

Learning from Nature

“NATURE IS THE greatest teacher,” said my mother while we were walking from home to our farm.

“Greater than the Buddha,” she continued, “for even he learned from nature. He became enlightened while sitting under a tree, contemplating on the compassionate, generous, ever-giving tree. While observing the banyan tree under which he was sitting, the Buddha realised that the fulfilment and self-realisation of the tree was in its being that which it is, never trying to be anything other than a tree. As tree it was always available to those who came to it: the birds could nest in it, the animals could rest under its cool shade, and everyone could benefit from its fruit.”

I was only eight years old, listening to my mother, and yet this was something I could understand. She would talk to me in more or less the same way that she would talk to my older sisters and brothers. For her, I was not ‘a child—an underdeveloped adult’. She always talked to me about matters of great substance.

Yet Mother was an illiterate woman: she could not read, nor write. She could not even sign her name, and on a document she would put her thumbprint. But she was both deeply religious and an intuitive philosopher.

My mother, whose name was Anchi Devi, was born in 1900, in the small town of Momasar in Rajasthan. Her parents were farmers, so she grew up on the land. Therefore, her religion, her spirituality, her philosophy and her way of life were part of her experiences, rather than a result of any formal education.

Mother was short and slim with bright eyes. The wrinkles on her kind and thoughtful face were clear evidence of an active and eventful life. She wore traditional clothes: an earth-coloured skirt with tie-dyed red circles on it, full and long, a black blouse and a dark brown cotton wrap which went over her shoulders and head, and veiled her forehead. All her clothes were woven, dyed and stitched locally in our town. She adhered to the Jain religion. Everything she did was underpinned by a religious view of life.

My father, Hiralal Sethia, was also Jain. His family lived fifteen miles away in another small town, Sri Dungargarh. His parents were merchants, trading in grain. What my mother's family grew, my father's family traded.

"After only three or four years of our marriage I felt a sense of loss," my mother recounted, "I didn't know what to do with myself—no land, no trees, no animals. So I persuaded your father to purchase some land. At first he was reluctant, but when he realised that we could have our own milk, butter and ghee, fresh fruit and vegetables, his taste buds persuaded him, and I was so happy."

This was very unusual. Generally speaking, Jains do not farm. They believe that farming is not conducive to their practice of non-violence, which is a central principle of the Jain religion. In their eyes the use of animals, even for ploughing, is a form of violence. While cultivating the land we may harm insects. Jains also avoid using honey because it deprives bees of their food. The use of silk and leather also involves violence to living creatures, and is therefore undesirable. But my mother had her own point of view in this matter. As long as we eat food, someone has to grow it, and therefore it is better to grow it ourselves, and grow it with care. In our family, as in all Jain families, we were strict vegetarians. No one dreamed of eating meat, as that would totally disqualify one from being Jain. But some Jains like my mother saw the violence of farming as unavoidable and acceptable. Non-violence to her was refraining from avoidable violence and from the intention to harm any creatures unnecessarily, or due to lack of care.

LIFE FOR MOTHER was a tapestry made up of millions of small acts, but each one was an essential contribution to the realisation of that tapestry. She did not believe in great acts of heroism; she believed in small actions performed with great love and imagination.

Mother gave to all material things a high value; she saw matter as the vehicle of the spirit and therefore she handled all things with reverence.

When I look back to my childhood I realise she was one of many women whose life and soul were formed and informed by Jain teachings. Mother believed that the whole of life should be lived as a spiritual practice, as a meditation. Self-realisation is not something for tomorrow, not somewhere far away in the distance; it is here and now in all our actions, guided by reverence for matter, reverence for work, reverence for life.

Being a Jain family, we did not live as isolated individuals; we were not taught to stand on our own feet and fend for ourselves. Ours was a relationship of mutuality: mutual sharing, mutual caring, no privacy, no private possessions, no private wealth; everything belonged to the family. This was particularly evident in Mother's life; she found her fulfilment and happiness

in taking care of the family and being an inseparable part of the community.

Our family lived in a house built of local stone, around two courtyards. The inner courtyard was connected to an outer courtyard where cows were milked, herbs were grown, rainwater was collected, guests were accommodated, and corn was dried, threshed and winnowed. The whole set-up was very simple. Everything was in good order and seemed amply sufficient for our needs. The family business, which was based on trade in grain and jute, brought enough income in cash to keep the needs of the family well supplied. We were not rich, we were not poor, and we never thought of these categories.

