

SATYAM TALES

Sodium and Potassium

The play of Kamala and Kali



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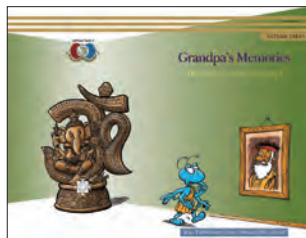
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Sodium and Potassium

This summer I had a most unusual experience which I would like to share. Five of us final year medical students studying at the prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi had taken time off from our busy, stressful lives to go on a short trek through the Himalayas.

It was the month of August, and we had chosen the picturesque Valley of Flowers in the Garhwal Himalayas as our destination. This natural valley of the Pushpawati river is at an altitude of 3,600 metres and this time of the year is awash with wild flowers of every colour, shape and size imaginable. It is a botanist's delight and for weary city-dwellers, a welcome respite.





We set off from Delhi early in the morning in a hired car. By mid-morning we were in Haridwar at the foothills of the Himalayas, and once we started climbing the mountains, the temperature began to drop and our spirits began to soar. What a relief to get away from the sweltering heat of the plains!

I looked around at my comrades-in-arms. There was Srinivasan, the tall bespectacled genius from Kerala; Samar, the athletic boy from Delhi; Pushpinder, a fellow Sikh from Patiala, and Kajal, the other girl in our group.

The sight of the Ganga cascading down the Himalayas was a balm to our eyes. The journey is practically tracing Ganga upstream along its course. On the way, we encountered various *prayags*, the points of confluence of various tributaries of the Ganga. The first was Devprayag, followed by Rudraprayag and then Karnaprayag. Finally we passed through Joshimath and arrived at Gobindghat in the evening. This was the starting point for our trek. The excitement of having been transported from the hustle-bustle of hot, humid Delhi to this picturesque place nestled besides the Alaknanda, deep in the Nanda Devi range of the Himalayas, was enough to offset the rigours and strains of our long road journey.

We checked into a rest-house for the night and the next morning hit the trail. We crossed the raging Alaknanda on a narrow bridge and made our way towards Ghangaria, our base camp for the trek to the Valley of Flowers. The valley is a designated national park and also a world heritage site. To preserve its pristine natural beauty, overnight stays are prohibited. On our way to Ghangaria we encountered many nature lovers and hiking enthusiasts on their way back from the valley. The gregarious ones would share helpful tips and offer healthy encouragement. Walking on the trail was such a different experience from our walks up and down the antiseptic hospital corridors back in Delhi.

Another set of people we frequently encountered were pilgrims returning from Hemkund Sahib, a holy site renowned for its pristine lake and the adjoining Sikh gurudwara and temple dedicated to Lakshmana. This place is about 6 km from Ghangaria but the trek there is much more difficult as it is situated at a much higher altitude, almost 4,300 metres above sea level. None of us were overtly religious, besides we had only so much time on our hands. That's why we had decided to stick to the Valley of Flowers on this trip.





We reached Ghangaria in the late afternoon and pitched our tents in a campsite managed by the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam. The next morning we rose early and started on the trail to the valley. As we wound our way into the valley, we were not disappointed. It was as if a vast vista of variegated vegetation had opened before us. I was reminded of Wordsworth's daffodils: "Ten thousand saw I at a glance, tossing their heads in sprightly dance."

What lay before us was much more than ten thousand. Srini, the avid nature-buff was just clicking away with his



camera. Samar was running non-stop up and down the adjoining slopes. I could go on and on about the wonders we saw, but that would mean digressing from my story. After spending a few magical hours in that enchanted place, it was time to leave. It was hard to say good-bye to that heavenly valley, as if a part of my heart was longing to stay back. With great reluctance we began retracing our steps out of the valley.



On the way back, Srini had a brainwave. He had been playing with his GPS device all along and had been showing me this and that on it. We had ended up lagging behind the others in our group. “Look Simran,” he said excitedly, “there seems to be a small lake just behind the mountain we are skirting right now. Wouldn’t it be cool to somehow get there and click some nice pictures?”

