as a single neat volume, albeit still square in shape. In its first incarnation, however, every aspect was executed entirely by hand and it was presented as a number of separate printed sections in square box that measured a foot in diameter. In its pre-commercial format, the boxed set retained the earlier title *From Bindu to Ojas*⁵⁴⁵. This was accompanied by a vinyl record of kirtan and also a small card that invited the reader to join a mailing list⁵⁴⁶. The first of the printed items, “Journey”, concerned Richard Alpert’s personal transformation into Baba Ram Dass. Written in an intimate and flowing manner, and interspersed with family and other private photographs, this opening section encourages the reader to feel as if he is somehow personally associated with the subject as he is presented here. Alpert’s former connections with Harvard University, with Timothy Leary and the early promotion of LSD are discussed freely. This particular thematic inclusion is significant, for it has undoubtedly served as an attractor for a proportion of this book’s readership, both initially and over successive decades. Alpert’s meeting with Bhagavan Das and then with Neem Karoli Baba are subsequently documented, again in the same loquacious style. Although it is a fascinating story in its own right, the purpose of this section nonetheless appears to be one of preparation. It serves as an introduction to the institution of the guru, to the persona of Neem Karoli Baba (albeit without direct use of his name) and also prepares the reader to enter the more esoteric narrative of the central core text that follows directly.

At one hundred and eight pages⁵⁴⁷ in length, “From Bindu to Ojas” is the longest section of this text and, as noted above, is densely illustrated throughout with “funny printing that looked like a child’s wood block”⁵⁴⁸. According to Ram Dass’ correspondence, this collection of spiritual teachings is the material, which he felt to have been issued through him by Neem Karoli Baba. Possibly this was one reason for the matter of its sideways presentation. The fact that it was transcribed from the oral source of Ram Dass’ lectures is very apparent in the style. The effect for the reader in reading this is that he feels almost as if he is physically present at the giving of such teachings. The immediacy of style thereby creates an accessibility not

⁵⁴⁵ Of this Rameshwar Das comments, “Ram Dass was trying to remember who came up with the title for *Be Here Now* which has become such a ubiquitous cultural mantra ever since (e.g. there’s a National Public Radio show called “Here and Now”)? Ram Dass thought it might have been the publisher, Bruce Harris, but it seems more likely it was Steve Durkee, one of the main founders of Lama who oversaw the box production there” (Rameshwar Das. *Email Correspondence*, 10 July 2009).

⁵⁴⁶ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:14

⁵⁴⁷ As the number of Upaniṣadic texts that is listed in *Muktika Upanisad*, 108 remains a very significant number to Hindu tradition. It is very likely that the number of pages used here was a conscious choice.

⁵⁴⁸ Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:14

always afforded by more conventional presentations of traditional Eastern concepts. Quite unapologetic in its perspectival stance, from the start this is clearly an egalitarian-style teaching that is offered without any sense of hierarchy or exclusivity. As the *Rāmacaritamānasa* was written in the vernacular (and not in Sanskrit) and with the common man as its intended reader, so too does this text appear aimed at bringing its rather devotional message to a popular audience. In many ways, it might be argued that this represents one of this publication's most remarkable aspects.

The final two printed inclusions in the box are less noteworthy in their own right but yet again emphasise the inclusive purpose of this project. The first is a selection of resources for contemporary East-West spiritual practitioners called "Cookbook for a Sacred Life". The second is a bibliography of suggested further reading that bears the title "Painted Cakes Do Not Satisfy Hunger". Together with the printed sections, and as noted above, the boxed set further included a kirtan recording. With the exception of in connection with the growing contemporaneous ISKCON movement, kirtan would still have been unusual within a Western setting at this time. A rare recording, therefore, it was performed by fellow-Neem Karoli Baba devotee Bhagavan Das together with other students of Ram Dass (who were, at that time, still to meet their guru). These included young men who were later to be renamed Krishna Das and Gangadhar.

Be Here Now was finally officially released (as *From Bindu to Ojas*) in early 1971 in an initial print run of 23,333⁵⁴⁹. When one considers that each of these boxed sets was bound and put together by hand, then this must have been a considerable act of seva by community members at Lama. Sets of the box were posted to recipients who had previously applied to the Foundation for a copy. As prior requests had been received for each of the initial print run, *Be Here Now* effectually 'sold out' immediately. As one of the first recipients, Hanuman Das remembers the set that he received:

At that time it wasn't in a book form. It was all hand printed in pages that were, I think, 12" x 12" – so it was a square. It was the same size as the album, and it was hand tied together, so it worked as a book, like a loose leaf kind. It was printed on rough recycled kind of paper. And there were sections in it and the cook book section was on brown paper. And that was basically what was in there – the book and the album⁵⁵⁰.

⁵⁴⁹ According to Larry Brilliant, this number is correct for "that's what it says on the box". Larry and Girija Brilliant. *Interview*, 2005, 00:13

⁵⁵⁰ Hanuman Das. *Interview*, 2005, 00:07

One element that does not feature in *Be Here Now* is the inclusion of Ram Dass' name as its author. It is presented instead as the property of the Lama Foundation⁵⁵¹. Considering the group nature of its eventual compilation, then this is conceivably only appropriate. Having said this, upon opening the front cover, the reader is greeted by a full-page photograph of Neem Karoli Baba, who points his finger at the lens – and so directly at the reader. The purpose of this rather stern image is not explicit, although two interesting possibilities come to the fore. The most obvious relates to the potential authorial property of this text. Bearing in mind Ram Dass' own views regarding the true creator of "From Bindu to Ojas", the photograph may be seen to represent the book's 'true originator'.

A further less conspicuous option may be entertained, however. A miracle story exists that could be seen to connect Neem Karoli Baba with the final part of the compilation process of *Be Here Now* and that, in addition, serves to demonstrate his ongoing instruction of *celā* Ram Dass. The teaching, at its essence, is an admonishment always to tell the truth, no matter what the circumstances might be. *The Divine Reality* offers the following:

With Maharaj ji's permission, Ram Dass published his book *Be Here Now* in America in 1971. He gave his instructions to the publisher to print the book and came to India with the first copy to present to Maharaj ji. Maharaj had not studied English. Yet five months later he drew Ram Dass' attention to some untruths in two passages of the book and said, 'Lies should not be mentioned in this book. They will hurt you. Delete those passages from the book.'

Ram Dass became anxious because a long time had elapsed, and the book might already have been published. He expected that about thirty thousand copies would have been printed. He contacted Steve Durkee [at the Lama Foundation] and found out that the next thirty thousand copies were, in fact, in print. Explaining the situation to Baba, he said that the changes could only be incorporated into the next edition. It would be a loss of \$10,000 to reject the thirty thousand books. Maharaj ji said, 'Money and truth have nothing to do with each other. When you printed it first, you thought it was true, but now you know that it isn't, you can't print lies. You must correct it now.'

Ram Dass sent a cable to Steve. After a week he received a reply reporting a strange incident. The book could not be printed because Baba's photograph, which was to be printed on a full page, was missing. The original was also missing, so a new plate could not be made. The printer had pulled the job off the press to await further instructions⁵⁵².

When *Miracle of Love* was later published in 1979, Ram Dass once more chose to include the same stern image of his guru that is placed at the front of *Be Here Now*. In the later text, the photograph again occupies a full page. On this occasion, however, it is positioned at the head

⁵⁵¹ In 1977, the Lama Foundation donated the copyright and half of the book's proceeds to the Hanuman Foundation. The latter was established in 1974 as a vehicle for the teaching and service work of Ram Dass.

⁵⁵² Pande, 2005, pp. 115-116

of a chapter entitled, “About Truth”. In this section, Ram Dass refers to the story immediately above concerning his guru’s potential involvement with the printing process. He cites Neem Karoli Baba as having said, “Total truth is necessary. You must live by what you say”⁵⁵³. With such evidence, it seems plausible that Ram Dass positioned the image of Neem Karoli Baba at the start of *Be Here Now* to serve as a clear reminder to himself (at least) never to stray from this path.

A final point for consideration here brings us full circle, for it is again suggestive of Ram Dass’ own motivation for completing *Be Here Now*. In the same chapter “About Truth”, Neem Karoli Baba is cited: “If you live in truth, God will always stand with you”⁵⁵⁴. A principal purpose for Ram Dass (as it would be for many of his subsequent *gurubhāī*) was the matter of maintaining close relations with his guru – this much has been established in the preceding pages. Moreover, for this devotee at least, Neem Karoli Baba had assumed something of a divine status. The teaching on truth as a path to honour and nourish the bond between guru and devotee, ergo, is one of some significance. It provides considerable additional motivation. In an early letter marking the start of the compilation of *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass exhorts K.K. Sah, “Please, please touch the feet of Maharaj-ji for me. I want only to serve him in this life”⁵⁵⁵. The final positioning of his guru’s photograph could be regarded as marking the end of the same venture. From it, the American’s sentiment appeared to remain an abiding one that has continued to inform his actions throughout.