The collection of the monsoon rainwater was part of our psyche. In the courtyard was a covered water tank, in which we collected the rainwater from the roofs of our house. This was as integral a part of our home as the grain store or the kitchen. The tank held all our drinking water for the entire year and never failed us.

Most of the households of the town had such water tanks. Harvesting of the monsoon rains was one of the major activities of the whole people of Rajasthan. Everywhere there were small water ponds, large water ponds, lakes, step wells, in the town, out of the town, between the fields—there were clusters of water stores wherever possible. There were wells ancient and modern, and new wells were always being dug. It seemed to me that the collection, conservation and preservation of monsoon water and the system to hold it was the most important communal preoccupation. There was a big water tank in the western part of our town. From that tank the watermen and women brought us our daily supply of washing water. Our share of water was one bucket per person per day. For Jains the wasting of water was a serious matter. Very early on my mother taught me a water sutra:

Waste not water
 Nor ever spill it
 Water is precious
 Water is sacred
 The way you use water is the measure of you
 Water is the witness
 Water is the judge
 Your reputation rests on your careful use of water.

Mother would say, “The monsoon is a great friend of the people and the Earth. The monsoon comes once a year and brings the gift of water. Our task is to receive the gift with gratitude, to thank the rain god, and make use of water with care and reverence. Our task is to live in harmony with the monsoon and celebrate it. God Surya, the sun, and God Indra, the rain, are twin brothers and all life depends on them.”

IN OUR COURTYARD there was a wild plum tree. It was a big tree and I loved climbing it. "When I came to this house, the courtyard was totally bare. So I planted the plum tree. Isn't it amazing that from the tiny seed I put in the soil such a lovely tree has grown." Once again Mother was in the mood to speak. She used the seed and the tree as a metaphor to illustrate her philosophy of change, of birth and death, of continuity and impermanence. She said, "As a seed is capable of becoming a tree, all human beings are also capable of realising their own full potential. In order for the seed to become a tree it must be planted in the soil—underground, in the dark, and almost forgotten. In relationship with the earth, the seed surrenders its separateness, its identity, its individuality, its ego. In fact, the seed allows itself to become one with the earth, only then its hidden energy bursts open and we see the green shoots emerging like a miracle."

I remember Mother talking like this. She used to go into a trance, and almost forget where she was and what she was doing. There was a kind of mystical quality about her, the like of which I have rarely experienced. When my mother spoke like that I would be transfixed too.

"Don't you think, my little one, it is a miracle? That tiny seed I planted thirty years ago has produced no one knows how many plums, and every one of those plums with a new seed in it. And all that from one seed. This is how I understand the meaning of eternity, and even the meaning of reincarnation." It was good that Mother did not muddy the waters by quoting any great scripture concerning eternity and reincarnation. Instead, she just pointed to our plum tree. Its fruit that I had eaten year after year, its branches on which I had climbed uncountable times, and the shade under which I had slept, were all so close to me.

"In the same way we human beings have to let go of our pride, our separateness, and not bother about our individual identity. If we immerse ourselves in the process of life, and trust the process of the universe, and identify ourselves with others, we can become the tree of a thousand branches and a million plums."

When I was eight years old, listening to Mother talk like this, I was a bit puzzled and said to her; "Of course I am a separate person, separate from you, from my brothers and sisters, from my friends. So how can I not be separate?"

Mother kept silent for a while. She went to the kitchen and I followed her. By now the rice was ready so she served it to me with vegetables and dhal. As I started to eat, I relaxed. My question was no longer occupying me. But Mother had not forgotten it. So she picked up the conversation at the right moment and said,

"You know, you are right, you do need a sense of the self, there is a place

for it. Individuality and wholeness are complementary, not contradictory—like the seed needs the shell. Without the shell the seed is incapable of forming itself as a seed. Similarly, we humans have our identity giving us a sense of separateness, but a time comes when the seed needs to grow into a tree. That is the point of transformation. As the seed goes through transformation and realises itself as a tree, the shell is no longer necessary, and has to disintegrate in order for the seed to integrate with the other elements.”