“You and your pictures, Srini!” I sighed, rolling my eyes. I was in no mood for random adventures after all the hiking we had done since morning, but Srini was so convincing and cocksure about what he wanted to do that I decided to tag along.

“What about the others? They’ll get worried,” I asked nonetheless.

“Don’t worry, I’ve already SMSed Pushpinder.”

“But do you have network coverage . . .” I couldn’t even finish my question. Srini had already started clambering up a few rocks to get on to the trail that was supposed to lead us to this lake. I wasn’t as tall



and agile as Srini, but bravely followed suit. Srini had to haul me up in the end.

Two hours later we were still trying to find the darned trail to the lake. The sun was setting and a bone-chilling wind had begun to blow. We had no idea where we were. Srini was still fiddling with his GPS receiver.

“So Srini,” I said scathingly, “Is your GPS toy telling us something we don’t know already?”

“Ummm, just a second, I think the signal is a little patchy, maybe if I climb on that peak over there, I just might . . .”

I didn’t let him finish his sentence. I just grabbed his toy and threw it down the cliff, “If you don’t come up with a good idea soon, we might freeze to death in the night.”

Soon it was pitch dark and we were stumbling aimlessly in the pathetic cones of light cast by our torches. We were tired, cold and hungry. “Why did I listen to this Malayali Moron?” I cursed myself for the umpteenth time.

Suddenly I heard Srini shout, “Look over there! I see a light across that rocky ledge.” We hastily scrambled in that direction.

The light was coming from a fire burning outside the mouth of a small cave. We could dimly see the silhouette of a figure sitting beside the fire.



Srini grabbed my arm and stopped for a second. It could be anyone: a robber, a fugitive, or even worse, some crafty practitioner of the black arts. I sensed Srini's hesitation. But under the circumstances it was best to take the risk. We approached the figure from behind. When he was within earshot, we again looked at each other wondering how to proceed. I stubbed Srini's toe with my foot. The message was clear. He had to play the part of gallant gentleman and take the initiative.

Srini cleared his throat and after a couple of false starts blurted out, "Hello, anyone home?" Dumbo! The guy by the fire probably didn't even understand Hindi, leave alone English. I couldn't have been more wrong.

The figure turned around. If he was surprised, his demeanour showed no signs of it. "Welcome to my humble abode, weary travellers! What can I do for you?" came the reply in fluent English. It almost sounded as if he was expecting us.

We hastily told him who we were and explained our predicament. "It's too dangerous to be wandering about in the dark now. You can spend the night in my little cave if you like. Tomorrow morning I'll show you the way back to Ghangaria."

We heaved a big sigh of relief at this unexpected offer of hospitality. Lucky we had brought our sleeping bags in our backpacks. We spread them out in the rear section of the cave and then came back to warm ourselves by the fire blazing near the entrance.

"Ahem, so what's your name . . . sadhu ji?" I tried to start up a conversation with our host. It was hard to discern his facial features in the light of the dancing flames. All I could make out was long hair tied into a jata on his head and a beard. He was wearing ochre-coloured robes and a tattered blanket seemed to be his sole protection from the cold. There was an aura of aloofness about him that inspired a mild sense of awe, yet he exuded a certain warm-heartedness that was reassuring.

He just stared back at me with a vacant expression. Finally he asked, “What time is it?”

I was surprised by the odd counter-question. Nonetheless, I turned on the backlight on my wristwatch and said, “6:56 pm.”

A few more minutes of quiet solitude followed. The sadhu finally cleared his throat and said, “Normally I maintain mouna from 6 in the evening to 6 in the morning. It’s a habit that’s become ingrained in me from the years spent in my guru’s ashram. But considering the circumstances of my offbeat companions tonight, I’ll be a little considerate and relax my rules somewhat,” he said, and then added, “As for my name, it’s Swami Anandachaitanya Saraswati, but you can just call me Ananda. So how was your experience of the saugandhika vana?”

“Saugandhika vana? What do you mean?” I asked back.

“I meant the Valley of Flowers. Saugandhika vana is the ancient name mentioned in the Mahabharata, the place where Bheema went to fetch the exotic thousand-petalled lotus for Draupadi. It was on the way to this place that Bheema had the fateful meeting with Hanuman, but that’s a story for another day.”