Simultaneously, this situation contains certain Rāmāyaṇic parallels that are of interest and that concern the narration of devotional material. In the same manner in which Ram Dass functions as the initial chronicler of the life and teachings of Neem Karoli Baba, so too does Hanumān serve as the original narrator of Rām’s story. In the case of the both, the proximity that these emissaries can demonstrate to their respective masters is paramount. Facing Sītā in the grove at Lankā, the simian deity must first convince her of whom it is that has sent him. The fact that he is able to persuade her of his true connection to the divine being ensures the suitable denouement of the narrative and, ultimately, reunites Rām with his bride. In this intermediary function between the two worlds of India and of Rāvaṇa’s kingdom, it is the strength of Hanumān’s devotion that proves key: it is not so much *what* he says as *how* he says it that provides the answer that she is looking for. The fact that he is the literal bearer of the name of Rām (in the form of his *mudrikā*) is also vital. It displays a closeness that signifies authenticity

⁵⁵³ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 191

⁵⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ Ram Dass. *Personal Letter to K.K. Sah*, 9 September 1968. Original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, India.

and acts as a form of transmission in its own right. When Lutgendorf discusses the importance of the purity of Hanumān's love, therefore, his words might easily apply to Ram Dass and his guru – and to the significance of a faultless adherence to the truth that lies between them:

...narratives are never entirely objective, but are shaped by the personality and worldview of the narrator; the Ramayana tradition regards Hanuman's narrative as exemplary not only because of his personal role in it, but because his motive in telling it – devotion to Rama – is thought to have been ideally pure⁵⁵⁶.

3.VI A Final Consideration

3.VI.i 'Becoming The Breath Of Rām': Doorways of Devotion

So how is all this love and devotion directed as a useful technique of sadhana? ...what traditionally has been useful is either that one connects to the concept of a supreme – such as the Lord God, or purushottoma, or Ram or Krishna – or that you find some form on the physical plane that you can love through, you can use as a doorway through your love to go through it. And that is what the technique of gurukripa is about: guru grace, guru blessing, the method of the guru. And that is my method.

Ram Dass⁵⁵⁷

From the preceding chapters of this study, Neem Karoli Baba has been introduced as a highly charismatic and rather enigmatic holy man who lived through times of extraordinary change in the North of India. From his beginnings as a cave dwelling ascetic and solitary yogic practitioner in the earlier decades of the last century, he came to be responsible for a considerable number of spiritual charges, both Indian and Western, and for a compact but flourishing network of temples that continue to be run in his name and memory. He was a man known for his miraculous abilities that, unlike those of some of his brasher contemporaries, were executed without any sense of display⁵⁵⁸. Conversely, they appeared to happen about him in subtle ways not always of his active 'doing'. In a similarly passive fashion, he is promoted by insiders as being a methodless teacher who chose not to rely on the 'spiritual wares' favoured by some of his peers in the form of "meditation techniques, stress relief and relaxation methods, specialized ritual prescriptions intended to effect specific outcomes, and methods of spiritual and physical healing"⁵⁵⁹. Instead, so his devotees uphold (and despite his sometimes unpredictable and fierce nature), he modelled the principles of love and compassion so completely and, in his direct-path *sādhana*, retained his focus on the divine principle (in his repetition of the name of Rām) so fluently that his very being served as an example in the

⁵⁵⁶ Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 35

⁵⁵⁷ Ram Dass. *The Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita*, 1974, CD 12: Devotion and the Guru I, Track 4

⁵⁵⁸ In contrast, Warriar comments on the miracle workings of Satya Sai Baba that, "comprise the materialization of ash, as well as of other objects like watches, diamond rings, and cameras, in the course of his darshan" (Warriar, 2005, p. 75).

⁵⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 65

teaching of others. Like the character of Hanumān before him, he is shown to have been “overwhelmed with love” for Rām (*RCM* 5.32). Neem Karoli Baba did not leave behind him a global mission in the manner of, for example, Satya Sai Baba or as Amritanandamayi Ma will upon her death. Having said this, the international impact of his considerably smaller satsang has been such as to secure his position amongst the more prominent preceptors of the twentieth century. If the mark of a teacher rests in the attainments of his students then this guru has been extremely successful in matters of pedagogy – however amorphous the mechanics might be perceived as being.

It could be maintained that a principal axis upon which considerations have turned in this study is the love of God, primarily signified in this context by the deity Rām. Hanumān (in particular, that of Tulsīdās’ authorship) shows devotion in its purest form to be representative of a salvific path and of securing an approach to divinity that the aspirant so craves. This may be observed similarly of Neem Karoli Baba. Whilst both the mythological Hanumān and this human guru serve as models of devotional practice, they may simultaneously be seen to have offered an alternative to the path of abandoned devotion that the *gopī*-figure represents. In line with Tulsīdās’ philosophical positioning, both celestial *dāsya bhakta* and Neem Karoli Baba may be seen to suggest a more socially ordered (perhaps more socially aware) manner of interaction and practice. In the case of the last, this may be observed in the egalitarian communal activities that he encouraged amongst his devotees. Significantly, whilst the external form of these proceedings might have found variation, the purpose of each remains in their performance as an act of ongoing surrender to and as an act of ongoing remembrance of Rām. For the most part, therefore, the ritualistic, the ceremonial and the ascetic are each supplanted by an emphasis on the devotional. Simultaneously, the practice of *bhakti* is seen as a manner of ‘finding oneself’ rather than ‘losing oneself’ through love.

Like Tulsīdās’ Hanumān beforehand, it is the strength and purity of devotion that may be seen to be key – in this instance, for both preceptor and his followers alike. As the citation at the start of this section observes, this love for God (or guru) may therefore be seen to illuminate the doorway to him. The features and functions of this doorway have found discussion in these pages. The *Rāmacaritamānasa* is shown to represent a doorway as is, in particular, the figure of Hanumān. The institution of the guru is identified as a further doorway and, in the context of this study, the persona of Neem Karoli Baba in particular. This thesis opens with the acknowledgement of the parallel intermediary or threshold responsibilities of these protagonists (Hanumān and the figure of the guru). It closes too with an ongoing awareness of this, their foremost role.

Within the Hindu tradition, it is clear that such doorways are designed to open in the same direction – in other words, to open onto the vertical plane of the divine. Their appearance, however, is of manifold identity and a matter of some flexibility. Indeed, at times, doorways become interchangeable with each other. The character of Hanumān, for example, is shown in the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, and in other Rāmāyaṇic texts, to be an *avatāra* of Rudra⁵⁶⁰. He is also depicted as being both a guru to man and the ultimate devotee. The supposed ‘creator’ of this literary portrayal, Tulsīdās, is nevertheless positioned as being Hanumān’s devotee as much as he is that of Rām. In some quarters, however, he is also shown to be Hanumān’s incarnation – as he is of the *ādi-kavi*, Vālmīki. In light of this complex arrangement, the fact that the doorway function of certain human exemplars of the guru tradition occasionally come to be equated with that of more mythological beings is unsurprising: again, one doorway becomes supplanted by another in the eyes of the aspirant. The horizontal portal may be different, that which lies beyond remains the same – for the aspirant at least.

This situation is particularly true of the deity Hanumān, of whom a number of prominent human gurus have been regarded as fleshly incarnations. Close companion of Caitanya (1486-1533), Murari Gupta, is considered to have been an early *avatāra* of Hanumān. He was, so Lutgendorf comments, “Noted for his physical strength and his devotional stance of self-abnegation (*dāsya bhāva*), [and] he was further said – and this appears to have been the clincher – to possess a tail, which he kept hidden from most people”⁵⁶¹. Other illustrations include Nābhādās, Tulsīdās’ contemporary and composer of the *Bhakta Mālā* and, later, also Swami Rāmdās – again apparently the possessor of a tail who, even as a child, displayed “a love of the outdoors, nimbleness and hyperactivity, a habit of making ‘monkey faces’ and a fearlessness of ghosts”⁵⁶². Two twentieth century exemplifications are Deoraha Baba – who lived on a platform in the Yamuna river “and was reputedly 250 years old at his death in 1989”⁵⁶³ – and Neem Karoli Baba.

The fact that his devotees considered this last guru to have experienced an intimacy in his “dealings with Hanuman... [that reflected] a bond between them far transcending the usual devotional forms”⁵⁶⁴ is clear to see. Hagiographical accounts report how, on occasion, this man

⁵⁶⁰ In a further and rather complicated layer, Rudra is an *avatāra* of Śiva who, for much devotional Rāmāyaṇic material, also functions as the narrator of it. This is certainly true of the *Rāmacaritamānasa*, for which Śiva provides as a principal narrative voice. “Here He [Śiva] instructed the sages in wisdom and there He extolled the virtues of Rāma” (*RCM* 1.75.1).

⁵⁶¹ Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 293

⁵⁶² *ibid.* p. 294

⁵⁶³ *ibid.*

⁵⁶⁴ Ram Dass comp. 1995, p. 354

was seen to adopt a partially simian form, display fur on his back⁵⁶⁵, leave paw prints⁵⁶⁶, “growl like a monkey”⁵⁶⁷ or refer to sections in his favoured *Rāmacaritamānasa* in such a way as to indicate a first person connection with events relating to Hanumān⁵⁶⁸. For his devotees at least, Neem Karoli Baba was identified as a doorway to the divine in just the same way as the mythological Hanumān might be. For them, he occupied an identical intermediary function. Thus, at times (in particular those charged with high emotion), man and celestial being became interchangeable in matters of purpose and of orientation towards God. The vertical dimensions of existence ultimately lie beyond rational comprehension, yet the horizontal expressions of devotion are altogether easier to investigate. They are longings for connection and proximity.

