

The Long and Winding Road

Death of a Serious Seeker:
An Autobiographical Account by Mary Adams

FROM THE FIRST DAY Andrew Cohen entered my life, I was fascinated and thrilled by his undeniable clarity and fiery passion for the truth. It rang a long-forgotten note inside me. My husband, on returning from a recent trip to India where he had met Andrew, had invited him to England to teach. He was now staying with us in Devon.

Very quickly each evening the living room of our small, stone cottage began to fill with people, seekers curious and eager to meet this unusual young man from New York who reportedly had not only attained Enlightenment, but possessed the rare ability to awaken others. Word had spread in the surrounding community of my husband's experiences in India and of the obvious changes in him through his association with Andrew. Within days it was apparent that something extraordinary was taking place. Night after night our small cottage rocked with explosive realization as people, through their questions and dialogues with Andrew, began to open up and spontaneously let go in the most profound way possible. The atmosphere was electric, charged with the thrill of the unknown and an intimacy that was almost tangible.

Although I found his presence thrilling, at the same time I felt strangely uneasy and I kept myself on the

sidelines. As I looked at my husband, whose countenance was radiant, I recognized a fire in his eyes, the glow of an awakened passion and conviction that I had not seen in him for years. I knew that I too had once shared that passion.

Images of the past twelve years floated before me and my mind went back to where it all began.

IN THE LATE SPRING OF 1975, during my first year in India, I traveled to a small town called Manali situated 4,000 feet up in the Himalayas in the beautiful Kulu valley. There the air was filled with the scent of pine needles mingled with the smell of the wood burning fires from the local tea shops.

During my first few days I unexpectedly discovered that a meditation retreat was being held further up on the mountain. I was told that visitors could go in the evenings to listen to the discourses given there. I made my way up the mountain that night. On entering the meditation room, softly lit with kerosene lamps, I observed twenty to thirty silent figures sitting on the floor cross-legged, wrapped in woollen shawls. The atmosphere was strikingly still and peaceful. A young western Buddhist monk sat at the front of the room.

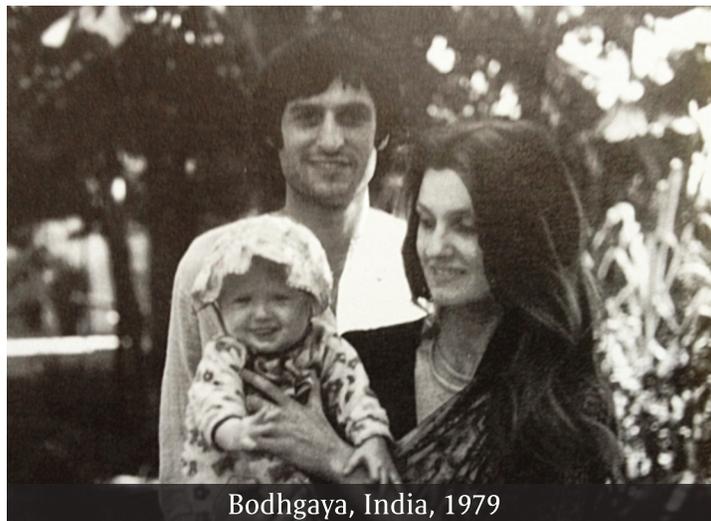
After ten minutes of silence he began to speak. The topic was “Inner Freedom.” He spoke clearly and unflinching, with an unmistakably English accent. To my surprise, he boldly asserted with utmost sincerity that inner freedom, that mysterious jewel, man’s ultimate goal, was utterly attainable here and now. I sat riveted, oblivious to the cramping in my legs. I don’t know how I knew, but I knew that what he was saying was true. I returned each evening for a week. His message had a powerful effect, suddenly defining my somewhat vague spiritual aspirations. By the end of the week I signed up for his next retreat.