The rice and dhal Mother had served me was delicious, and I was more keenly absorbed in eating than in listening to her words. But somehow her words penetrated more deeply because I was not paying too much attention. Maybe, who knows, it was Mother’s idea that she should speak to me like this while I was busy eating my lunch, and my sister Suraj was humming while washing the clothes.

Whether or not I was concentrating, there was no way to stop Mother. “The seed comes from the tree and goes on to become a tree. The seedness of the seed is only transitory; there is the transition from seed to tree, so why get hooked on that? Similarly, we humans, each and every one of us, have our individuality, but this individuality is transitory. Our individuality may be more apparent than real. Would you exist without me, my son? Would you exist without the food you are eating? Would you exist without the ground on which you are sitting? Our individuality is dependent on others. Individuality is indivisible.”

Although Mother was illiterate, she had learned many songs, poems and verses of our Jain religious literature by heart. One she recited was: “Souls render service to one another, and thus find salvation.”

She related this verse to the seed and said, “Seed serves the earth, and the earth serves the seed. A tree sheds its leaves to the earth, and the earth gives nourishment to the roots of the tree. Thus souls are serving each other and being fulfilled.”

“What about your lunch, Mother, aren’t you going to eat?”

“No, no food today, I am fasting.”

ANOTHER DAY, Mother and I were walking to our land. It was early in the morning. The vastness of red sky behind us was breathtaking. I asked, “Where does so much of this red colour come from?”

“It’s a mystery, my boy, a mystery.”

“It seems like someone has spilt tons and tons of red paint upon the sky!”

“Look at the beehive on that tree.”

Mother was more captivated by the the bees than by the beauty of the the sky. “Bees go from flower to flower, taking only a little nectar here and

a little nectar there, and doing no harm to the flower. How gentle and restrained they are. Never has a flower complained ‘the honey bee came and stole away my nectar’. It is as if the bee knows it cannot exist without flowers, and the flower knows it cannot be without bees. But what do human beings do? When we start to extract the bounties of the earth, we know no limits, we go on taking and taking until the earth is depleted. What do the bees do with the nectar? They transform it into sweet, delicious and healing honey, while pollinating the plants. How many humans can do that? When we humans take the gifts of nature we cause so much waste and damage. If we could only learn from nature, we would take from the earth without violating the earth, and what we do take we would transform into something like honey, and return it as the tree’s leaves return to the ground. Nature knows no waste.”

OUR FARM WAS about three miles from our home, so generally it took over an hour to walk there in the morning, and an hour to walk back in the evening. Two hours of walking most days suited Mother very well.

“Your father used to come—when he did—on horseback, but I always said to him, why ride a horse when we have perfectly good legs to walk? And how would you like it, if a horse wanted to ride on you? Your father would laugh, but never use his legs.” Normally Mother was quite complimentary about Father, but she wanted him to walk with her so that they had time to talk together. Mother rarely talked about trivial things, she liked to talk about meaning and mystery. But my father, a busy businessman, was more concerned about where the bread and butter was to come from rather than infinity and reincarnation.

I noticed that Mother had an expression of sorrow on her face when she mentioned my father. Father died when I was four years old, so I hardly knew him. I am my mother’s son. I have always thought of and talked about Mother. I know of Father only by what Mother told me about him from time to time.

Sometimes people are puzzled that I speak so much about my mother. People say to me: In the West we don’t talk about our mothers—it seems like you have a mother complex. I am not too worried about it. I learned so much from my mother that I like to acknowledge her influence on me.

It may be that, because our modern culture makes children reluctant to acknowledge and appreciate their mothers, many mothers have lost the sense of close connection with their children.

Father was involved in business, and not with the land. Therefore, he was less able to appreciate the beauty of nature. Mother found this awkward. However, Mother did appreciate Father’s high-mindedness in business.

“He used to say,” Mother recalled, “I am in business to make friends, and serve the community. Profit for me is by the way. One has to make profit and balance the books, otherwise the business will go bust, but profit is not the main motivation. Profit oils the wheels, but the purpose of operating the wheels is not to consume oil but to produce something for people. Profit is necessary but not primary. Making friends and forming relationships is much more fun. That is why I am in business.’” This made Mother very happy. She always believed in a simple way of life.

“Too many possessions take too much of your time,” Mother believed. “You have to clean them, look after them, use them, store them; if you are always busy with material things, when do you have time for reflection, meditation and service to the community?”