Ram Dass prefaces his lecture on ‘Devotion and the Guru’ (from which the opening quotation to this section comes) with a remark that it is a discussion of ‘the whole love and light phenomenon’⁵⁶⁹. In this simple aside, he encapsulates the issue of the dual perspective that has been explored in a variety of ways in the preceding parts of this study. The import of the twin dynamics of *śakti* and *bhakti* has been investigated already. What is yet to be commented upon, however, is the singular contribution that Neem Karoli Baba is said to have made in this respect. As Lutgendorf has noted⁵⁷⁰, throughout Indian iconography Hanumān is almost always depicted as *either* a manifestation of *śakti* *or* as an embodiment of *bhakti*. Very rarely is he illustrated in both aspects at the same time. It is true that some of the *bhakti*-related imagery has a raw energy to it that might connect it with its *śakti* counterpart. The popular image in which Hanumān wrenches open his chest with his bare hands to show the divine couple as residing within his heart is a case in point. Yet, for the most part, whilst he represents the middle ground in which divinity and devotion may intersect, the character of Hanumān assumes either form in different situations or depictions – but rarely both.

In the life and teaching of Neem Karoli Baba, however, an interesting variation upon the theme of *śakti* and *bhakti* may be observed. Indeed, he is frequently located in both of these aspects and *at the same time*. From the material that has been presented in Parts Two and Three, hagiographers depict him as having had a mastery of seemingly miraculous powers. Co-existent with these alleged powers, however, this guru is positioned as representing a point of deep and authentic devotion to the god Rām. Lutgendorf considers the potential that is

⁵⁶⁵ *ibid.* p. 361

⁵⁶⁶ *ibid.* p. 362

⁵⁶⁷ *ibid.* p. 361

⁵⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 363

⁵⁶⁹ Ram Dass. *The Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita*, 1974, CD 12: Devotion and the Guru I, Track 2

⁵⁷⁰ See Lutgendorf, 2007, pp. 388-390

inherent within the unusual co-existence of *śakti* and *bhakti* within Hanumān's intrinsic nature and his words could serve to describe how satsang members view their preceptor also:

Hanuman's dual aspects thus constitute, I propose, a shorthand for two of the principal currents in Hindu religious history, and their confluence creates a paradoxical, yet highly desirable ego-ideal: that of being powerful, autonomous, and self-realized, and yet simultaneously of having an 'open heart' and ready access to deep feeling, especially self-giving love. ...the shakti and bhakti formula again suggest their [devotees'] perception of Hanuman [or Neem Karoli Baba] as a full-service deity who offers a complete range of divine attributes and functions in a singular and accessible form⁵⁷¹.

The purposes of the Neem Karoli Baba community's writings and reminiscences have been considered at various points in this thesis. A primary motivation to underpin the material, however, has been identified as the seeking of the guru's 'company' or darshan (even now that he is no longer physically 'in the body') and what would be seen to be his blessing and grace. The yearning for proximity with the divine that the guru's ongoing practice of *Rām-nām* would suggest is continued by his devotees' approach to him. A well-known Rāmāyaṇic story asserts that as long as the tale of Rām is told, Hanumān will remain on earth in order that he might share in the joy of its recitation. Reminiscent of this, devotees feel that they too maintain the presence of Neem Karoli Baba in their lives and help keep the community alive through the sharing of their experiences. Although it is not a direct quotation from the *Rāmācaritamānasa*, the guru was known to comment with some regularity that Hanumān was as close to Rām as his very breath. Adhering to this model, it could be posited that his *celās* sought just the same synthesis with their human master. Whether the celestial Hanumān or the human guru Neem Karoli Baba may be seen to call for Rām, or devotees to reach out to their guru, the concept of doorways of devotion is one of continuing relevance for this satsang. It is about connecting with the divine essence that resides at the very heart.

3.VI.ii Concluding Thoughts on Neem Karoli Baba and his Community

Writing of ecstasies in Bengal, June McDaniel considers the principal criteria in assessing a holy person's religious claims to be the twin poles of the content of his claims and of the context in which he lived⁵⁷². Both of these have been appraised in relation to Neem Karoli Baba in this study. Where this approach has differed is that the contextual assay has been engaged with first. As this guru has been so consistently promoted as having intimate connections with the lineage of Rām, the framework of this tradition has been offered as a foundational chapter at the culmination of Part One. This chapter commenced with an

⁵⁷¹ Lutgendorf, 2007, p. 390

⁵⁷² McDaniel, 1989, p. 245

overview of the origination of the wider Rāmāyaṇic tradition and, within this context, positioned one of its principal literary handlings, the sixteenth century *Rāmacaritamānasa*. It is with this strongly devotional rendering that the guru demonstrated a strong predilection. The character Hanumān plays a central role in this version and this introductory chapter concluded its Rāmāyaṇic deliberations with an appraisal of this deity. Inquiry considered, in particular, the varying roles in which he has found cultural and textual representation: as the *śakta* but also, significantly, as the *bhakta*, the foremost proponent of *Rāma-bhakti*. In this manner at least, an affiliation between Hanumān and Neem Karoli Baba may be observed, for our principal human protagonist is promoted as having followed this same devotional path as his simian counterpart.

To aid in the analysis of the *vānara*, I.V provided a wider contextual awareness of the Rāmāyaṇic tradition of which Hanumān was a part before examining the deity himself. To a similar end, prior to the introduction of Neem Karoli Baba, this study investigated the context of the Hindu guru tradition (with particular emphasis upon *bhakti* guru convention). Part Two therefore considered the traditional Hindu view of the guru as a divine agent and appraised what might be deemed to be the mechanics of the guru-disciple relationship. This included inquiry into the concept of the guru as the hunter (rather than the hunted) within the initiatory process. Issues of transmission, disciplic surrender and transformation received further attention at this juncture. Within this framework of the guru tradition, the persona of Neem Karoli Baba was introduced and assessed for what devotees consider to be his ongoing influence (now almost four decades since his death), his ‘hidden’ nature, his ‘miraculous’ nature and the fact that there appears to be no demonstrable lineage in operation. Matters of succession and the routinisation of the guru’s charisma found evaluation here also.

Approaching Neem Karoli Baba at closer quarters, Part Three continued its estimation of the guru as a man rather than merely as an exemplar of his tradition. From a combination of mainly insider and a few outsider materials, this study has presented the first biographical portrait of the man to exist outside immediate hagiographical sources. This has been accompanied by an evaluation of his interaction with devotees – both Indian and Western – (primarily) within the day-to-day temple environments that he created towards the end of his teaching career. Particular consideration has been made of the role of the ‘unknowable’ in relation to effecting disciplic surrender and avoiding personal attachment, as well as of the egalitarian *bhakti* forms of *sādhana* for which this guru became best known – including the communal practices of kirtan and of seva. Part Three concluded its investigation with a detailed analysis of the Western satsang of Neem Karoli Baba and the subsequent compilation of *Be Here Now*. In taking their experiences and teachings back to the West prior to and upon

the guru's death, it might be observed that these Western aspirants were emulating Hanumān's leap to Lānkā that he too performed at the behest of his master.

Whilst Neem Karoli Baba has remained at the forefront of consideration throughout the thesis it may not be forgotten that a further element has been present from the start. This has been his community – whether in the form of individual members or from the more 'authorised' communal perspective of his wider satsang. With so little outsider material available upon this guru and his movement, the principal source through which we have come to view either has by necessity been an emic one. The contributing voices from the hagiographical canon have sometimes been embedded or hidden within the wider framework of another devotee's edited narrative. On occasion they have served different purposes than those for which they were ostensibly intended and have offered more about the agenda of the experiencer than that which was experienced. Consistently, however, they are angled towards the promotion of their guru as a superior spiritual being who, as time passes, is seen in an ever more avatarial light. Far from Weber's consideration of the typical Hindu guru as a teacher of ethics whose own spiritual authority is garnered more from his tradition than from any personal charismatic entitlement, the predominant promotion of the devotees of Neem Karoli Baba has been of their preceptor in the role of the exemplary prophet⁵⁷³.

The outsider to the movement may not be entirely comfortable with this presentation. As has been seen in 1.II.i, Weber offers the Buddha as an illustration of this religious prototype⁵⁷⁴. Yet should a householder guru who neither committed to his own ordination nor performed that of his lay followers be seen as the same? Should a guru with a history of sexual indiscretion be considered a suitable role model for emulation? Can there be spiritual congruence in a preceptor who promoted a path that was not in line with his own preparatory *sādhana* and personal training? Moreover, can the amorphous and informal teaching style of a man such as this even be claimed to be that of a 'prophet', which surely denotes a greater structure in its presentation? However Neem Karoli Baba 'actually' was as a man and as a teacher of many thousands of aspirants, it must be acknowledged that the objective historiographical events of his life have since been subsumed and (most probably) sanitised for contemporary devotional consumption. With every occasion that stories are excised from the public eye, or that devotees refine their personal stories in line with the increasingly accepted (and acceptable) canon, this becomes more the case. How could it be otherwise? Whether or not the majority of his followers held him to be an exemplary prophet figure during his lifetime, in the decades since

⁵⁷³ It is interesting that Weber notes that almost no Indian prophets are of the Brahmin caste, although Neem Karoli Baba is just that (Weber, 1965, p. 46).

⁵⁷⁴ *ibid.* p. 55

his death his image has subsequently been moulded into such a representation. Admittedly this is in a manner that is not uncommon within twentieth century Indian hagiographical generic conventions. Observing just the same situation in the hagiography relating to Swami Rama Tirtha, Rinehart remarks, "It is a truism to state the tendency of many hagiographical traditions to become more 'mythological' and less historical over time"⁵⁷⁵. Having said this, and even though it is not unique to Neem Karoli Baba, it is of interest nonetheless.