Little did I know that this was the first step in what would become years of singular dedication to the pursuit of liberation. The young monk’s name was Luong Pe. During my first retreat with him, amidst the monotony of intense boredom and flights of fierce restlessness, I experienced for the first time moments of deep peace and effortless clarity. When the first twenty days of retreat came to an end, sensing I was on the brink of something extraordinary, I jumped at the chance of doing another, more extended retreat with him. ’

One month later I found myself on a beautiful ridge with breathtaking views high above the noisy bazaars of Dalhousie. About forty of us rented three large wooden houses which served as our retreat center for the next four months. Under the guidance and unwavering encouragement of Luong Pe, who had now

become our teacher, we immersed ourselves in intensive meditation practice and inquiry. Weeks gradually dissolved into months and as our practice deepened, the world seemed to recede farther and farther into the background. Sitting on that mountaintop, gazing down on the valleys below submerged beneath swirling monsoon mists, it felt as if we had entered another dimension where time and our personal histories had vanished. There was a luminous quality to this dimension. Living and practicing intimately together, day after day, a remarkable atmosphere developed in the group. Although we were from different countries, with dif-

ferent backgrounds and different life stories, we were drawn together through our fascination with and desire for this mysterious jewel called Enlightenment. This mutual goal and our undivided dedication to it not only united us in a powerful way but seemed to ennoble us, lifting us out of the petty, selfish preoccupations that generally divide



Bodhgaya, India, 1979

people. An extraordinary intimacy, joy and seriousness pervaded the group throughout the retreats. It was as if we met, at least temporarily, in something far beyond ourselves, and in this tasted the marvelous possibility of life unfettered by personal preoccupation. At one point our teacher, himself inspired by this phenomenon unfolding before him, spoke of the possibility of starting a community in the West solely dedicated to Enlightenment and living a spiritual life. In retrospect none of us fully realized or appreciated the significance and rarity of what had occurred between us. Those

months in Dalhousie had a profound impact on me. A deep conviction had taken root that the genuine attainment of liberation was without a doubt the most important goal in life.

For the next three years I lived in south India near the ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi. It was there that I met up with my future husband, who had also been part of the group in Dalhousie. We found in each other a mutual intensity for spiritual practice and inquiry, and spent long hours engaged in passionate debate over Ramana's teachings and our meditation practice. Often, after circumambulating the sacred mountain which loomed above the ashram, we would end up at dawn, sitting in a tiny tea shop still engaged in endless exploration. Our growing friendship only fueled our passion for liberation. Living in two small thatched huts, we supported each other in doing long weeks of solitary meditation during which each of us provided food for the other. Spurred on by our deepening experience and by each other's enthusiasm, we seemed to have endless energy for meditation, often sitting for sixteen hours or more a day. My body became highly sensitized, experiencing sounds as delicate as the flight of a bird as strong physical sensations. High levels of concentration would at times produce explosive insight. However, over time it became clear that these experiences were not enough. Within weeks or even days of emerging from retreat, this delicious, heightened state of consciousness that we were experiencing would soon subside. Gradually it became apparent that no deep or permanent transformation was occurring and that we were in need of further guidance. We began to seek out reportedly enlightened teachers and sadhus.

For five years we traveled the length and breadth of India, sometimes alone, sometimes together, but

always sharing our experiences and always urging each other further on. During that time we met some of the greatest and some of the most obscure spiritual teachers of this century. At times as a result of these encounters I would experience rapturous ecstasy and profound states of nondual consciousness, which would last for days, sometimes weeks at a time. However, without exception these precious glimpses of freedom faded. My husband had the same experience and we both noticed that our meditations began to change. They were no longer as fresh and revelatory as they had been in the past. For myself, I now felt that rather than being on the brink of the unknown as before, I was always trying to recapture something. There was no doubt in either of our minds that something fundamental was still missing.

In the fall of 1978 we had a child together. We continued however to live the homeless life, taking turns caring for the baby as we alternated being on retreat. But it was different now; it had become more of a lifestyle. Each January we would make a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment, to organize a retreat for Luong Pe, who had now disrobed. Ever since his first year teaching in India, this had become an annual event. Through him we kept up contact with our old friends and discovered that he had already started the community in England that he had envisioned years before in Dalhousie. Aware that we had reached a spiritual plateau, we were attracted by his inspiring descriptions of communal life in the West. These, along with our own memories of the magical time we had all spent together on retreat, led us after much consideration to finally leave India and join the community in England. It felt like the beginning of a new chapter.