So if Father did not bring much money home, that never bothered Mother, but Father not going for a walk in nature did disappoint her. As Mother was talking I could see her eyes getting moist; she was about to choke, but she did her best to hold her composure. It was clear that even though Father had died four years ago, Mother’s feelings towards him were still tender. She quickly returned to her thoughts about walking.

For her, walking was the best way to exercise. It was better than yoga and better than running.

“Have you sweated today?” Mother would ask sister Suraj and me. “If not, go for a long brisk walk. Sweating cleanses the poison of the body and opens the pores. It keeps the skin healthy. Moreover, you get a free foot massage given to you by the sand. The herbs and grasses rubbing against your feet give you subtle doses of herbal treatment.” She laughed.

For Mother, walking was much more than physical exercise, it was a meditation. Touching the earth, being connected to the soil, and taking every step consciously and mindfully, was supremely conducive to contemplation.

“Our Lord Mahavir, the great prophet of the Jain tradition, attained enlightenment while walking. This was dynamic meditation. Mahavir was meditating on self and world simultaneously, whereas in sitting meditation one is much more likely to focus on the self alone.”

Mother was not self-centred. That is why she was out and about, flowing with the wind and finding spirit in nature. When I recall those days of walking with Mother, I realise that maybe that’s why all my life I have enjoyed walking. Long-distance walking has presented no problems to me.

As I walked with her, Mother would teach me to breathe properly, and ask me to pay full attention to breathing. “Paying attention is meditation,” Mother would say. She must have thought that if she could introduce the idea of walking and meditating into my mind at such an early age, I would never find them daunting. In particular I remember her saying, “Focus on

the moment between the in-breath and the out-breath. Observe the subtle point when you are neither inhaling nor exhaling. No need to prolong that moment, no need to hold the breath. Just observe.”

Mother had learned this technique from a nun who had practised meditation over twelve years. Jain nuns and monks walk barefoot every day, and use no other conveyance; therefore, they are the masters of walking meditation. I was lucky that I could learn meditation from my mother, without much effort.

“Breathing connects you with the world. You are sharing the same breath of life, the same air, with all humanity. You are connected with everyone through this invisible medium: you share the same breath with animals, birds, fish, plants—the entire universe. How wonderful that we are all connected through our breathing. Air knows no barriers, no boundaries, no distinctions, no separations. By paying attention to your breathing your sense of separateness is dissolved.

Once she had told me about this technique of breathing she would stop talking, and we would walk together for ten to twenty minutes in silence.

“Should I pay attention to my feet touching the earth or to my breathing? I can’t do them both at once, can I?” I remember asking Mother.

“Yes, you can. Don’t think about breathing, nor think about walking. Meditation is not about thinking on these things. Just let it happen.” Only much later did I understand what she was saying; that meditation is not a self-conscious action, it is a way of letting go of thoughts, ideas, techniques and methods. Just to be—be aware, be attentive.

In the beginning, one learns the letters of the alphabet, but later on when one uses them in reading and writing one doesn’t think about the alphabet, nor even of individual words. One flows with the language and the meaning; so with meditation.

Mother was very fond of the mantra ‘Aum shanti, shanti, shanti’. She would chant this, sometimes aloud and at other times silently. “Sometimes my mind is too full of family affairs or farming matters. But when I use the mantra all thought-clouds disperse. Chanting is enchanting. It enables you to rise above, to transcend and be free of your mental maze. So whenever I am lost, the mantra helps me to be re-enchanted.

“‘Mantra’ is a sacred word that has been charged and recharged by constant repetition. The more you chant the same mantra, the greater the potency. Mantra sweeps your mind clean. In Sanskrit ‘man’ means the mind and ‘tra’ means liberation. You liberate your mind through chanting. You become free of all mental tangles.

“This is why Hindus, Buddhists and Jains have used the technique of chanting mantras, and often share the same mantras.”