Ultimately, the process of biographical reconstruction that we have engaged with here has provided clues as to who the man was, but it cannot offer real 'understanding' in the fullest sense. Maybe this does not mark the guru out from his contemporaries, however, for it is arguable that critical biography must, in its nature, be exceptionally limited in relation to holy persons. After all the whole point of these individuals is that they are *not* like other men and women. What is demonstrated with greater clarity, however, is the manner in which this community has sought to portray (and thus to understand) their teacher and, in doing so, to attempt to locate themselves in relation to him. In turn, this has created and subsequently concretised a sense of insider theology and communal ethics. Furthermore, it has served to orientate their faith and lives even now that Neem Karoli Baba is no longer 'in the body'. The common understanding(s) that these *gurubhāi* publicly share about their preceptor thus provides a sense of cohesion that continues to bind them together and to direct the ongoing movement.

A question that was posed early on in this study was whether the material that currently exists on Neem Karoli Baba directly serves those who have succeeded him more than it might do the guru (1.I.ii, p. 17). Aside from the fact that, by all accounts, he probably would not have been overly concerned as to other peoples' opinions about him, it must surely be conceded that the hagiography does serve this end. It is clearly angled towards those who continue in their devotional journeys with the deceased guru, with their own lives, and with the other devotees who likewise share the same or similar path(s). Apart from the twin aspects of love and proximity that have been appraised above in 3.VI.i, a foremost purpose of the hagiographical canon has been in the securing of a continuing spiritual legitimacy, and thus validity, for this movement. As it must seek to ensure its future, this is of foremost concern – even if it is never made explicit. This is interesting in that it succeeds in positioning the satsang with a foot in two camps: on the one side, it continues to look longingly backwards, venerating the originator of charismatic force in their midst; simultaneously, it leans rather tenuously forwards, focussing on the institutionalisation / succession of the same energy. In this way, charisma

⁵⁷⁵ Rinehart, 1999, p. 99

and canon both remain key factors at play⁵⁷⁶. Yet, as Broo points out, observance of both need not be antagonistic⁵⁷⁷: the dynamic that connects the two is exceptionally fluid and, potentially, therein lies its vibrancy and strength.

...canon and charisma must not be taken as polar opposites. In the writings of Weber and others who have studied a Western context, the impression is sometimes given of charisma as an immensely revolutionary and disruptive element. Here [in an Indian context], the two work in a rather symbiotal relationship. This is because of the nature of the system of *guru-paramparā*: to preserve the 'essence' (however that is defined) while allowing rules of conduct and importations the change needed to keep the *sampradāya* from losing its relevancy. New charisma is often surprisingly quickly routinised and preserved until the next renewer comes along⁵⁷⁸.

Broo is here commenting upon the devotional Gaudīya tradition, yet his comments are pertinent to the dilemmas and prospects facing the Neem Karoli Baba movement also. It has been previously mentioned (1.I.iii, p. 19) that this study stands at a unique chronological distance from the originator of this movement in that it is far enough removed to gain something of an overview and also close enough to have the benefit of the opinions and experiences of those who 'knew' the preceptor whilst he was still living. What remains to be seen, however, is how the community will progress and change over the next forty years and what the most appropriate organisational model will be for it now in the twenty-first century.

3.VI.iii Contributions of the Thesis

What remains for consideration is, firstly, the proposed contributions of this thesis and, secondly, suggested avenues for further research. The primary subject sphere to which this thesis clearly contributes is that of contemporary Indian guru studies, an emerging field that has been presented already in 1.III.i (pp. 33-35). As observed at that juncture, a principal aim of this study has been to introduce Neem Karoli Baba for the academic analysis that a growing number of his peers have started to receive in the last years. Research pertaining to Satya Sai Baba (Srinivas, 2008), Amritanandamayi Ma (Warrier, 2004 and 2005) and Prabhupada (Ketola, 2008) provide recent examples here. To this point, our preceptor has been overlooked by scholars in favour of better known teachers, in particular those (such as those listed here) with global movements. Yet, as has been noted above (3.VI.i), the satsang that has succeeded this holy man has had an impact on the international spiritual stage to an extent that secures Neem Karoli Baba's preceptorial reputation. If for this reason alone, a study of him is

⁵⁷⁶ See 1.II.i, pp. 24-25

⁵⁷⁷ Broo, 2003, pp. 269-270

⁵⁷⁸ *ibid.* p. 272

warranted. An important twentieth century guru is presented for wider consideration and, simultaneously, comparative light is offered on other *bhakti* movements to have emerged in India in modern times. Following this line of thought, the proposed contributions to the field of guru studies are bi-fold. On the one hand, they concern direct appraisal of this elusive holy man's life and teachings and seek to locate him within the *bhakti* guru tradition and in association with the time-honoured Rāmāyaṇic connections that his devotees so heavily promote. On the other hand, the contributions of this research include an analysis of the motivations and workings of the community to have surrounded him and to have continued since his death. In this way, traditional reflections are intertwined with more contemporary considerations and the interplay between charisma and canon is shown to be both dynamic and of ongoing concern.

The second area to which this study proposes a contribution is closely related to the first and concerns the East-West religious dialogue of recent decades. It has been established in this thesis that an interesting proportion of Neem Karoli Baba's Western satsang have gone on to become significant players in the bringing of Hindu teachings and practices to contemporary Western audiences. In this study, the guru's most famous devotee, Ram Dass has received substantial attention. This has occurred for the first time within an academic study. The lengthy excerpts from his unpublished private correspondence appear here for the first time in any format. As the American has been a major personality in contemporary Western spiritual culture, the import of this contribution is not to be underestimated. Other devotees have also been brought to initial public notice in this medium. Whilst the attention herein has not been directly focussed on them (at least not for extended periods), their voices and opinions have been repeatedly heard throughout these pages in a manner hitherto not experienced.

There is also a contribution of method that concerns more generic matters of the source materials utilised on behalf of this study. A difference that may be established between the larger guru movements and that relating to Neem Karoli Baba is the extent of textual materials (including outsider publications) that exist in connection with them. In place of the sometimes extensive bodies of work and commentary from and about these more famous gurus, demonstrably less exists that is connected to this one. As has already been observed, the preceptor appeared to be more interested in the participation of life than in the commentary upon it and, with the exception of *Be Here Now*, no written material was available about him until after his death in 1973. Accordingly, much of the material that was compiled on behalf of this study (in particular for the latter parts of Part Two and the whole of Part Three) has been hagiographical in nature, including first hand insider accounts and unpublished archival sources offered by a community of living believers. Consequently, a certain ethical sensitivity

has been required from the present author⁵⁷⁹. In response, this thesis has not been written from the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion⁵⁸⁰. Instead it is, “located within the community of devotion... and engages in the ‘anthropology of credibility’”⁵⁸¹. Moreover, the orientation of this work has not been to provide explication of a man and his lineage that is definitive, but rather to contribute a relative narrative strand that may be interwoven into other commentative voices on *bhakti*. This manner of handling contemporary hagiographical sources has been revealing and marks a contribution of method that may inform similar studies yet to come.

3.VI.iv Considering Further Avenues of Research

From the previous section, it is apparent that there remain a number of related avenues of research that are yet to be explored within the field(s) indicated here. The purpose of this section is to identify a number of such lines that, because of either the present focal or spatial parameters, have not found inclusion here. Whilst this project has located Neem Karoli Baba within a Rāmāyaṇic context, there are other gurus of whom the same might be observed. Swami Papa Ramdas, for example, would make for an interesting study in this respect. Ram Thakur would mark another instance. As this last guru wrote his own version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, such an exercise might be especially useful. Furthermore, there are a number of twentieth century gurus who have found mention in this study who are yet to receive significant outsider and / or scholarly attention. There are certain parallels that might be drawn, for example, between (Muktananda’s guru) Nityananda and Neem Karoli Baba and yet, to date, the former is an important preceptor who remains to be appraised in this manner. Mukunddas Baba would represent an additional example. An obvious further avenue of research, therefore, would be a comparative study of twentieth century gurus of this nature.

It is clear that this study has remained located in Indological territory, both thematically and also quite literally. This positioning has been intentional and has been adopted in order to retain a suitable focus on its principal character. What have not been fully examined here are the varying contributions that devotees of Neem Karoli Baba have made in a Western context. There are three potential areas of investigation that could prove rewarding in this respect:

⁵⁷⁹ For similar deliberation on working with the Satya Sai Baba community, see Srinivas, 2008, pp. 334-335

⁵⁸⁰ In his study on Freud, Paul Ricoeur coined the phrase ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’. This represents an attempt to retain both science and art, at the same time as denying either an absolute status. He writes, “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience” (Ricoeur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, p. 27). He examines the thought of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as representing “three convergent procedures of demystification” (*ibid.* p. 34) that seek to distinguish between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘apparent’. The true meaning of religion is considered to be one stripped of false meaning.

⁵⁸¹ *ibid.* p. 335

research into the lives and work of particular individuals; into the translocation of kirtan as a communal spiritual practice; and into aspects of service that have found Rāmāyaṇic inspiration and yet experience a modern Western execution.