We didn’t need any prodding to speak on our experiences of the day. Both of us gushed about the beautiful sights we saw and the wonderful pictures we took. Srini even fished out his camera and began showing some of his close-up shots to the sadhu. I suddenly remembered something. Dipping my hand into my little handbag, I brought out a bunch of special flowers that I couldn’t

resist plucking in the valley. I had planned to present them to my parents, but here was a worthier recipient. Besides the flowers would've wilted by the time we returned to Delhi anyway.

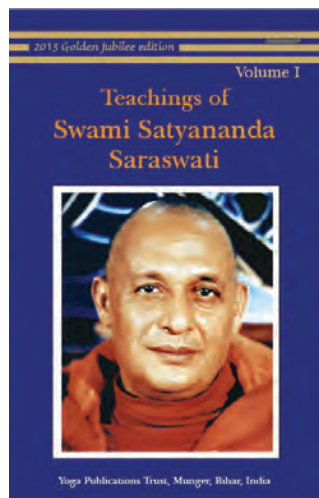
"This is a small token of appreciation from our side," I mumbled, as I extended my hand out rather awkwardly. Perhaps it would've been better if Srini had presented the flowers. Sadhus tend to follow strange rules of protocol around ladies and I wasn't quite sure about this one. Nonetheless I was sure that he would much appreciate the beauty and smell of these exotic flowers.

Swami Ananda took one good look at the flowers and immediately broke into an uproarious laughter. I and Srini looked at each other. What was so funny about a lady presenting a bunch of exotic flowers to a sadhu in the middle of the night?

He just touched the bunch in a gesture of acceptance and said, "Thanks, but no thanks." Before I could ask the reason for his reluctance, he himself added, "What a wonderful stroke of synchronicity! Just this afternoon I was reading a book of satsangs of my paramguru, and it happened to warn me about this very thing." Seeing our confused expression, he pointed to a book lying on a rock which served as his reading-cum-dining table.

I picked up the book and in the flickering light of the flames slowly read aloud the words: "*Teachings of Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Volume 1*". A twig had been slid in as a bookmark and I opened the book to that very page. The swami pointed to a section which I began to read aloud:

In the Himalayas there is a place known as the Valley of Flowers. The



whole valley has a vast variety of blooms. In August, September and October, you'll go crazy at the sight of them. The whole valley for miles and miles is nothing but beautiful, exotic and diverse flowers. I happened to smell some flowers, and that night I suffered from severe pain in the stomach. I told the men with whom I was staying that I had unbearable stomach cramps. They told me that they always warn the tourists not to smell the flowers and asked if I had smelled them. My cramps were the result. That incident has left a permanent reminder in my brain. Even now if people bring me flowers, I just keep them in the corner. You'll never see me admiring them; I am very wary. I know their beauty but at the same time I know their pain . . .

"I hope you'll now excuse me for not fully appreciating your kind gift," said Swami Ananda, his eyes still awash with unspoken mirth, "Imagine reading this just a couple of hours before you came . . ."

"Who is this Swami Satyananda Saraswati?" I asked. The face on the cover had intrigued me.

"The guru of my own guru, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, and the founder of the Bihar Yoga tradition. You may have heard of the Bihar School of Yoga perhaps."

I never had, and to tell you the truth, this appellation of Saraswati at the end of all these swamis' names sounded as if these were archaeologists desperately trying to discover the remains of the mythical river Saraswati. It was only later when Swami Ananda gave me a few relevant details of the Dashnami sannyasa tradition that the disturbing thought subsided.

"You guys must be hungry. Would you like to eat something? I can make you some daliya and black chai?"

A hot meal sounded like a godsend. We nodded our heads in vigorous unison.

During the next half hour as the meal was cooked over the fire, Swami Ananda told us about the life and works of Swami Satyananda. He mentioned Swami Satyananda's childhood spiritual experiences; his meeting with his guru, Swami Sivananda; twelve years of hard toil in his guru's



ashram in Rishikesh and the mandate he received from his guru to spread yoga and establish it as a scientific discipline.