AS WE PULLED INTO THE DRIVEWAY of our new home and I glimpsed a group of familiar faces waving excitedly, my heart leapt. It was a joyous reunion. Our first few days in England passed in a haze of animated stories and endless cups of English tea. There were about twenty people living together in the community at the time, a large two-storied country house with three acres of generous grounds set in a storybook English village. It became apparent however, that in spite of the beautifully kept flower gardens, the huge, well-tended organic vegetable plot and the organized daily running of the community, a lot had changed since our days together in India. We were surprised to find the meditation room was hardly ever used and felt cold, bleak and uninviting. People no longer spoke about liberation or about the importance of being free, here and now in this life. In fact, the passion for going all the way and the conviction that this was possible seemed to have all but gone. In its place, issues such as choosing a line of "right livelihood" and working on relationships had become the priority. Worst of all, this shift of perspective was reflected in the community's central figure, Luong Pe himself. It seemed his fundamental interest and emphasis had shifted from the urgency of Enlightenment to green politics and the social ills of the world. I was shocked when the first dharma talk I listened to in the community was on the importance of giving up smoking. Topics of this nature appeared with increasing frequency in his talks. With such a loss of vision, an atmosphere of fragmentation and undercurrents of tension plagued the group. Even Luong Pe and his young female colleague, who had recently ended their relationship, were lost in personal conflict. There was no doubt this had a spiritually debilitating effect on the group. Although we came together for regular meetings there was hardly a trace of the intimacy or inspiration we had so effortlessly shared in Dalhousie

together. The focus of these meetings rarely rose beyond the mundane details of living together. Endless hours were spent discussing interpersonal conflicts, which for the most part were never resolved.

Initially my husband and I were disillusioned and disoriented by the situation. Our first impulse was to leave and return to India. The reality of our financial situation, however, caused us to choose to stay and make the most of it. Overwhelmed by the practical responsibilities in our new life and afraid to challenge those we had respected in the past, we fell into compromise. Despite my acute discomfort, I gradually found myself fitting in. Without being aware of it, like those around me, I soon lost touch with my own passion and single-pointed desire for freedom. As the months passed, even the memories of the exquisite experience we had all shared together five years before faded, along with the vision of what was possible.

TWO YEARS LATER, along with several of the original members, we left the community and moved to the south-west of England. There, unlike the conservative village we had left behind in Kent, the local town was unusual with its unapologetic alternative flavor. Local bulletin boards were bursting with courses, workshops and seminars of every spiritual and therapeutic ilk. We were captivated by this smorgasbord of alternative delights. Very quickly we rented houses in the area. There was an unspoken understanding among us that none of us wished to live under the same roof again. Unvoiced grievances had created separation and intolerance and many of us now secretly believed it was not possible to truly live together harmoniously. The irony of this in a group ostensibly concerned with truth, love and nonseparation did not occur to us. In fact, on the contrary, we still considered ourselves to

be close friends and serious practitioners and a core group of us set about establishing a meditation retreat center in the area. Soon old friends appeared, returning from Thailand and India or visiting from the States to do retreats. Many ended up staying on and slowly a loosely knit community began to evolve. It felt like a new beginning. In the summers we would go together to the J. Krishnamurti gatherings held each year in Brockwood Park. There, sitting around campfires in the evenings, we would immerse ourselves in the thrill of dharma debate and discussion once again. The disappointments and bruises of the past two years had slowly faded; unfortunately so had the lessons. None of us really questioned the compromised condition we had come to accept, nor the apparent ineffectiveness of so many years of spiritual practice. What had it all amounted to? We never deeply considered the fact, nor the implications, of the failure of the spiritual community we had all left behind in Kent. Instead we were happy to forget it, like a bad dream.

FOUR YEARS LATER, through a strange twist of fate, it was the unexpected appearance of Andrew Cohen in our living room that threatened to rupture the bubble of delusion and spiritual stagnation that my life had become.

Ever since my days in the community in Kent, I learned to push aside feelings of discomfort as I drifted into an ever deepening state of compromise and complacency in my own life. I had joined the ubiquitous treadmill of retired seekers, doing several meditation retreats a year, making regular trips to India and combining therapy with meditation practice to try to bridge the gaps. Without realizing it, the glorious possibility of true freedom had long since dimmed and faded, and with it had gone the innocence which had