Of the first area that is identified here, it is true that the labours of both Ram Dass and Larry Brilliant are introduced in 3.IV.v and in 3.V. In both instances, this work was either directly sanctioned by the guru or, for the most part, performed during the years in which he was still alive and so able to give his guidance on such matters. This notwithstanding, both men have had quite exceptional careers in the years since Neem Karoli Baba's death and have made significant contributions to the contemporary Western spiritual landscape. Ram Dass continues to operate as an important spiritual teacher and author in his own right. Larry Brilliant's work with the Seva Foundation, and now his recent appointment as the "Guru of Google"⁵⁸², positions him as major philanthropic player in Western culture. Either of these two men could (and should) warrant a full-length study.

Of other areas that represent potential future avenues of research, it is apparent that a number of additional Western devotees of Neem Karoli Baba have gone on to establish serious careers as kirtan musicians in the West. Krishna Das, Bhagavan Das, Jai Uttal and Shyamdas have each contributed to the establishment of this traditional spiritual practice within a modern Western setting. Some interest in this phenomenon has been generated in recent years: both Rosen (2008) and Johnsen and Jacobus (2007) have published collections of interviews with modern Western kirtan practitioners and sections from both publications have found some inclusion in this thesis. Scholarly assessment of the manner and efficacy of this translocation could prove to be a rich investigative exercise and would serve to establish a greater East-West dialogue within contemporary sacred musicology.

Finally, there have been additional service or seva-related contributions from the Western satsang that could warrant further study. These offerings have been presented in a variety of forms. Aside from Larry Brilliant and Ram Dass, other devotees who have served in this way include Girija Brilliant as well as Mirabai Bush and Daniel Goleman (both introduced in 3.V.viii). Moreover, the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram and Hanuman Temple in New Mexico have been significant in this respect by providing a focal point for the service-related activities for devotees from the West. Again further research into this, in the form of a cultural or

⁵⁸² Of Brilliant's appointment in 2008 as the ethical director of the internet company, Google, Jeff Goodell writes, "He hung with Jerry Garcia, dropped acid with Wavy Gravy and helped wipe out smallpox in India. Is Dr. Larry Brilliant saving the world - or just helping Google to take it over?" (*Rolling Stone Magazine*, 17 April 2008, < <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story>>)

anthropological study, could prove rewarding. It would provide greater understanding of how and why these Eastern-based principles and practices (that have, in recent years, found popular translocation into a contemporary Western setting) might serve as a form of cross-cultural discourse that is informative to ongoing East-West religious dialogue.

APPENDIX 1

SELECTED GLOSSARY OF INDIC TERMS

The following terms are in Sanskrit unless prefaced with 'Hi' indicating that they are in Hindi. A pronunciation guide is offered by the word that follows each term in parentheses.

[Hi] 'āo' (aao): the command form of the verb ānā, 'to come'

ācārya (acharya): spiritual preceptor of a high order

adhikāra (adhikara): spiritual eligibility, suitability or authority

ādi-kavi (adikavi): the first poet (a title often given to Vālmīki)

advaita (advaita): non-dual

adhyāya (adhyaya): chapter

ānanda (ananda): bliss or delight

apsarā (apsara): celestial nymph

[Hi] āratī (aarti): ritual worship of a deity or guru that usually involves the waving of lighted lamps before the image and that is often accompanied by chanting or the ringing of a bell.

arcana (arcana): praise or honour

āsana (asana): yoga posture

āśram (ashram): residential place of spiritual practice, often connected to a temple

āśīrvāda (ashirbad): blessings

ātman (atman): the transcendental self; according to the *Upaniṣads*, the *ātman* represents ultimate universal existence

avatāra (avatara) :an incarnation of (a) God in human form

[Hi] bhajan (bhajan): devotional song, usually involving repetition of the names/s of God

bhakta (bhakta): devotee or lover of God

bhakti (bhakti): devotion

[Hi] bhaṇḍārā (bhandara): public feeding

bhāva (bhava): state of being, emotion, existence

[Hi] bhog (bhog): offering (usually of food) made to a deity

bindu (bindu): dot or point; the area where *śakti* is thought to converge in the body to create the potential of manifesting in the universe

brahmācārī (brahmachari): practitioner of brahmacharya

brahmācārya (brahmacharya): a strict lifestyle usually characterised by celibacy

brahman (brahman): ultimate reality

cakra (chakra): energy centre in the body situated along the length of the spinal column

[Hi] cālīsā (chalisa): form of devotional prayer

[Hi] *caupāi* (caupai): a metre or verse consisting of four lines

[Hi] *celā* (chela): devotee

[Hi] *cimṭa* (chimta): metal tongs

cirañjīvi (ciranjivi): one blessed with long life

dakṣiṇa (dakshina): gift, sacrificial fee

darśana (darshan): being in the presence of a saint or holy person, or being in a sacred place, primarily with the intention of receiving grace or blessings; also indicates a school of philosophy

dāsa (das): servant or slave

dāsyā bhakti (dasya bhakti): servile devotion

deva (deva): god, celestial being

devī (devi): goddess

dharamśālā (dharamshala): hostel or resting place for pilgrims, often attached to a temple

dharma (dharma): literally duty, or righteous conduct

[Hi] *dhōtī* (dhoti): length of cloth worn by men

dīkṣā (diksha): initiation

dūta (duta): messenger

gopī (gopi): wife of a cowherd, or any of the dairy maids of Vraja (in love with Kṛṣṇa)

[Hi] *gurubhāī* (gurubhai): a spiritual ‘brother’ devotee (in the sense of sharing the same guru)

[Hi] *gurudev* (gurudev): a divine teacher

[Hi] *halvā* (halva): sweet dish made of wheat grain, sugar and ghee (clarified butter)

havana-kunḍa (havankund): sacred fire pit

hṛdaya (hridaya): heart

itihāsa (itihasa): so it happened (relating to history); also relating to the Hindu epic literature, including the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*

[Hi] ‘*jāo*’ (jao): the command form of the verb *jānā*, ‘to go’

japa (japa): repetition of the divine name

jīva (jīva): the individual soul

jñāna (jnana): knowledge or wisdom

kalāśa (kalash): pitcher

kāṇḍa (kanda): chapter, section or ‘book’ within a single text

karma (karma): effect of a person's actions (in this and previous lifetimes) which determine a person's destiny

kathā (katha): a story, in particular one that is religious in nature

[Hi] ‘*khāo*’ (khao): the command form of the verb *khānā*, ‘to eat’

kīrtana (kirtan): devotional chanting and singing, usually involving a series of divine names

kriyā (kriya): purification rituals designed to awaken *kuṇḍalinī* energy; also, outward manifestations of inner *kuṇḍalinī* awakening, sometimes seen as sudden physical movements

krpā (kripa): grace or favour; *guru-krpā*, therefore, is grace arising from the guru's intercession or assistance

kuṇḍalinī (kundalini): spiritual energy that lies dormant at the base of the spine and which, when awakened, may be channelled upward through the body's energy centres

kuṭī (kuti): literally hut, in particular one where a holy person would stay

laḍḍū (laddu): round confectionary made primarily from ghee and sugar

līlā (leela): play or diversion

[Hi] *loṭā* (lota): metal pot, often one used to hold water

madhurā bhakti (madhura bhakti): erotic devotion

mahā (maha): great

mahāsamādhi (mahasamadhi): term used to describe the death of a saint or enlightened being

mālā (mala): string of beads, or garland

mandir (mandir): temple

mārga (marg): spiritual path

māyā (maya): the great illusion of one reality appearing as many

melā (mela): large religious fair

mokṣa (moksha): spiritual liberation

mudrā (mudra): a position or posture of the hands or body, often used in meditation

mudrikā (mudrika): ring

mukti (mukti): spiritual liberation

muni (muni): ascetic or sage who practises silence

mūrti (murti): a consecrated statue of a deity or of a guru

nirguṇa (nirguna): devoid of attributes or qualities

ojas (ojas): vitality, vigour or bodily strength

parabrahman (parabrahman): supreme reality, cosmic principle of absolute existence

paramparā (parampara): lineage of gurus

prāṇa (prana): vital breath or wind that is considered to pervade the cosmos

pra-ṇam (pranam): to bow (in greeting, and as a sign of reverence)

prāṇāyāma (pranayam): control of the breath

prasāda (prasad): an offering (usually, although not always, of food) that is made to or received from a guru or deity

praśasti (prashasti): the acknowledgement or praising of one's benefactors

pūjā (puja): prayers or worship, often involving flowers, incense, water, lamps and sweets

pujārī (pujari): one who performs puja, in general, at a temple

[Hi] *pūrī* (puri): round deep-fried bread
pūrṇimā (purnima): the day or night of the full moon
rākṣasa (rakshasa): carnivorous beings with superhuman powers
[Hi] *Rām-nām* (Ramnam): practice of the repetition of the name of Rām(a)
Rāma-kathā (Ramakatha): the legend of Rāma
Rāma-līlā (Ramlila): performance of the story of Rāma
rasa (rasa): sentiment (of devotion)
rṣi (rishi): seer or sage
roṭī (roti): unleavened bread, chapatti
sādhaka (sadhaka): spiritual practitioner
sādhana (sadhana): spiritual practice
sādhu (sadhu): holy person, often an ascetic
saguṇa (saguna): with attributes, qualities
sahaja (sahaja): natural, innate, inborn
śaiva (shaiva): referring to the devotees of Śiva and their ideology and practice
sakhya bhakti (sakhya bhakti): friendly devotion.
śakti (shakti): power, energy or life-force
śaktipāta (shaktipat): direct transmission of spiritual energy from guru to disciple
samādhi (samadhi): high state of consciousness, also used to describe the burial place of a holy person
sampradāya (sampradaya): a tradition of disciplic succession
samskāra (samskara): psychological imprints based on previous patterns of behaviour (from this lifetime or from previous incarnations)
samnyāsin (sannyasin or samnyasin): renunciate
śānta bhakti (shanta bhakti): peaceful devotion
śaraṇagati (sharnagati): self-surrender, refuge
satguru (satguru): true guru
satsaṅga (satsang): group of devotees or a spiritual gathering
sevā (seva): service
siddha (siddha): an enlightened being, a master endowed with spiritual power
siddhi (siddhi): a paranormal or spiritual power (classically thought to be eight in number)
śiṣya (shishya): a disciple or student
Śivalinga (Shivling): a *lingam* (phallic) stone cupped by a carved *yoni* (vulva) base, this represents a union of male and female principles and is associated with worship of the god Śiva
śloka (shloka): most common form of Sanskrit poetic metre, consisting of two lines

