

Every escape is bound to fail

The following interview with Alexander took place in 1988. It seems like an eternity ago. For me it was a time of the after effects of a spiritual search in which people of the same generation from all parts of the world searched en masse for new ways and dimensions of religious experience and came into contact with the contrasts between West and East. We had learned new concepts and ideals, values and norms. 'Spiritual' communes sprung up everywhere; we were building a 'new world' that collapsed again, as always and yet again. In written or translated texts, words such as Guru or Spiritual Master or Him and Her were written in capital letters and He or She were treated as deities as is still the case in India and its surrounding countries.

It seems to me now, in 2002, that my interview with Alexander reflects the spirit of that time. 'It seems old fashioned' writes Sietske Roegholt in reaction to a letter I wrote, 'to think that way about teachers who after all nowadays would rather be a friend or are still so young in their 'complete or not complete' realization...' We both find that a new time has arrived, that of the complete demythologizing of the teacher. Some people cheer that on, others are holding their breath. Are we throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Are there probably not enough people of the caliber of Nisargadatta among us at this moment? Questions without answers. Whoever knows can say it.

One of the reasons that this interview has never been made public before, is that Alexander always taught me that disciples should never know how their spiritual master came to clearness; it would lead them to make ideas about how 'it ought' to happen to them. Now, 3 years after his death I notice two things: a. almost every day a new spiritual master, man or woman, appears, and b. they speak openly about their realization. And the seekers? Slowly it has penetrated them that 'it' is only a 'happening' that moreover has as many forms as there are people.

What Alexander had foreseen, has long become 'reality', no matter how much he would have found that to be bad; the West has made much of the Eastern religious experience its own. It is in the nature of things that this new flower has come, because that's the way it must happen, that's how it is and that's how it always will be in the Play of Consciousness.

b.b., 21.10.2001

In conversation with Alexander Smit.

Alexander at the age of 25.

September 1988.

Location: the kitchen of his house on the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam. We were busy going over the translation of THE NECTAR OF THE LORD'S FEET (Dutch title SELF-REALIZATION) by his Spiritual master Nisargadatta Maharaj and he wanted to do an 'interview 'for a change, as a sort of practice. The interview has survived a computer crash, break-in and theft, because luckily I had typed it out and printed the tape previously. I have preserved this as a treasure for years. Until now.

Alexander met Nisargadatta in September of 1978. In the beginning of September of that year Jacques Lewenstein had been in India and come back with the book I AM THAT and tapes of Nisargadatta.

Alexander: That book came into the hands of Wolter Keers. He was very happy with it, because after the death of Krishna Menon (Wolter's spiritual master) he had not heard anything so purely advaita. After Wolter had read the book he decided to translate and publish it 'because this is so extremely good'. Wolter gave me the book immediately and I was very moved by it. Then there was an article in Panorama or The New Revue: GOD HAS NO TEETH. A poorly written story by the young man who did Showroom (TV). There was a life-sized photo of Nisargadatta's head in it. That was actually my first acquaintance with Nisargadatta. By then Wolter had already told me: 'I can not do anything more for you. You need someone. But I wouldn't know who.' But, when he had read I AM THAT he said: 'If I can give you a piece of advice, go there immediately.' And that I did.

What were you seeking?

I was seeking nothing more. I knew everything. But, if you had asked me what I had learned I would have said; I don't actually know it. There is something essential that I don't know. There was a sort of blind spot in me that no one knew what do with. Krishnamurti knew nothing that he could say about it. Bhagwan was for us at that time not someone that you would go to, at least for this sort of thing. Da Free John was also not it. Those were the known people at that time. I had a blind spot. And what typifies a blind spot is that you don't know what it is. You only knew that if you were really honest with yourself, if you really went to the bottom of yourself, that you had not yet solved the riddle.

For the first time in Bombay?

A little staircase going up to an attic room. First came my head, and the first thing that I saw was Mrs. Satprem and Nisargadatta. There were maybe three or four people there.