“ . . . and that was one of the major achievements of Swami Satyananda. He shattered the misconception that yoga was a mystical subject, the exclusive preserve of hermits and recluses. Rather he propagated it as a science for the evolution and betterment of the entire human personality, no matter what station of life or strata of society the person may belong to. By conducting research at some of the leading laboratories of the world he showed that many of the effects of yoga could be scientifically measured and validated. Of course, there is much more that yoga offers, which is beyond the purview of the current scientific state-of-the-art, but perhaps as modern science becomes progressively subtler it may one day corroborate these claims of yoga . . . ”

“Such as?” As a medical student well-trained in the scientific method, I am always wary of any unsubstantiated claims.

Swami Ananda smiled enigmatically and then said, “Such as the yogic view of the human body. As doctors you concern yourself just with the physical body of bones, nerves and

muscles, but as Swami Niranjan says, to the yogi the body is like a Russian doll. There are subtler and subtler bodies inside the physical, starting with the pranic or the energy body.” He then proceeded to explain something about this pranic body, bringing up terms and concepts like nadis and chakras.

I had read something about this before, so it wasn’t totally new. But in the medical community such things are looked down upon as pseudo-science, and are not considered worthy of serious attention. I told the swami as much.

“Just because you can’t see or observe something doesn’t mean it cannot exist,” was all he said, before settling into a long silence.

‘Must have offended him,’ I thought. I tried to restart the conversation on a different note, “Tell us something about your own guru, Swami Niranjan.”

Swami Ananda’s eyes lit up at the mention of his guru’s name, but he remained engrossed in stirring the porridge. “Come on,” Srimi prodded, “don’t be so reticent.”

“What can a disciple really say about his guru?” said the swami finally, “It is like asking a mother to describe her child. For the mother the child is undoubtedly the



most beautiful in the whole wide world, isn’t it? It is the same with a disciple and his guru.” Then throwing a scanning look in my direction, he asked, “Aren’t you a Sikh, Simran?”

I nodded. The swami was quite perceptive.

“Then I don’t have to explain the guru’s glory and greatness to you. Let’s just say that Swami Niranjan is to me what Guru Gobind Singh is to you. Verily a

warrior-sage of this era,” and then added after a slight pause, “Except he prefers the role of a gardener. A warrior destroys, but a gardener creates and nurtures . . .”

The porridge was ready and Swami Ananda served it in whatever container he could find. I was eating out of an empty coconut shell and Srimi from a broken mug.

“You know, there’s another point of similarity between the two gurus. Did you visit Hemkund Sahib as well?”

We shook our heads. As I mentioned before, visiting places of religious interest wasn’t the main agenda of our trip.

“In that case you are perhaps not aware of the legend of that place. It is believed, from Guru Gobind Singh’s own autobiographical accounts, that he did intense sadhana of Devi beside that lake in a previous life, until he received a divine mandate to perform the role he eventually performed in his next incarnation.”

I vaguely remembered hearing a story along those lines from a ragi of the local gurudwara in my childhood. “But what does this legend have to do with your guru?”

Again Swami Ananda flashed his enigmatic smile. Perhaps he was judging whether to share the story with us. Finally he said, “In this universe nothing happens by chance. Your arrival at my doorstep is also perhaps for a reason.” And he began telling us the life-story of his guru: how he was a manas-putra of Swami Satyananda, who had invoked him especially for a divine purpose; how his long-childless parents begot him after taking a sankalpa at Gangotri that they would give the child to their guru; how he left his home at the tender age of four to be at his guru’s side; how he was sent overseas at the age of eleven to spread his guru’s mission in different countries and continents; and many other memorable incidents and achievements of his life till the present.

“What a remarkable persona your guru must be!” I exclaimed as Swami Ananda’s soliloquy came to an end, and then added, “Excuse me if I’ve missed the point, but then again what is the similarity with Guru Gobind Singh?”