originally propelled me on my search. Unknowingly I had reached the cynical conclusion that "this" was it. When I looked around at my closest friends, most of them veteran seekers like myself, some of them spiritual teachers, I saw nothing to challenge this assumption. We had now become a group built on good intentions and our past, a past comprised of years of spiritual practice. Over time we had grown accustomed to each other's shortcomings and rarely challenged each other to rise to a higher standard, all of us secretly aware of our own failings. Despite the undercurrents of mistrust and conflict that continued to exist in the group and the declining state of most of our marriages, mine included, almost unbelievably we still never thought to seriously question either individually or collectively the efficacy of the spiritual community we had established. At times we would call on the services of a local therapist who unsuccessfully tried to help us deal with tensions between members of the board of what had now become an internationally respected meditation retreat center. I had taken up training in psychotherapy, my daughter was in an alternative school, I was engaged in "right livelihood" and I had a lot of friends. In fact I was a pillar in the local community. When my husband had left for India some eight months earlier to take the risk and follow his heart once again, I like many of our friends had been privately skeptical. I had wondered if, after so many years of having given so much of his life solely to spiritual practice and having met so many of the great spiritual teachers already, anything new could actually happen. With the arrival of Andrew on the scene, the very ground on which all these assumptions were built, including my own identity, became dangerously shaky.

From the very beginning, Andrew's frank, uncompromising realness and the absolute nature of his teaching posed a serious threat to many of us. His insistence on

the black-and—whiteness of truth and the personal implications of this stood like a glaring beacon in a foggy world of all-encompassing grayness, a world where good intentions were enough and where no one was held accountable for their actions. My first few months with him proved to be difficult. I experienced an ever-widening gap between myself and those of my friends who had been profoundly affected by him, including my husband. Because of my investment in my identity, pride and fear kept me locked in denial of the reality of my own life. Despite this ambivalence however, I could not deny that something extraordinary was taking place, and like a moth to a flame I attended almost every teaching. Slowly the situation created a deep, insistent internal pressure. It was in Amsterdam some three months later that the lid of my resistance and self-deception finally blew off. In an explosive realization I saw the utter falsity of an imagined, separate self-existence, the illusion of which I had been so desperately clinging to. I saw with crystal clarity the charade my life had become. For the first time I was witnessing my own death, something that even in the most sublime experiences of nonduality I had never truly embraced. Tears poured down my cheeks. Fear and pride vanished, replaced by an immense sense of relief, of freedom and extraordinary oneness. The agonizing gap between two worlds which I had been trying to straddle miraculously closed. I felt enormous gratitude. I knew I had come home.

Immersed in this revelation I turned to my husband who was sitting beside me and was astounded to see, of all things, fear in his eyes. I couldn't believe that after having been so eager to share the source of his newly awakened inspiration with us upon his return from India, he would now retreat in fear the moment I finally let go. What happened that evening caused me to reevaluate everything. Nothing was the same.

RETURNING TO ENGLAND, I wanted very much to share with my friends that the marvelous possibility which we had all tasted so many years ago was entirely within reach. However, I was completely unprepared for the lack of interest, mistrust and estrangement that I encountered. Rumors flew around the town. Old friends would cross the street to avoid contact and telephone conversations became short and brittle; suddenly there was "no time for coffee." Most of my old friends withdrew behind a wall of disapproving silence. There was no interest, even on a human level it seemed, in opening up or inquiring into the unthinkable possibility that something truly extraordinary was taking place. I was struck by what I now saw as profound cynicism. "Keep back one percent, always one percent," my former teacher warned me emphatically. I knew he was wrong. Within that one percent lay the difference between heaven and hell, liberation and bondage. That one percent would always contain the seeds of doubt, fear and separation. "That one percent is, and always will be, the problem," I replied excitedly. Seeing my newfound conviction, the color in his face drained. His voice shaking slightly, advice turned to anger. "Your reputation in this town will be in shreds!" he shouted. Like so many of my old friends he seemed to be terrified. Unknowingly, I was betraying the status quo that we had created and of which I had been such an integral part. It seemed that an unbridgeable gap had developed between us. I now knew my life as I had known it was over.

On the other hand, I found myself in the midst of what seemed to me an unprecedented explosion of joy and ecstatic revelation. Word spread like wildfire of the dramatic changes that were taking place in many peoples' lives. Within weeks people were spilling out of our living room and we had to rent a larger space for Andrew to teach in. There was no doubt he had ignited

a fire in our souls which was consuming our lives. Walls of separation crumbled. We spent endless hours, day and night, engaged in inspired investigation. Whether at the teachings or at a coffee shop in town, we were constantly immersed in this unfolding revelation. It was as if an insatiable force had been released in us which found its expression when two or three or more of us came together. I discovered an intimacy I had never experienced before, both with friends I had known for years and people who were almost strangers. It was magical.