smṛti (smṛiti): that which has been remembered
śṛṅgāra bhakti (srngara bhakti): erotic devotion
śruti (shruti): that which has been divinely revealed
sūtra (sutra): condensed spiritual aphorisms
svāmi (swami): ordained spiritual teacher
tapas (tapas): austerity or disciplined practice
tilaka (tilak): mark or decoration on the forehead to show religious observance
upāya (upaya): technique or practice to attain liberation
vaiṣṇava (vaishnava): referring to the devotees of Viṣṇu and their ideology and practice
vairāgya (vairagya): non-attachment, renunciation
[Hi] *vālā* (wallah): a person in charge of or employed in a particular activity
vānara (vanara): being who lives in the forest
vajra (vajra): thunderbolt or diamond
vātsalya bhakti (vatsalya bhakti): parental devotion
vīra (vira): hero
yama (yama): restraint or moral discipline
yajña (yagna): ritual fire sacrifice or ceremony
yakṣa (yaksha): immortal nature spirit
yātrā (yatra): pilgrimage
yogi (yogi): a spiritual practitioner, often ascetical

APPENDIX 2

Hanumān Cālīsā: Forty Verses in Praise of Hanumān

(Attributed to Tulsīdās)

(Invocatory couplets)

Having polished, with the dust of my master's feet, the mirror of my heart,
I narrate the pure fame of Raghupati, which bestows life's four fruits.ⁱ
Knowing this body to be void of intelligence, I recall the Son of the Wind.
Grant me strength, intelligence, wisdom, and remove my afflictions and shortcomings.

(Verses)

1. Victory to Hanuman, ocean of wisdom and virtue,
Hail monkey lord, illuminator of the three worlds.
2. Rama's emissary, abode of matchless power,
Anjani's son, named "Son of the Wind."
3. Great hero, mighty as a thunderbolt,
remover of bad thoughts and companion to good.
4. Golden-hued and splendidly adorned,
with heavy earrings and curly locks.
5. In your hands shine mace and banner,
a thread of munja grass adorns your shoulder.
6. Shiva's son and Kesari's joy,
your glory is sung throughout the world.
7. Supremely wise, virtuous, and clever,
you are ever intent on Rama's tasks.
8. You relish hearing the Lord's deeds,
Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita dwell in your heart.
9. Taking tiny form you showed yourself to Sita,
assuming awesome form you burned Lanka.
10. Taking terrible form you slew demons
and completed Ramachandra's mission.
11. Bringing the healing herb, you revived Lakshmana,
and Rama, overjoyed, clasped you to his breast.
12. Greatly did the Raghu Lord praise you:
"Brother, you're as dear to me as Bharat!"
13. May the thousand-mouthed serpent sing your fame!"
So saying, Shri's Lord held you in his embrace.
14. Sanaka and the sages, Brahma and the gods, great saints,
Narada, Sarasvati, and the king of snakes,

15. Yama, Kubera, and the directional guardians,
poets, and pandits—none can express your glory.
16. You rendered great service to Sugriva,
presented him to Rama, and gave him kingship.
17. Vibhishana heeded your counsel
and became Lord of Lanka, as the whole world knows.
18. The sun is two thousand leagues away,
yet you swallowed it, thinking it a sweet fruit.
19. With the Lord's ring in your mouth,
you leapt the sea—what wonder in that?
20. Every arduous task in this world
becomes easy by your grace.
21. You are the guardian of Rama's door,
none enters without your leave.
22. Sheltered by you, one gains all delight,
protected by you, one fears no one.
23. You alone can contain your glory,
the three worlds tremble at your roar.
24. Ghosts and spirits cannot come near,
Great Hero, when your name is uttered.
25. Disease is destroyed and all pain removed,
brave Hanuman, by constantly repeating your name.
26. Hanuman releases from affliction
those who focus on him in thought, word, and deed.
27. Rama the renunciant reigns above all,
you carry out all his work.
28. Whoever brings any yearning to you
obtains the fruit of immortal life.ⁱⁱ
29. Your splendor fills the four ages,
your fame shines throughout the world.
30. You are the guardian of saints and sages,
the destroyer of demons, the darling of Rama.
31. You grant the eight powers and nine treasures,
such was the boon given by Mother Janaki.
32. You possess the elixir of Rama
and remain eternally his servant.

33. Singing your praise, one finds Rama
and forgets the sorrows of countless lives.
34. At death, one goes to Rama's realm
or is born on earth as his devotee.
35. Pay no heed to any other deity,
serving Hanuman, one obtains all delight.
36. All affliction ceases, all pain is erased,
when one recalls the mighty hero, Hanuman.
37. Victory, victory, victory to Lord Hanuman!
Be merciful even as is the Master.
38. Whoever recites this a hundred times
is released from bondage and gains bliss.
39. One who reads this Hanuman Chalisa
gains success—Gauri's Lord is witness.
40. Says Tulsidas, Hari's constant servant,
"Lord, make your abode in my heart."

(Benedictory Couplet)

Son of the Wind, banisher of affliction, embodiment of auspiciousness,
dwell in my heart, King of Gods, together with Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita.

¹ This *dohā* immediately follows the Sanskrit benedictory verses that open Book 2 (*Ayodhyā kāṇḍa*) of the *Rāmcaritmānas*. The traditional "four fruits" or goals of life are righteousness (*dharma*), prosperity (*artha*), pleasure (*kāma*), and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*).

ⁱⁱ Some Hindi commentators interpret this as "obtains immortal fruit in this life."

APPENDIX 3

Śrī Guru Āraṭī: Prayer in Praise of the Guru

Glory to you Gurudev, ocean of compassion, helper of the downtrodden, the support and wellwisher of your devotees. Glory to you! Glory to you! Destroyer of ignorance and remover of worldly ties. Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

Brahma [the creator], Vishnu [the preserver], and Shiva [the destroyer] are all different forms of the Guru. The Vedas and Puranas all describe the greatness of the Guru. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

One can perform recitation of mantras, penance, go on pilgrimages, do other kinds of benevolent works and millions and millions of other spiritual practices, but without the grace and support of the Guru one cannot attain realization. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

In the deep waters of ignorance and attachment all souls are drowning [and unable to save themselves]. The Guru picks them up and brings all of them inside the ship of the holy Name and thus saves them. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

Lust, anger, pride, and envy are the cunning thieves [which rob the poor soul of its divine capital]. The Guru, with the sword of knowledge in hand, destroys all these thieves. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

There are many paths in this world and the followers of each path praise their own. The Guru explains the essence of all paths and puts the disciple on the right path. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

For the protection from the five thieves, the Guru bestows on the disciple the arrow of the Name. Simply offering loving devotion causes the Guru to pull us out of our worldly ocean of sorrows. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

The holy water of the Guru's lotus feet is able to remove all sins from the disciple's mind. The Guru's words remove all darkness and doubts from the heart of the disciple. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