A Hindu Mind

ONE DAY AS Mother and I were returning from our fields, we met my brahmin teacher, Gopalji, a forty-year-old philosopher. Mother was very fond of him. Gopalji, though not a Jain, had much in common with my Mother in the way he saw the world. Outwardly, Gopalji looked very much like an orthodox brahmin. A well-dressed man, he wore a light saffron-coloured shirt (*kurta*) which was hand-spun and hand-woven in a nearby town. Over his shoulders he wore a white cotton shawl, upon which the sacred names of Radha and Krishna were printed, so that at no time should he forget that these gods were his true companions. His head was clean-shaven, apart from a long plait of black hair growing from his crown. His sandals, decorated with colourful threads, were handcrafted by the local shoemaker. He was tall and slim. We, the pupils of our little school, revered him greatly. He was our hero.

That day Gopalji was not feeling too well. He had caught a cold and was suffering from a headache. Mother invited him to come to our house so that she could give him a herbal drink. Neither tea nor coffee were ever used in our house. We had no kettle, no gas and no electricity. We did not use coal. For the Jains, coal-mining is a form of violence and to be avoided wherever possible.

The only fuel used in the house was wood and cow dung cake. The latter was considered particularly good and appropriate. In the desert, wood is scarce and cow dung is plentiful. Young boys and girls go around the grazing land and collect the dung, mix it with straw, shape the cakes and dry them in the sun. They would sell them to us. In addition, our own cows and buffalos produced dung which was turned into fuel. Dung was never used for compost: only the leaf and vegetable waste which the cows did not eat was put on the compost heap.

Some embers were always kept covered under ash, so that Mother could quickly revive the fire by adding the dung cakes to the embers. She boiled the water in a saucepan with cinnamon, dry ginger, cardamom,

black pepper and a few leaves of *tulsi*, the Indian basil plant. Mother and Gopalji were totally devoted to this plant. The healing properties of *tulsi* are such that it helps to cure most ailments; it restores the self-renewing capacity of the body. The brew was never called tea, she called it *ukali*, which simply means ‘spicy concoction’! Gopalji called it *yogi chat*.

In many homes in India a *tulsi* plant is an essential part of the household. It is believed that *tulsi* is a gift of Lord Shiva. It is not only a healing herb but also a deity. So every morning Mother would water the plant and then bow with both palms together, as a mark of her worshipful devotion. Gopalji believed that “The *tulsi* plant represents the entire vegetable kingdom. So by respecting *tulsi* you are paying homage to all plants. Likewise, the river Ganga represents all the waters of the world, so by making a pilgrimage to the Ganga we acknowledge the sacredness of water itself. The cow is holy. She is a symbol of the entire animal kingdom, and therefore all animals are sacred. The religious tradition has highlighted a particular plant, a particular animal or a particular bird as sacred only to remind us that all life is sacred.”

As we drank *ukali*, Mother asked Gopalji why the mantra of ‘Aum shanti shanti shanti’ has become so universally recognised as the supreme mantra?

“If you chant this mantra, the very sound of it is enough to make you return to your centre. It is like the *tulsi* plant, the river Ganga, or the holy cow, it is a sacred word to make all words sacred.

“Aum is made up of three sounds, A, U, M. In Sanskrit, ‘A’ is the first and ‘M’ is the last letter of the alphabet, while U represents all the letters in between. So in the mantra Aum the entire structure of the language is distilled. It is the essence of all speech and of all existence, because according to our ancient tradition, existence itself emerged out of the sound ‘Aum’.

“Goddess Uma, the consort of Lord Shiva, takes her name from the mantra Aum because she is the mother of all creation. Uma means mother. The mantra Aum is the Mother Principle. It means all, whole, complete. In Aum nothing is left out and everything is included.”

While Gopalji was speaking Mother became totally absorbed, and her *ukali* was getting cold. I could see why Mother was so fond of Gopalji. He had such a clear and simple understanding of the matters which interested her.

Gopalji knew the *Bhagavad Gita*, which means Song of the Lord, one of India’s great scriptures, by heart. He considered this “the most beautiful and eloquent poem ever written, where sound, mind and meaning converge.” Gopalji was a Sanskrit scholar—although I don’t know what difference that made, since Mother was as fluent in elucidating profound truths. Her illiteracy was no handicap. I was happy that I grew up in the company of such a mother and such a teacher.

Gopalji had not finished; he was enjoying himself in explaining the meaning of Aum to Mother.