'Here I am', I said. And he said: 'So, finally you came.'

Yeah, that is what they all say, that I heard later, but for me it was the first

time that I heard it. I did have the feeling when I went in that now it was really serious. Now there is no escape possible, Here something is really going to happen.

Naturally I had already met many of these people: Krishnamurti, Jean Klein, Wolter, Swami Ranganathananda, Douglas Harding, and also some less well known Indians. I was naturally too young for Ramana Maharshi and Krishna Menon. They died in the fifties. I was 7 or 8 years old then. That is not the age to be busy with these sorts of things.

It held also true for us at that time, 'wait' for a living master. And I had a very strong feeling that this was the man that I had been looking for. He asked if I were married, what I did, and why I had come to India.

What precisely did you want from him?

Self-realization. I wanted to know how I was put together. I said: 'I have heard that you are the greatest ego killer who exists. And that is what I want.' He said: 'I am not a killer. I am a diamond cutter. You are also a diamond. But you are a raw diamond and you can only be cut by a pure diamond. And that is very precise work, because if that is not done properly then you fall apart into a hundred pieces, and then there is nothing left for you. Do you have any questions?'

I told him that Maurice Frydman was the decisive reason for my coming. Frydman was a friend of Krishnamurti and Frydman was planning to publish all of the earlier work of Krishnamurti at Chetana Publishers in Bombay, And that he had heard from Mr. Dikshit, the publisher, that there was someone in Bombay who he had to meet. (I AM THAT was of course not yet published at that time because Frydman had yet to meet Nisargadatta). Frydman went there with his usual skeptical ideas. He came in there, and within two weeks things became clear to him that had never become clear with Krishnamurti. And I thought then: if it all became clear to Frydman within two weeks, how will it go with me? I told all this to Nisargadatta and he said: 'That says nothing about me, but everything about Frydman.' And he also said: 'People who don't understand Krishnamurti don't understand themselves.' I thought that was beautiful, because all the gurus I knew always ran everyone down. It seemed as if he wanted to help me relax. He didn't launch any provocations. I was able to relax, because as you can understand it was of course a rather tense situation there.

He said; 'Do you have any questions?'

I said; 'No.'

'When are you going to come?'

'Every day if you allow me.'

'That's good. Come just two times every day, mornings and afternoons, for the lectures, and we'll see how it goes.'

I said: 'Yes, and I am not leaving until it has become clear.'

He said; 'That's good.'

Was that true?

Yes, without a doubt. Because what he did — within two minutes he made it clear, whatever you brought up, that the knowledge you presented was not yours. That it was from a book, or that you had borrowed or stolen it, or that it was fantasy, but that you were actually not capable of having a direct observation, a direct perception, seeing directly, immediately, without a mediator, without self consciousness.

And that frightened me terribly, because everything you said was cut down in a brutal way.

What happened with you exactly?

The second day he asked if I had any questions. Then I began to ask a question about reincarnation in a more or less romanticized way. I told that I had always had a connection with India, that when I heard the word 'India' for the first time it was shock for me, and that the word 'yoga' was like being hit by a bomb when I first heard it on TV, and that the word 'British India' was like a dog hearing his boss whistle. And I asked, could it mean that I had lived in India in previous lives? And then he began to curse in Marathi, and to get unbelievably agitated, and that lasted for at least ten minutes. I thought, my god, what's happening here? The translator was apparently used to it, because he just sat calmly by, and when Maharaj was finished he summarized it all together; 'Maharaj is asking himself if you are really serious. Yesterday you came and you wanted self-realization, but now you begin with questions that belong in kindergarten'... In this way you were forced to be unbelievably alert. Everything counted heavily. It became clear to me within a few days that I knew absolutely nothing, that all that I knew, all the knowledge that I had gathered was book knowledge, second hand, learned, but that out of myself I knew nothing.