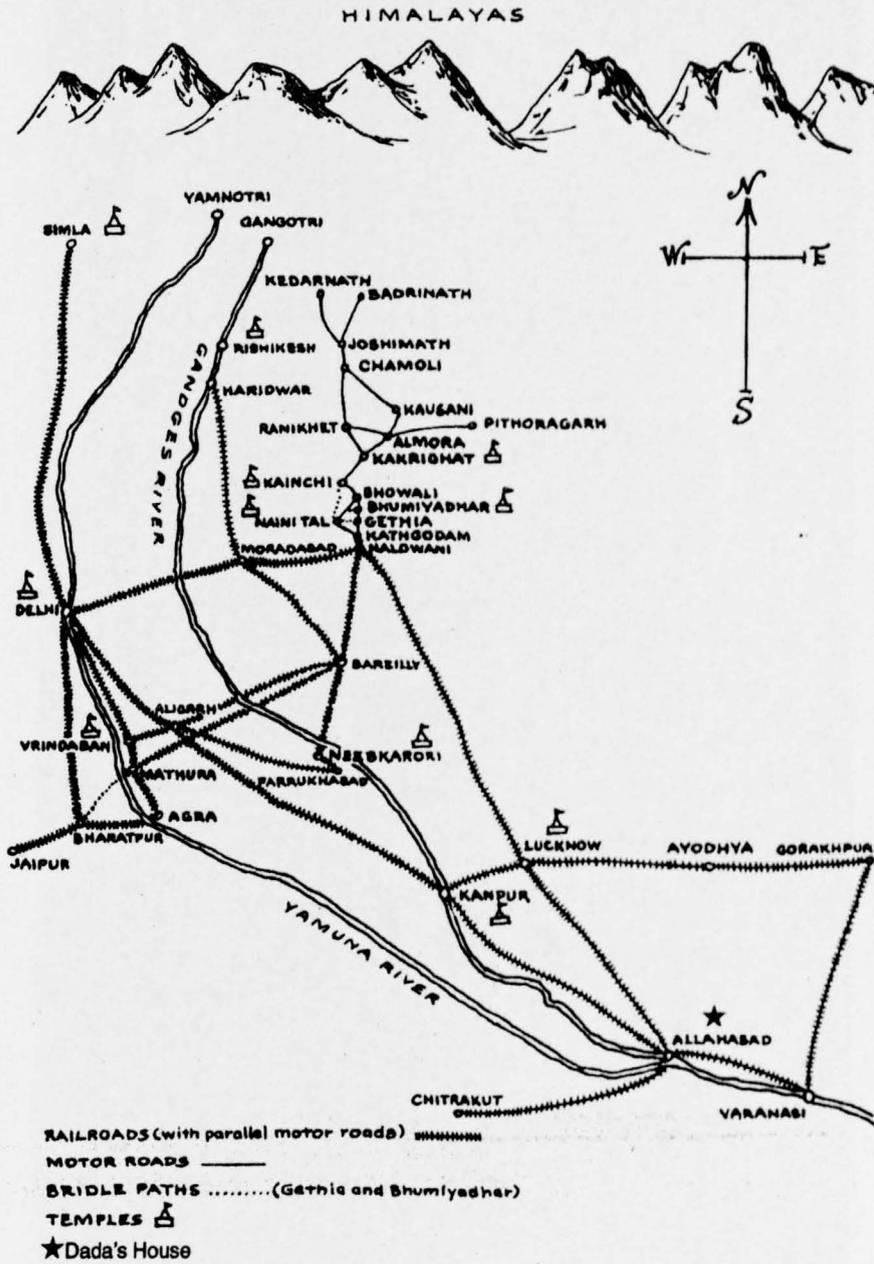
Surrender body, mind and wealth [achievements] at the holy feet of the Guru and thus attain the supreme bliss of Brahma and the highest seat of spirituality. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

It is certain that whoever recites the arati of the Guru daily will easily cross the worldly sea of attachment and ignorance and will attain ultimate bliss and peace. Om, Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

Glory to you Gurudev, ocean of compassion, helper of the downtrodden, the support and wellwisher of your devotees. Glory to you! Glory to you! Destroyer of ignorance and remover of worldly ties. Glory, glory, glory to you Gurudev.

APPENDIX 4

A Map of "Maharajji's North India"



APPENDIX 5

Handwriting from the Diary of Neem Karoli Baba: 'Rāms'

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Selected Photographs of Neem Karoli Baba and his Satsang

Listing of Photographs

Photograph 1: Earliest known photograph of Neem Karoli Baba.

Photograph 2: Neem Karoli Baba in his middle years.

Photograph 3: Neem Karoli Baba in his later years.

Photograph 4: Taken at Kainchi Dham, a female devotee performs *āratī* before the guru. In her right hand she is waving a lighted brass lamp.

Photographs 5–10: Neem Karoli Baba gives darshan. That the guru was double jointed may be seen in photographs 5 and 9. Devotees consider some of his hand gestures to represent auspicious *mudrās*.

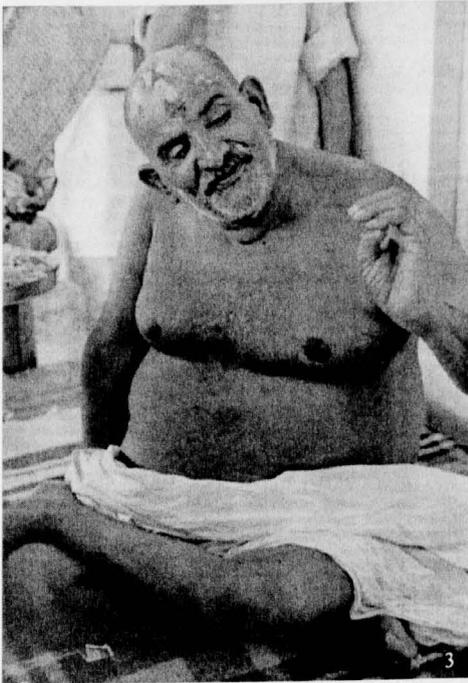
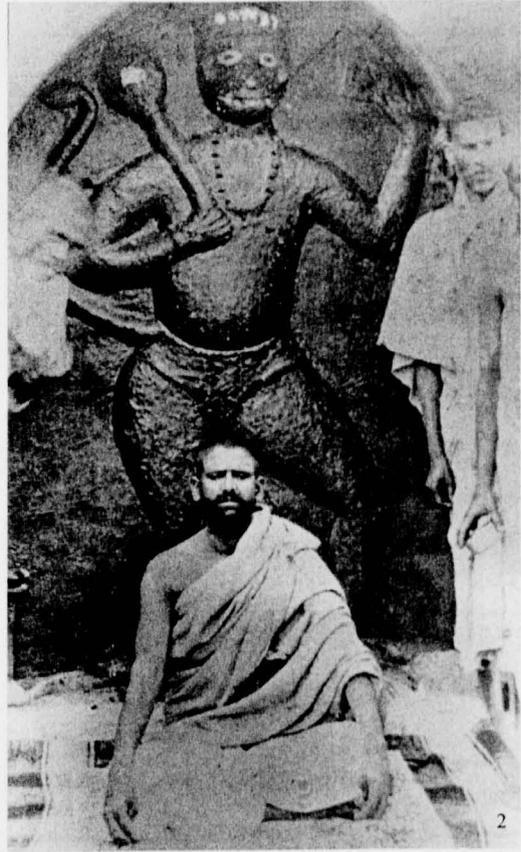
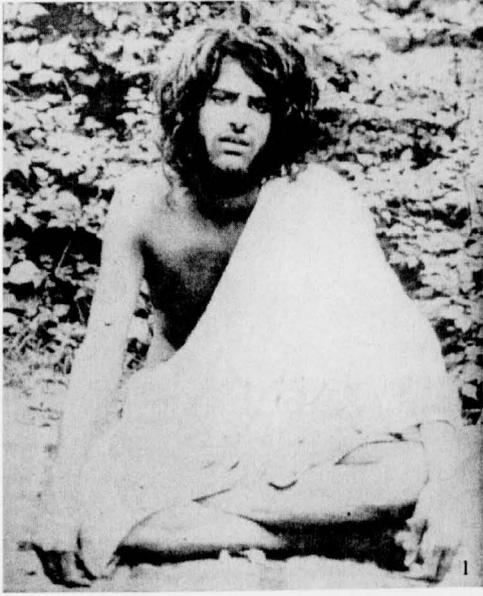
Photograph 11: Two favoured attendants, Jivanti Ma and Siddhi Ma, sit before their guru.

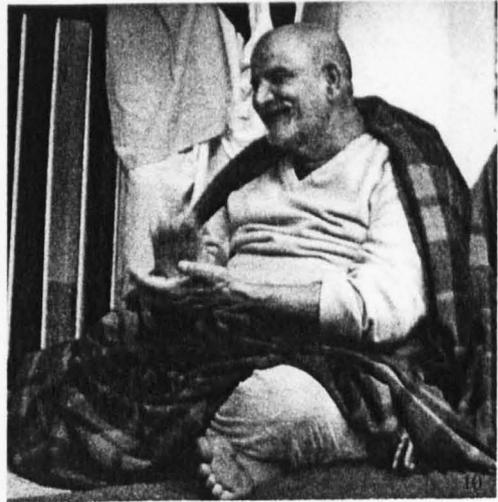
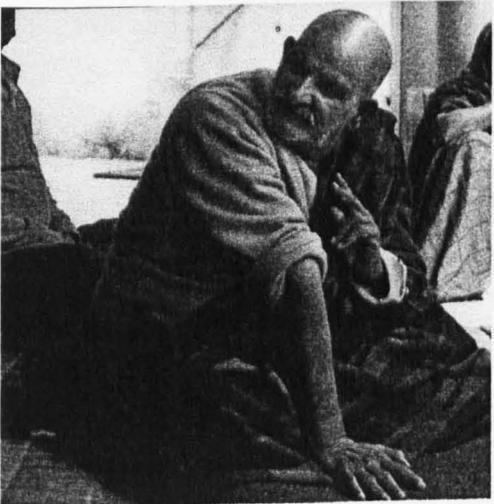
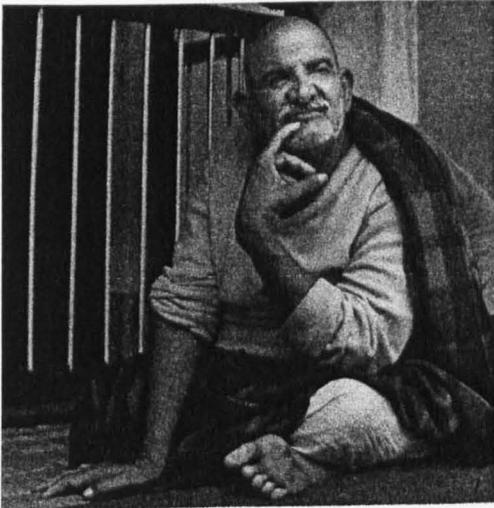
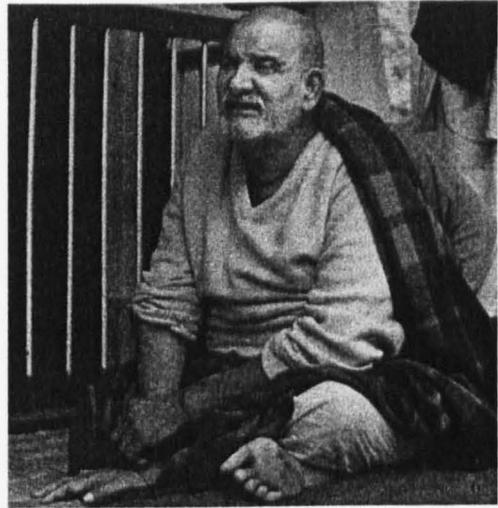
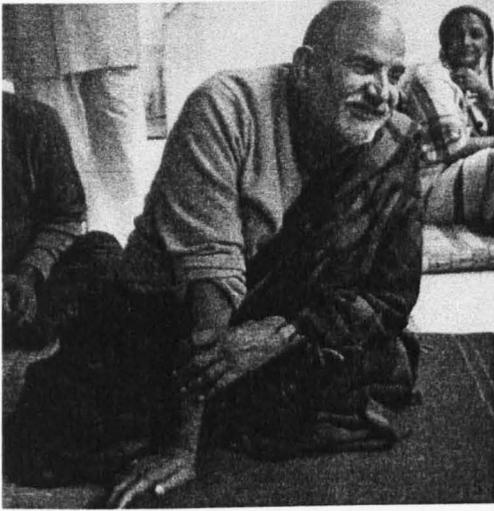
Photograph 12: K.K. Sah accompanies Neem Karoli Baba.