IN THE SPRING OF 1988 I left my past behind and with my husband and child joined Andrew in America. Along with many others who had awakened from a deep sleep, I threw myself into the hurtling current of profound exploration that was taking place

around him. The destination was unknown; we were all aware of this. It was terrifying, exhilarating and utterly choiceless. The priorities of our separate lives had undergone a radical shift. In the face of discovering a mystery far beyond ourselves, all prior interests had suddenly paled in significance. The conscious choice to give ourselves to our desire to be free created a powerful bond between us. As a natural step we began living together. Many of us barely knew each other but there was an unusual delight and excitement in sharing this precious jewel we had_ all discovered. A rare intimacy, shocking in its depth, existed between us based on our mutual



London, England, 1994

recognition and experience of nonseparation. There was an extraordinary power in being together because everyone wanted the same thing. Coming together for this and this alone, we transcended the boundaries of self. In our passionate desire to be free, we began to relinquish the need to protect or maintain any personal identity or self-image. This meant that very often we were able to be completely real, undefended and vulnerable with each other, something I had never encountered before. Much of the time the atmosphere was remarkably free of the unspoken games people usually play. We were no longer inter-

ested in keeping up any pretense with each other. Instead we were more interested in finding out what was true. I felt I had entered another world, a world devoid of deception and inauthenticity. Often it felt like paradise!

As we evolved into a stable community, a deepening trust developed

between us which allowed for an uninhibited investigation of our own condition and the nature of spiritual freedom. Firmly held ideas about myself began to dissolve. No longer hiding, I felt as if I was stepping out of the shadows, able to face life fully and openly as never before. Slowly love began to take the place of fear.

As time went by however, we all began to understand that true love has a price. In living so closely with others, the lack of trust that had characterized my marriage for so many years began to stand out in stark contrast to the profound intimacy we were all sharing. Although I found it personally challenging, because of

my passionate desire to be free I knew I had to let go of my marriage and face the insecurity and aloneness it had shielded me from. Difficult as this was at the time, it led to the discovery of a new depth of confidence and trust in life itself. I came to realize that real spiritual life begins with a profound reckoning. Do I really want to be free or not? Once this choice has been made one's relationship to life changes radically. One begins to recognize the profound significance of each and every action and in that recognition one feels compelled to take absolute responsibility for one's life.

Looking back I understand what made the time I spent with my old friends in Dalhousie almost twenty years ago so special; why it left such an indelible impression and a bond between some of us that still exists today. During that time we had also come together out of a mutual recognition and desire for something beyond ourselves. Temporarily transcending petty self-centered concerns, we tasted intimations of true intimacy. It has become equally clear over time why the community in Kent ultimately failed. With the loss of that transcendent goal and perspective, we all inevitably reverted to the mechanical condition of selfhood where separation, lack of trust and self-protection rule. A true community acts as a vehicle, a catalyst for profound evolution, but in order for it to serve this purpose, each individual must be willing to be "a light unto themselves," possessing an independent interest, love and Commitment to the truth. How rare in history is the phenomenon of genuine spiritual community and how important is its function! For if all its members are truly committed to the discovery and manifestation of Truth, there will be no limits to its evolutionary potential. I now understand why the Buddha included Sangha (spiritual community) in the Triple Gem, citing, "keeping the company of likeminded people" as being of equal importance to the teacher

(Buddha) and the teachings (Dharma). The yearning in each of us for intimacy and true love, and the commitment, strength and sustained transcendent perspective needed to bring this to fruition is extremely rare and delicate.

EIGHT YEARS LATER the explosion that first began in that small Devonshire cottage has mushroomed into a community of people dedicated to fulfilling that yearning. This community now spans three continents. My life has come full circle. I am back living in England, helping to run a center in London that has evolved to support the momentum of passionate interest in the truth that has developed here over the last few years. On entering the tranquil, cobbled courtyard tucked behind the noisy streets of London, I make my way to the meditation hall. There seated inside is a large group of silent figures immersed in the gathering stillness of the evening. As I gaze momentarily at the clear, dignified faces around me, I feel a surge of love and extraordinary oneness with these people who are part of the community that has formed here in response to Andrew's teachings. I know that we have entered an unfolding mystery, the nature of which is endlessly fascinating and always unknown. The yearning which propelled me on my search almost twenty years ago has found utter fulfillment in the rare and powerful phenomenon of true spiritual community. Closing my eyes, I am aware of the profound peace and happiness of knowing without a doubt that I have truly come home. ■