I can assure you that this put what was needed into motion. And that's how it went every day! Whatever I came up with, whether I asked an intelligent question or a dumb question, made absolutely no difference. And one day he asserted this, and the following day he asserted precisely the opposite and the following day he twisted it around one more time even though that was not actually possible. And so it went, until by observation I understood why that was, and that was a really wonderful realization. Why do I try all the time to cram everything into concepts, to try to understand everything in terms of thinking or in the feelings sphere?

And, he gave me tips about how I could look at things in another way, thus really looking. And then it became clear to me that it just made no sense to regard yourself — whatever you call yourself, or don't call yourself — in that way. That was an absolute undermining of the self-consciousness, like a termite eating a chair. At a certain moment it becomes sawdust. It still looks like a chair, but it isn't a chair anymore.

Did that lead to self realization?

He kept going on like this, and then there came a moment that I just plain had enough of it. Really just so much ... I would not say that I became angry, but a

shift took place in me, a shift of the accent on all authorities outside of myself, including Nisargadatta, to an authority inside myself. He was talking, and at a given moment he said 'nobody'. He said : 'Naturally there is nobody here who talks.' That was too much for me. And I said: 'If you don't talk then why don't you shut up then? Why say anything then?'

And it seemed as if that is what had been waiting for. He said: 'Do you want that I should not talk anymore? That's good, then I won't talk anymore and if people want to know something then they can just go to Alexander. From now on there are no more translations, translators don't have to come anymore, there is no more English spoken. Only Marathi will be spoken, and if people have any problems then they can go to Alexander because he seems to know everything.' And then began all the trouble with the others, the bootlickers and toadies who insisted that I had to offer my apologies! Not on my life. Yeah, you can't offer excuses to a nobody, eh?!

And to me he said; 'And you, you can't come here anymore.' And I said: 'What do you mean I can't come here anymore. Try and stop me. Have you gone completely crazy? ' And the translators were naturally completely upset. They said nothing like this had ever been seen before. And he was angry! Unbelievably angry!. And he threw the presents that I had brought for him at my feet and said: 'I want nothing from you, Nothing from you I want.'

And that was the breakthrough, because something happened, there was no thinking because I was.. the shift in authority had happened. As I experienced it everything came to me from all sides: logic, understanding, on the one hand the intellect and on the other hand at the same time the heart, feelings and all phenomena, the entire manifest came directly to me from all sides to an absolute center where the whole thing exploded. Bang. After that everything became clear to me...

The next day I went there as usual. There was a lecture, but indeed no English was spoken. I can assure you that the tension could be cut with a knife, because I was the guilty party of course. He wanted to push that down my throat and the translators just went along quietly. There was not even any talking. And the next day, there was not even a lecture. He arrived in a car, and drove away when he saw me and went to a movie... Then I wrote him a letter. Twelve pages. In perfect English. I had someone bring the letter to him. Everything was running over. I wrote everything. And his answer was: let him come tomorrow at 10 o'clock. And he read my letter and said: 'You understood. This confrontation was needed to eliminate that self-consciousness. But you understood completely and I am very happy with your letter and nothing happened.' Naturally , that cleared the air. He asked if I wanted to stay longer. 'From this situation that took place on September 21, 1978, I want to be here in love .' And he said; 'that is good.' From that day on I attended all the talks and also translated sometimes, for example when Spaniards, or Frenchmen or Germans came. I was a bit of a helper then.

So actually you apply the same method as he did: the cutting away of the self-consciousness to the bone and letting people see their identities.

Was that his method?

Yes. Recognizing the false as false and thereafter letting the truth be born. But the most wonderful thing was, MY basis dilemma, and if I say 'my' I mean everyone in a certain sense, is that if at a certain moment you ask yourself: what did I come here for, that seems to be something completely different from what you thought. Everyone has ideas about this question, and I had never suspected in the farthest reaches of my mind that the Realization of it would be something like this. That is the first point. The second is, it appears that at a certain point you have the choice of maintaining your self-consciousness out of pride, arrogance, intellect. And the function of the Guru, the skill with which he can close the escapes from the real confrontation was in his case uncommonly great, at least in my case. And for me that was the decisive factor. Because if there had been a chance to 'escape', I would certainly have taken it. Like a thief who still tries to get away.