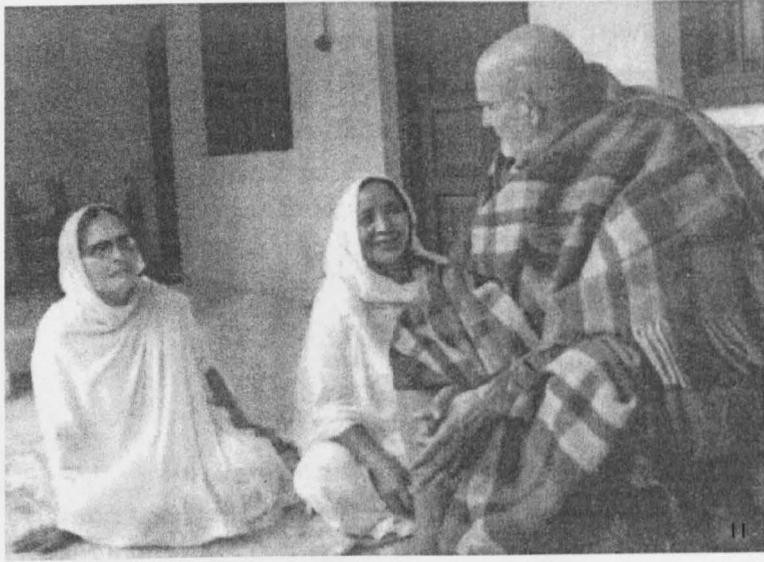
Photograph 13: Also taken at Kainchi Dham, Ram Dass sits quietly before the guru's tucket.

Photograph 14: Taken during Ram Dass' first visit to India, this photograph of the rooftop courtyard of the Sah family home in Nainital shows K.K. sitting with Ram Dass and Bhagavan Das.

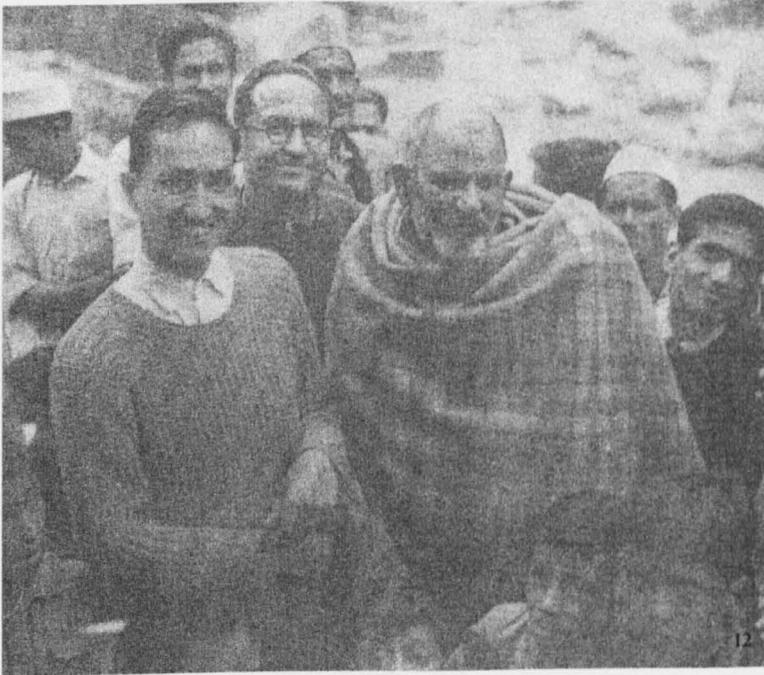
Photograph 15: Known fondly as the 'Nainital High' photograph, this group portrait is of the Western satsang, with the addition of K.K. Sah who is stood second from right in the back row. The photograph was taken on the main terrace of the Evelyn Hotel in Nainital.



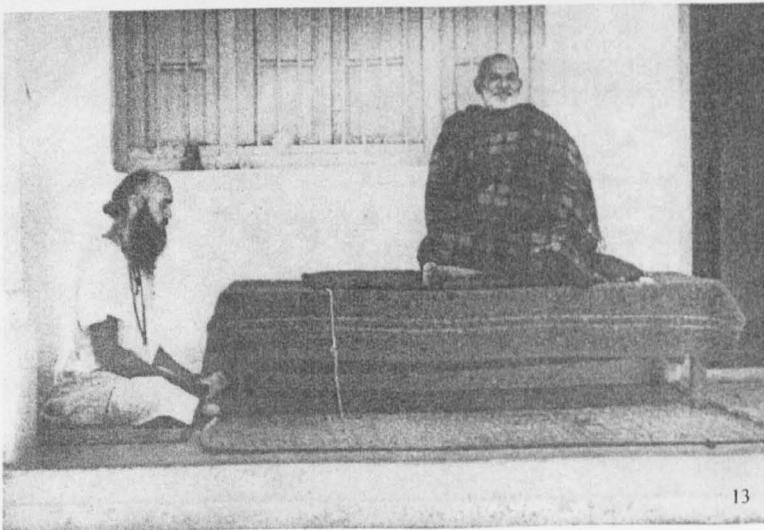




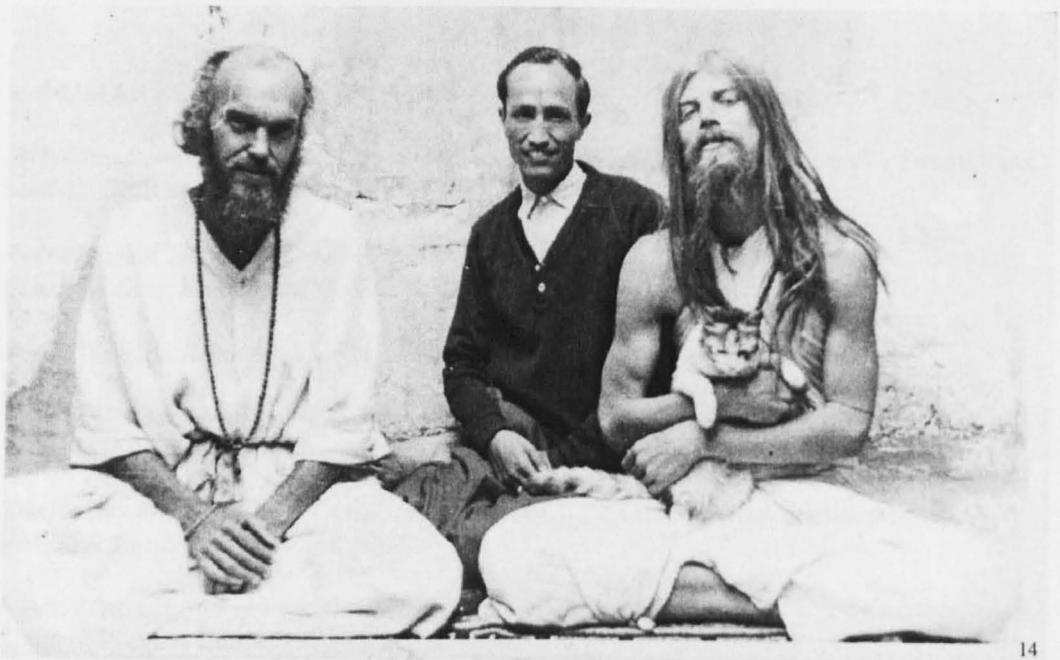
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Ram Dass comp. 1995, unnumbered pages, photographs 12, 13, 15

Pande, 2005, p. 143, photograph 4

Michau, Prema comp. 2008, p. 69, photograph 11

K.K.Sah, *Personal Collection*, original in possession of K.K. Sah, Nainital, photograph 14

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