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CHAPTER I

The Life of Sri Gyanamata

During a talk given in America in 1940, Paramahansa Yogananda—the great master from India who founded Yogoda Satsanga Society of India in 1917, and Self-Realization Fellowship in 1920—said of his disciple Sri Gyanamata: “Of all the women I have met in America, I think the one who has found highest favour with God is Sister Gyanamata.” Eleven years later, at her funeral service in Encinitas, California, he declared: “A great saint has gone away....But she has left spiritual footprints...for all souls that are in despair, that they might trace her footsteps...to my Father’s home. Those spiritual footprints will always be here.”

A “great saint,” one of the foremost disciples of a God-illuminated master, yet one whose exalted life was lived in relative obscurity—who was this humble soul who found such favour with God?

Childhood and Early Years

Born Edith Anne Ruth D’Evelyn on July 4, 1869, Gyanamata was the daughter of John and Isabella D’Evelyn of Woodbridge, Canada, and the eldest of their three children. Her predominant memories of those earliest years were of the church her family attended in that small Ontario town: “I can still see the little white English church amidst the pine trees. When I was about four years old I used to stand on the kneeling bench in the church in order to bring my

head above the top of the pew, and I sang the hymns with all my heart. When I was about six, I listened to a sermon in St. George's Cathedral in nearby Toronto. The clergyman said that God would not allow us to depend upon anything but Himself. I thought about the application to myself, and understood it perfectly."

Her father, a young medical doctor, had died when she was but four; and after living for a few years with relatives in Toronto, her mother remarried and the family moved to Madelia, Minnesota, where Gyanamata grew up. Hers was not at all an easy, care-free childhood. For one thing, the family was poor. Gyanamata said that although her mother's family—the well-to-do founders of Woodbridge—were in a position to help them with their financial difficulties, they did so begrudgingly and then only sparingly, "because," she said, "they could not condone the 'unconventional' ways of my mother." Her mother had, for example, married at a very young age and, they felt, "beneath her station"; she refused to wear a widow's cap (the custom of the day) when her husband died; and, though a religious person, she would not attend church "merely for show," as they would have liked. "Mother could not stand hypocrisy in life," Gyanamata recalled. "And she would tell me everything—the unkindness of her family, all of her heartaches and sorrows. I witnessed many, many tears at a very young age."

These childhood struggles no doubt had a strengthening effect on Gyanamata's character—she learned early to deal with suffering in life. Like her mother, she also developed an aversion to hypocrisy and the fickleness of worldly living; this nourished an already strong desire to discover the deeper, eternal

truths of life. "I am sure that my steady progress toward the Master* began right then," she said.

Finding public school somewhat shallow, she terminated her formal education after the eighth grade. With Sri Gyanamata, as with many great men and women throughout history, learning was mostly a matter of self-education. Gyanamata had an insatiable appetite for Truth, and was constantly reading and reflecting on the thoughts of the world's deep thinkers—especially religious philosophers and saints. Further, she was determined to *apply* the wisdom she distilled from her reading, so that from her early childhood, each of life's circumstances became for her an opportunity to learn a new lesson. The whole world became her classroom; her "teachers," the experiences she encountered in her growing desire for spiritual unfoldment.

Gyanamata once related an incident that typified her attitude in those early years. She had a friend at school—a pretty, vivacious, impudent girl—who was a favourite with the young male teacher. Gyanamata longed for a word of approval from him, too; she decided to adopt the mannerisms of her little friend in an attempt to gain his favour. But all she received was a severe reprimand for her impertinent behaviour. Characteristically, she thought this over carefully, and gleaned a valuable lesson: "I decided that from that day forth, I must act naturally and follow my heart's natural inclinations." She was nine years old at the time.

* A respectful title often used by disciples when referring to Paramahansa Yogananda—one who had attained self-mastery. It serves as an English equivalent for "Guru," the customary Sanskrit term for one's spiritual preceptor.

Searching for Love

Through adolescence and into womanhood, Gyanamata's independent spirit matured. "I never allowed anyone to force anything upon me," she said. "And when I saw anything that I wanted, I always went after it fearlessly." Her heart was seeking love. "But," she recalled, "I was absolutely unimpressed by the opposite sex. As far as I was concerned, they simply did not exist. When asked to go anywhere, the answer was always the same: *No*. One day, my brother relayed the comment of one of my male acquaintances: 'It will be a brave man who marries your sister!' My mother was always telling me that I would be lonely in old age if I did not marry. I replied, 'Well, it makes no difference to me. For one reason only will I marry—that is for love.' Then I met Mr. Bissett."

Clark Prescott Bissett was at that time a young divinity student who had been given the assignment of conducting summer services in the little Episcopal church that Gyanamata attended in Madelia. A kind, sincere, deeply religious gentleman with a striking personality, the Reverend Mr. Bissett won the hearts of all who knew him—especially the heart of Edith D'Evelyn. "I was really in love with love," Gyanamata said. "I wanted true love, and Mr. Bissett was the soul of kindness. I loved him dearly. When I think of his incarnating again, I picture him as a philanthropist, or one who establishes a house for orphans." It was in 1899, when she was thirty years of age, that they married.

Soon after their marriage, her husband changed his mind about his vocation and entered law school in