“Oho! You have been paying close attention to all that I’ve been saying,” the swami responded with a pleased expression, “I’ll relate a small anecdote about him that I once heard from his aunt. As a young infant, he had some queer patches on the undersides of his thighs. Worried that it might be some skin condition, she asked Swami Satyananda about it. Sri Swamiji just laughed it off and said reassuringly, ‘Don’t worry about it. Niranjana was a great yogi in his previous birth who did intense tapasya in the Himalayan heights. So much so that even the tigerskin on which he was seated became stuck to his skin! That is why you see these patches. On one of my visits to Gangotri, our paths crossed and he expressed regret at the fact that his intense sadhana had only revolved around himself, and he had not been able to do anything for the suffering multitudes. I told him to descend as my disciple in his next birth and I would fulfil his cherished desire.’” And he added in a low tone, “Simran and Srinu, Swami Niranjana is none other than that yogi . . .”

A sense of great stillness and silence descended upon us as we tried to digest all we had heard. We finished our meal in complete silence and washed our containers.

“Would you like some fruits?” Swami Ananda broke the silence as he took out a few apples and other assorted fruit from a basket nearby. We took an apple each. Wiping the apple with my fleece pullover, I promptly bit into the juicy fruit, but Srinu was still dilly-dallying.

“Do you need something else?” asked the swami.

“Er . . . yeah. Would you happen to have any potassium permanganate by any chance?” he asked, and then seeing the swami’s uncomprehending face, added, “to disinfect the apple with.”

I was embarrassed by Srinu’s flippant remark. What was he thinking! Suddenly remembering the fundamentals of hygiene in a cave in the middle of nowhere!

Swami Ananda didn’t mind the remark at all. In fact he found it quite amusing. “Instead of bothering about a trivial compound of potassium, why not directly invoke the

source of all its energy and power?” he said, mumbling some strange incantation as he passed his hands over Srini’s apple.

“What did you just say?” I asked with a certain degree of suspicion.

“A devi mantra,” he replied with a straight face.

“Which devi?” It was Srini’s turn to be curious.

Again the swami gave us a sizing-us-up look. “What I’m about to say may not make much sense to your scientifically oriented minds, but because you’ve asked I’ll say it anyway. Srini, since you were making such a fuss about your potassium permanganate, can you tell me the chemical symbol for potassium?”

“K, of course.”

“Why not something starting with P?”

Srini was the star student of our batch with a strong background in chemistry, but for once he was caught on the wrong foot. Suddenly he regained his footing, “Ah, how could I’ve forgotten? The Latin name for potassium is Kalium of course.”

“Thank you Srini. You’ve just answered your own question.”

Both of us exchanged puzzled looks.

Seeing our puzzlement the swami shrugged his shoulders, “I guess I’ll have to go deeper than that. Kalium when interpreted in Sanskrit is nothing but a conjunction of *Kali* and *iyam*. Iyam means ‘this’ and Kali, you know. In other words, the name of the element is simply proclaiming, ‘This is Kali.’ So now you know which devi I was referring to.”



“What a bunkum argument?” Srimi countered, “Who in his right frame of mind would subscribe to the view that there is a possible connection between an Indian goddess and the metal potassium, which . . .”

“For your information,” the swami interjected, “the word ‘potassium’ was coined much later, by the English chemist, Sir Humphry Davy to be precise, who is given the credit for ‘discovering’ this element in the early nineteenth century. And the reason he called it potassium was because the most common method of obtaining it was by leaching potash, which is nothing but plant ‘ash’ kept in iron ‘pots’. Nonetheless, it is only really the English and French speaking world that refers to the element by this name. In most of the other world languages, including the Germanic, Baltic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric, Altaic and other language families, Kalium or its variants are the preferred nomenclature.”

‘How could a wandering sadhu know all this?’ I wondered.

As if reading my mind, he said, “In case you are wondering about the veracity of these facts, feel free to crosscheck them as soon as you are within range of your nearest cellular tower . . .”

“Look, I’m not buying your hogwash reasoning. This way you may as well convert the entire periodic table of chemistry into a pantheon of gods and goddesses,” Srimi butted in belligerently.

“What’s wrong with that?” replied the swami evenly, “After all, hasn’t all matter descended from spirit?”