Did he ever say anything about it?

He said that unbelievable courage is needed not to flee. And that my being there had almost given him a heart attack, that he no longer had the strength to tackle cases like mine as he became older. So I have the feeling that I got there at just the right moment. Later he became sick. He said: 'I have no strength anymore to try to convince people. If you like it, continue to come, maybe you can get something out of it, but I have no strength anymore to convince people like him (and then he pointed to me). I am so grateful to him, because it only showed how great my resistance was. There has to be a proportional force that is just a bit stronger than your strangest and strongest resistance. You need that. It showed how great my resistance was. And it showed how great his strength was, and his skill. For me he was the great *Satguru*. The fact that he was capable of defeating my most cunning resistance — and I can assure you after having gone into these things for 15 years — my resistance was extremely refined and cunning, was difficult for him even though he knew who he was dealing with. That's why I had to go to such a difficult person of course. It says everything about me. Just as he said in the beginning that it said everything about Frydman. But I have never seen the skill he had in closing the escape routes of the lies and falsehoods so immensely great anywhere else.

Of course I have not been everywhere, but with Ramana Maharshi you just melted. That was another way. With Krishna Menon the intellect could just not keep it together under the gigantic dismantling, but by Nisargadatta, every escape was doomed to failure. People who came to get something, or people who thought they could bring something stood naked outside the door within five minutes. I saw a great many people there walking away in great terror. At a certain moment I was no longer afraid, because I felt that I had nothing more to lose. So I can't really say that it was very courageous of me. I can only say that in a certain sense with him I went on the attack. And what was nice about it is that he also valued that. Because, he sent many people away, and these really went and mostly didn't come back. The he would say: 'They are cowards. I didn't send them away, I sent away the part of them that was not acceptable here.'

And if they then returned, completely open, then he would say nothing about it. But during those happenings with me, people forgot that. There was also a doctor, a really fine man, who said; 'don't think that he is being brutal with you; you don't have any idea how much love there is in him to do this with you.' I said: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know that.' Because I didn't want any commentary from anyone. After all, this is what I had come for! Only the form in which it happened was totally different from what I had expected in my wildest dreams. But again, that says more about me than about Maharaj, and I still think that.

So, his method was thus to let you recognize the false as false, to see through the lies as lies, and to come to truth in this way?

Yes, and that went deeper than I could have ever suspected. The thinking was absolutely helpless. The intellect had no ghost of chance. The heart was also a trap. And that is exactly what happened there. That is everything. And I know that after that day, September 21, 1978, there has never been even a grain of doubt about this question, and the authority, the command, the authenticity, has never left, has never again shifted. There is no authority, neither in this world or in another world, that can thrust me out of the realization. That's the way it is.

Did Maharaj say that you had to do something after this realization?

I asked: 'It is all very beautiful, but what now? What do I do with my life?' Then he said: 'You just talk and people will take care of you.' And that's the way it has gone.

Did you go visit him often?

Various times. As often as I could I was there every year for two or three months. Until the last time. And when I knew that I would never see him again there was entirely no sadness or anything like that. It was just the way it was. It was fine that way,

Did he do the same with others as he had with you?

Not as intensely and not so persistently.

You get what you give?

Yes, that is so. In a certain sense he did that with everyone, but if someone was very sensitive he approached it in a different way. Naturally it makes difference if an old nun is sitting in front of you, or a rebel like myself, who also looks as if he can take quite a bit. The last time he said; 'He will be powerful in Europe. He has the knowledge. He will be the source of what I am teaching.' And then he directed those headlight eyes of his towards me. That is still so wonderful... It is ten years ago now, and it seems like a week. I have learned to value his words in the passage of time. The things I questioned in the past I see becoming manifest now. At first I thought; the way he has put this into words is typical Indian conditioning after all, but the wonder is that all the advice that he gave taught me to hang on to them. I didn't follow them a few times and that always lead to catastrophes.