“Aum is an affirmative mantra. It simply means ‘yes’—yes to existence, yes to the sun and moon, yes to trees and rivers, yes to our friends and families, yes to you and me, yes to this brew we are drinking, yes to life and its beauty. It is a mantra of acceptance and openness, a mantra of positive thinking. We should chant it as often as we can. There is no fixed time for it. We don’t have to sit cross-legged in a room to chant it; we can chant it while eating, bathing, walking—any time.”

There was a pause. Mother poured more ukali into Gopalji’s brass cup. In our house there was neither glass, china, nor plastic. Utensils were made of metal: brass, bronze and silver. Gopalji held the cup with a handkerchief, as there was no handle, to avoid being burned. He was savouring the drink. After allowing a brief breathing space Mother probed him further:

“Then how about shanti, shanti, shanti?”

It seemed as if Gopalji was waiting for such a question, and I was waiting too. Conversations between Mother and Gopalji were never boring.

“‘Shanti’ in Sanskrit simply means peace. Peace is the ultimate discovery. Aren’t we all searching for peace? When we are at peace we can find happiness and fulfilment.”

“But why do we say it three times?” Mother asked.

“First of all we have to make peace with ourselves by accepting who we are. Each and everyone of us is a particular manifestation of the universal energy. We need to recognise that particularity and ‘eachness’; that individuality. Often we have a habit of despising ourselves; ‘I am not good enough’ is a very common expression. This means I am at war with myself. Unless I make peace within, how can I make peace without? Without inner peace no outer peace can be realised.

“If our society is full of people who have self-respect, have no negative thoughts, and who have achieved a degree of peace of mind, then naturally they will not fear any ‘enemies’. But if spiritually we have not been able to overcome our personal fears then it is very easy for governments and military leaders to encourage fear of an external enemy. Every day they tell us about the enemies. It suits them. It is in their interest. They want to create fear and keep us in fear. We are ruled by fear. Fear of our neighbours, fear of Hindus, fear of Muslims, fear of Christians, fear of other countries. We are all divided into different groups and fear somebody. We even fear our wife or husband, or fear our children. No wonder that we have leaders who spend much of the world’s resources on armaments! It may not be so easy to see the connection between spiritual peace and political peace, between inner peace and world peace, but these two aspects are inseparable, totally interlinked.

“As long as we expect the world to change in our image, it will not change. The fear, the mistrust, the competitiveness, the insecurity that we see between nations and their leaders are rooted in us. The fear we have in our lives accumulates, and becomes national fear, national mistrust, national disunity, national insecurity.

“So unless we begin with ourselves we cannot achieve peace; we cannot even begin to understand what peace means.

“Once I have made peace with myself I have to make peace with the world. Like thinking ‘I am not good enough’, we also think ‘My family is not good enough, my work is not good enough, society is not good enough, government is not good enough.’ We are possessed with this negative force, and therefore there is no peace. So we need to recognise the essential and intrinsic goodness of the world, and build upon it the ideal world of our dreams. Then we will have world peace.”

That was the time of the second world war, so he continued, “There is a false superiority from which we suffer: ‘I am better than you, my religion is better than yours. My country is superior to yours’ and so on. This kind of thinking produces inter-religious and international wars. Therefore, making peace with other races, religions and nations is included in this chant.” Gopalji paused for a moment.

“And why do we invoke peace the third time?” Mother asked.

“When there is world peace, then we make peace with nature, with the cosmos, with the gods—with the universe. The world does not only consist of humans, and therefore we need to make peace with all life forms, going beyond the human world. The whole earth is one family—humans, animals, birds, plants—all are related, and therefore we chant ‘peace’ three times so that it prevails and permeates these three spheres, personal, social and cosmic. We send our noble thoughts of peace to all corners of the universe, and we let noble thoughts of peace come to us from all the corners of the universe.”

Mother had no watch, and nor did Gopalji. I could sense that Gopalji was ready to leave, yet somehow he felt that what he had said was inconclusive. He stood up, and so did Mother and I, but we did not move.

Gopalji looked serious, and he said: “But we mustn’t think that personal peace is separate from world peace, nor world peace separate from cosmic peace. It is not that we have to wait for world peace until we have achieved personal peace. Personal, political, and planetary peace are to be pursued together. One includes and reinforces the others. One kind of peace is not possible without the others. The three dimensions of peace belong together.” Gopalji smiled. Now he looked relaxed and with both palms together he bowed. Mother bowed to him and I touched his feet. He put his hand on my head in blessing.