“In that case, let’s take another element from the same family, say sodium. What do you have to say about that?” Srimi was hell-bent on cornering the swami and winning the argument now.

The swami remained unperturbed. Rather he began to smile. “That’s a good choice, Srimi. But before I answer, I want you to tell me about the indispensable role that sodium and potassium ions play in most biological systems, including the human body.”

There was something so forceful and mesmerizing in the swami's personality that from arguing adversaries he turned us into meek students, as if we were appearing before our professor for our viva-voce. Recalling past classes in biochemistry and neurobiology, Srini said in his most serious voice, "Sodium ions are used in opposition to potassium ions to allow the organism to build up an electrostatic charge on cell membranes, and thus allow transmission of nerve impulses when the charge is allowed to dissipate by a moving wave of voltage change. Sodium ions tend to be more concentrated in the extracellular fluid and potassium ions inside the cells, and this delicate concentration gradient is maintained by specialized ion pumps and channels."

"Very good Srini. Now you tell me, if potassium is an expression of the power of Kali, what is sodium an expression of?" Seeing him scratch his head, the swami added, "Okay, here's a hint. You yourself said that the living cells float in an ocean of extracellular fluid rich in sodium. *Yatha brahmande tatha pinde*. What is true for the macrocosm is also true for the microcosm. Which devi emerged from the churning of the salty ocean?"

"Lakshmi?" Srini ventured tentatively.



“Yes. And the Latin name for sodium means exactly that.”

“You mean Natrium.”

“Indeed. One of the many names of Lakshmi is *Netri*, the one who leads. Netri and *iyam* together give you the Latin name for sodium, which like *Kalium*, is much more common throughout the world.”

“This sounds really far-fetched,” I protested.

“Not really, if you see Lakshmi and Kali not just as heavenly goddesses, but two fundamental forces operating at every level and dimension of creation. Lakshmi is the shakti of Narayana and Kali or Durga the shakti of Shiva. The two represent the opposing forces of stability and change, preservation and destruction, which are necessary for creation to sustain itself.

“My guru, Swami Niranjan, used to illustrate this with a nice example. If you have a piece of land that you wish to convert into a beautiful garden, the first step is to clear the land of all unwanted things like weeds and rocks. Then you must till the land and prepare it for its forthcoming role. This process of destruction, change and transformation is governed by the force of Kali, and once it is complete, the benign energy of Lakshmi takes over. You plant different seeds, nurture them with water and manure until they blossom into beautiful plants. The same principle applies, from the cosmic level down to the cellular level. At all levels, Lakshmi represents attainment, fulfilment, satisfaction and contentment.

“I still remember what my paramguru, Swami Satyananda, said in one of his satsangs during the annual Sita Kalyanam festival, ‘If your ordinary mother can give so much love, care and thought for your wellbeing, just think what the Divine Mother can do. She has an immense number of children and she looks after the growth of the trees, animals and people as well as everything else in creation. Everything is Lakshmi. The grass, flowers, cows and children all grow and they are hers.’



“One of his last mandates to Swami Niranjan before attaining mahasamadhi was to start the tradition of an annual Sri Lakshmi-Narayana yajna in Munger. He had once said, ‘All the goddesses are important, but I regard Lakshmi as the highest because she is the goddess of Kali Yuga, the present age.’

“And even if you look at the devis from the tantric perspective, where they manifest in the form of the *dasha mahavidyas*, the sequence begins with Kali and ends with Kamala, that is Lakshmi. The two of them together complete the circle so to speak.” With that remark he fell silent for a few moments. It felt as if he was inwardly communing with the goddesses he had been speaking of. Then perhaps feeling that the discussion had become too weighty, he said in lighter vein, “So the next time you reach out for the salt shaker, do spare a thought for Mother Lakshmi . . .”

I still felt that all this talk had been more fictional than factual, more pseudo-science than solid science. But out of respect for our host and his gurus, I kept my doubts to myself. It was getting late as well and we were feeling sleepy. The swami tossed a few more pieces of wood into the fire and while he tended the fire, we went inside the little cave and

got into our sleeping bags. A few minutes later Srini got up to take a leak.