For example?

For example he said to me: 'Don't challenge the Great Ones. Let them enjoy.' And I have to admit that I had trouble with that. But knowing my rebellious character — and naturally he saw that immediately — he still had to give me that. And every time that I see that, that aspect of my character wants to express itself, I hear his voice: 'Don't challenge the Great Ones.' He anticipated that. I know that for sure. And in that way he also said a number of things that suddenly made sense. Then I hear him. And Wolter always said: 'After the realization, the only words that remain with you are the words of your Guru. All your knowledge disappears, but the words of the Guru remain.' And I can now confirm that that is true, that it is like that.

Was Wolter also a disciple of Nisargadatta?

No, but he was there often.

I have understood that you find the Living Teaching very important. Is that especially true for Advaita?

The objection to books about Advaita, including the translations of Nisargadatta's words is that too much knowledge is given in them. That is an objection. People can use this knowledge, and especially the knowledge at the highest level to defend and maintain their self-consciousness. That makes my work more difficult. Knowledge, spiritual knowledge, can, when there is no living master be used again to maintain the 'I', the self-consciousness. The mind is tricky, cunning. And I speak out of my own experience! Because Advaita Vedanta, without a good *living* spiritual master, I repeat, a *good one*, can become a perfect self contained defense mechanism. It can be a plastic sack that leaks on all sides, but you can't find the leak. You know that it doesn't tally, but it looks as if it does tally. That is the danger in Vedanta. Provided there is a good *living* master available, it can do no harm. But stay away from it if there is no master available! Provided it is well guided Advaita can be brilliant.

Do you mean that people could act from their so called 'knowing' as if they are more than the content of their consciousness? That they therefore assume that the content is worthless?

Yes. That is why up to now, I have never wanted to write a book. But, as long as I am alive there are Living Teachings. When I die they can do whatever they want to with it, but as long as I am alive I am there.

To take corrective action?

Yes.

Do people have a built in defense mechanism?

At the level of the psyche there is a defense mechanism that prevents you from taking in more than you can cope with, but at a higher level sooner or later you have an irrevocable need for a spiritual master who can tell you certain things, who has to explain things because other wise you get stuck. Whoever doesn't want a living master gets stuck.

Books could lead to people becoming interested and going on a search.

To a good spiritual master of flesh and blood. Living!

Did Nisargadatta foresee that you would manifest as a guru?

I think guru is a rotten word, but he did say: 'Many people will seek your blessings.'

So you couldn't do anything else. It happened by itself.

He said; 'The seed is sown, the seasons do the rest.'

Isn't that true for everyone?

Yes, but some seeds fall on good soil and something grows, but other seeds don't grow. Out of million sperms only one reaches the egg.

At Nisargadatta's bhajans were also sung and certain rituals done, especially for the Indians. Did you also participate in that?

I participated two times. The *bhajans* I thought, were really special...

What is their goal?

Singing *bhajans* has a purifying effect on the body, thinking, and feeling, so that the Knowledge can become manifest and finds its place there. I don't have any need of it, but I see that the singing offers social and emotional solace and thus I am not against it. In addition *prasad* was distributed and *arati* done.

What is arati?

A form of ritual in which fire is swung around and camphor is burned. Camphor is the symbol of the ego. That burns and nothing remains of it. Just as in self-realization nothing of the self-consciousness remains. It is a beautiful ritual. It makes you attentive to all kinds of things. The fire is swung at your eye level so what you see may be beautiful, at your ears so that what you hear may be pure, and at your mouth so that what you eat may be pure. It is Hindu symbolism that has become so common in India that it has mostly become flattened out and routine. It has something, as a symbol, but Westerners shouldn't try it unless they understand the symbolism completely. I find the singing of OM good, that works, that is a law. It works to purify the body, thinking and feeling, so that the Knowing that it is can be manifest and find a place in your life.

Did Nisargadatta follow a certain tradition?