“Make sure you put on your shoes before you go off into the bushes. There are quite a few scorpions and snakes around this place,” warned the swami from his fireside seat.

“Okay,” Srini grunted, but when he couldn’t find his shoes, he started walking barefoot anyway.

Less than a minute later we heard him scream aloud in pain.

Both of us rushed to his aid. As we shone our flashlights in his direction, we saw him lying on the ground, writhing in agony. We looked towards his bare feet. He had accidentally stepped upon a nest of scorpions and when I saw them scurrying off in the light of our torches, my heart sank. They were big ones, with potentially lethal venom, and examining Srini’s feet, we found that he had been stung by at least half a dozen of them!

I tried to recall the appropriate emergency procedures for such a situation, but my panic-stricken mind drew a blank. I looked at Srini’s face. He was having difficulty in breathing and seemed to be sinking into anaphylactic shock. I knew that the venom of most scorpions and snakes contained neurotoxins which disrupted the functioning of specific neural pathways, but here under the open Himalayan sky with no antidotes or medicines at hand, I didn’t know what to do.

“Quick! grab his feet while I
We must carry him back to the
commanded.

grab his shoulders.
cave,” the swami



Back in the cave,
he laid Srini down
and proceeded to
examine him carefully
in the light of the fire.

Srini’s cries of agony were
unbearable, and I was
paralyzed by an acute sense of

fear and foreboding. The swami, on the other hand, was in total control of himself and the situation. He looked around for a sharp object and not finding anything else, settled on a big needle. Placing it in his hands, he sterilized it in the fire and after mumbling something did some incisions on Srini's feet. Then he passed his hands over Srini's body a few times, still mumbling the same incantation. The only familiar word I could catch was 'Kali'.

Soon Srini's cries of pain reduced in intensity and in ten minutes he wasn't even groaning any more. Half an hour later, a slight smile had broken on his wan face. I had never felt so relieved and grateful in my life.

The object of my gratitude was as self-composed as ever. "He is out of danger, but nonetheless we should take turns to keep vigil tonight. You better get some sleep now, I'll wake you up later."

I flatly refused and both of us ended up keeping vigil that night. In the bargain, I got to hear many more stories about the swami and his illustrious gurus. Yes, they had definitely earned my respect and admiration.

The sun rose over the eastern snow-capped peaks and the first sliver of sunlight entering our cave jolted me out of the nap I had fallen into. The swami was outside the cave, practising his asanas and pranayamas. And Srini was blissfully asleep. I gently nudged him awake. He looked fighting fit. Last night's dreadful episode just seemed like a bad nightmare. I had never seen such a remarkable recovery in a venom case. I asked the swami more than once to share his mysterious technique with us, but he just smiled and said, "Better to leave some secrets untold, so you can enjoy some magic in your lives . . ."

After a quick breakfast, we were ready to make our way back to Ghangaria. The swami graciously accompanied us some way to ensure that we got back on to the right trail.

It was time to say goodbye. Words failed us. It was Srini who again broke the awkward silence. "Thanks for saving my life, Swami Ananda. I don't know what magic you wrought,

but I owe my life to you. Is there any way I can keep in touch with you? Any mobile number or postal address or . . . ?”

Swami Ananda just sang a little ditty in response, “*Hari Om, Have no home, Work nor food nor money have I none, Still I will be Anandam.* That is the theme-song of a true sannyasin.”

“Will you be staying here for long?” I ventured to ask.

“I’m just spending chaturmaas here. As soon as the period is over, I’ll make my move from here and continue my parivrajaka life. *Sannyasi yaar kiska, lagaya dam khiska . . .* A sannyasi is friendly towards all, but friends with none; he may share a puff and a chat with you but in a trice he’s gone.”

With that parting remark he waved to us and turned around to walk back to his cave. We remained rooted in our spots till he disappeared from our sight.

We reached Ghangaria safely and had a joyous reunion with our worry-stricken friends. Amidst the playful bonhomie and banter that is the hallmark of bosom buddies, both Srini and me completely forgot about his near brush with death.

EPILOGUE

It was only when I got back to Delhi and returned to my routine at the medical college did the enormity of that incident fully dawn upon me. I decided to do some more research about this mysterious Swami Satyananda and his Bihar School of Yoga on my computer. I added “poison” and “mantra” to the obvious keywords and sent Google’s search engine on its chase. Amongst the many search results, one caught my attention. It was an article from a past issue of the monthly journal *Yoga* from the website: www.yogamag.net. I downloaded the article and the closing words totally riveted my attention:

. . . Many years later I came to my guru’s ashram in Rishikesh. I am speaking about the Rishikesh ashram of many years ago in 1942–43 on the banks of the Ganga River, surrounded on all sides by dense jungle, where at night your step might fall on a scorpion. An American family came to stay at the ashram. One day, the small

girl was stung so severely by a scorpion that it seemed she would be dead within ten minutes.

Just next to the ashram was a police station and from there somebody brought a constable. He brought a small knife with him and with that knife he removed the poison within five minutes. In another five minutes the girl was completely normal. I asked, "What mantra have you used?" He said, "*Kali Kalkattewali*". The goddess Kali is the patron deity of Calcutta. I was amazed.

I was raised by Arya Samajis, a sect which does not accept the concept of personal gods and goddesses. I was educated at a convent school with Christians and many close relatives at home were Muslims. When I heard the name of Kali Kalkattewali, my entire faith was shaken. I said, "Oh, I know Kali Kalkattewali. Kali is just a



name and Calcutta is a place, so how could poison be removed just by repeating those words?"

Gradually my attention was caught. I asked many people and started to read books about tantra and to practise mantra anushtana myself. Since then, I have had so many experiences, so many wonderful benefits, that it is not even possible to relate them. What I want to explain is that those words, Kali Kalkattewali, may seem completely simple and ordinary to us, but for the man who has realized them, they are not ordinary at all. Those sounds which the rishis realized are not only simple words but syllables full of power. That is why we say *shabda*, sound, is *Brahman*, supreme consciousness. There is power in the mantra and to awaken this power, everyone should find a method within himself. . .

"Kali Kalkattewali . . . Wasn't that the mantra that Swami Ananda was mumbling as he was making those passes over Srini?" I thought, and then on a sudden hunch pulled out a fat book on toxicology from my shelf.

I hastily flicked through the tome trying to find the common kinds of venoms found in Indian scorpions. What I found made me freeze:

. . . Of the 1000+ known species of scorpion, about 25 have venom that is dangerous to humans. The key ingredient of the venom is a scorpion neurotoxin which is a potassium (K+) channel blocking peptide . . .

For a while, all I could hear in my head was the juxtaposition of "Potassium", "Kalium" and "Kali Kalkattewali" . . .

SATVAM TALES 14





Satyam Tales

Commenced on the occasion of World Yoga Convention & BSY Golden Jubilee, 2013

Sodium and Potassium is the fourteenth in the series of *Satyam Tales* depicting the life and teachings of our guru, Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Through the medium of these simple narratives, we hear the voice of Sri Swamiji inspiring all, irrespective of age.

A couple of medical students on a visit to the beautiful Valley of Flowers in the Himalayas get lost and end up spending the night in a cave with a reclusive sannyasin. The encounter gives them a glimpse into the world of mantras and devatas, leading to a re-examination and re-evaluation of many of their cherished scientific beliefs and opinions.

This story is a delightful read for children, adults and old alike. It is an invaluable message for those engaged in the world and for those seeking the spirit. This journey is your journey, these challenges are your challenges, and this victory is your victory. It is a story that will touch your heart, give you joy, hope, conviction and, above all, faith. Yes, you too can get a glimpse of the divinity hidden behind the names and forms of everyday objects.

—Editor

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Please note:

- This collection of *Satyam Tales* is dedicated to our masters, Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati and Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati, and is the vehicle to bring their spiritual and yogic teachings in an understandable and applicable form into the lives of individuals throughout the world.
- *Satyam Tales* will be exclusively published by Yoga Publications Trust to ensure the accuracy and correctness of the teachings and the context in which they are being presented.
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