But of course. The *Navdath Sampradaya*. The tradition of the Nine Gurus. The first was Jnaneshwar (Jnanadeva) from the 13th century, who became realized when he was twenty and also died at that age. Nisargadatta was the ninth.

Are you the tenth?

No. I always call Maharaj 'the last of the Mohicans'.

Still you always talk about the tradition.

I work following a traditional background, because there lies the experience of a

thousand years of instruction. Instruction that works! I have learned to value the Tradition. I am totally non traditional, but in my heart I am a traditionalist. When I talk about 'the tradition' I mean the tradition of Advaita so as that became manifest in the *Navdath Sampradaya*.

What is the importance of tradition?

The importance of a tradition is just as with violin playing, that you have had predecessors who have done it in a certain which you know works. But many traditions have become dead end traditions because they don't work anymore. That is why you always see renovators like a Buddha, a Krishna, Krishnamurti, Ramana Maharshi in a certain sense, and Bhagwan (Osho) and Nisargadatta. The way Nisargadatta said it is after all quite different from the way his Guru said it, and the way it is here made manifest, is after all also very different then at Nisargadatta's. It is about the 'essence'. Just as consciousness is transmitted by means of sex, enlightenment is transmitted by the Guru.

Did Nisargadatta teach you the tradition?

You can't learn a tradition; you can only become self-realized. And that is what happened. I know what I know. Done.

And then a tradition is born?

Yes, precisely, you say it very well.

We are now busy with book 'Self-realization. What do you think about that book?

It is no easy book. It is no easy bedside companion.

In one way or another, translating the book has done much for me.

You have been busy with these things for a long time, thus the reading of a relatively direct form of Nisargadatta's words must have an effect, But even you found it to be a difficult book. The theme of the book — who were you before the conception, before body/thinking/feeling appeared and before the forming of words in the mind — is not simple to say, but by repeated readings, and talking with each other and all kind of other things, a few things have become clear.

It has to be digested?

Yes, especially digesting it is important. You can eat a lot, but it has to be digested.

Did you just see him sometimes in the daytime, like here in the kitchen?

He lived in that house and everyone went to their hotel or family, or to friends, or had lodgings with the translators. Someone always stayed to care for him a bit, but everyone simply went their own way. There was nothing like an *ashram* in the usual sense, a care institution, a salvation army for seekers. Absolutely not.

How was he between the acts?

Changeable, from extremely friendly to grumbling.

Did you find him to be a nice man?

Never thought about it for a second.

Would you like to be his friend?

.....

That cannot?

No, Odd question.

I don't agree, you could at least say 'he is my Guru, but as a human, as a person'... if you at least could still see him as a person.

Just a whopper of a person, but yeah, there are no meaningful words that can be said about it.

I don't believe that.

Really not.

Did you ever eat with him?

Yes.

Did you ever listen to music with him?

No.

Did you ever just chat with him about little things?

Yes.

How was that?

Normal, just like with you.

Did you find that scary?

No.

Never? Also not in the beginning?

No.

Did he have a normal householder's life?

Yes.

Was he married?

Yes, he had children.

What kind of a father was he?

Strict.

What kind of husband was he?

I don't know because his wife was dead.

Did he have girl friends?

No.

Did he sometimes speak about sex?

No, never.

What did he do in his spare time?

He had no spare time. All his time was spent on the 'talks'. Or he slept or took walks, or he looked outside, and he smoked a little *beedee*.

How did he experience being sick?

He didn't think about it. It's just something of the body, a little something.

What was his attitude towards women 'seekers'?

The rule for Indian women was keep your mouth shut and listen. Ask no questions. Unless they were very brave, then he allowed it from time to time and answered them, just as with them men. Western women he just answered, just like with the men. But with Indian women he was very traditional: 'just keep quiet.'

What did he think about Bhagwan (Osho)?

It varied. It depended who was asking the question.

Now, Ok, you don't want anymore. I give up.

(laughs and turns of the microphone.)

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