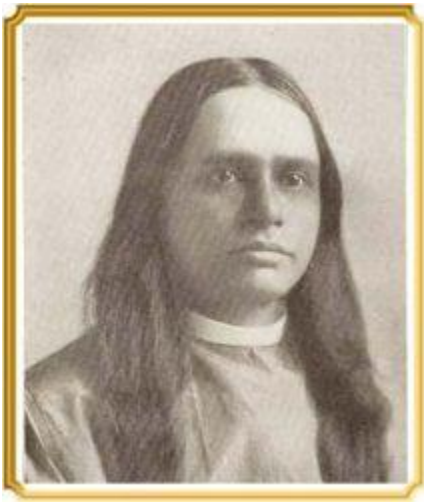


A Historical but Unknown Figure: Swami Dhirananda



Swami Dhirananda was discussed already in the chapter about the “History of Mount Washington.” Here is a more complete story of this important player in Yogananda’s life, who nowadays (for understandable reasons) has become almost unknown amongst Yogananda devotees. And if they know about him, Dhirananda is usually a red flag: an enemy of Yogananda.

It is easy to put people into neat boxes: “good,” “bad,” “hero,” “villain,” “black,” “white.” But if we look a bit more fairly, we see that life is not like that at all. People are much more complex than that. So Dhirananda was not “black,” nor “white,” □ but simply a struggling devotee, with his bright and less bright sides- like the rest of Yogananda’s disciples, and like all of us.

What happened back in India, in the early days?

The following events are taken from Swami Satyananda’s book, “Yogananda Sangha.” □

Dhirananda (Basu Kumar Bagchi) was one of the closest boyhood friends of Yogananda. They were practically of the same age, met in college, and were classmates there. They became close friends, traveled together in India, visited saints, meditated, sang many devotional songs to God, and founded a school and a library. Dhirananda is described as being dutiful, service-oriented, and highly knowledgeable.

Sananda, in his book “Mejda,” □ adds the fun story that back in India, Dhirananda was having troubles at home: he didn’t get the privacy he needed for his meditations. So Yogananda invited him to his home in Gurpar Road, saying, “We both travel the same path with heart and soul.” Yogananda kept Dhirananda’s presence in his attic room a secret, first. He lovingly shared his food with him. But of course Dhirananda’s presence became known to all, and he was accepted in the house as one of the family members.

Dhirananda's family members were all disciples of Bhaduri Mahasaya (the levitating saint). Dhirananda used to go to Bhaduri's meetings too, but once he joined Mukunda, he stopped going there.

Satyananda was part of that inspired circle of friends. Throughout his book, he describes Yogananda as the leader of the group. Yogananda was called "Bara (top or elder) Swami;" Dhirananda was called "Meja (middle) Swami;" and Satyananda, being a few years younger, "Chota (younger) Swami." Later, however, they called Yogananda "Guruji." □

Upon Yogananda's advice, Dhirananda received initiation into Kriya Yoga from Shastri Mahasaya (Kebalananda), and progressed quickly.

Yogananda in 1911 gave Dhirananda his orange dress, initiated him into swami-hood, and gave him his monastic name, "Dhirananda." □

Yogananda traveled a lot, and thus Dhirananda spent more time at their school, becoming the head teacher, and the central figure there.

When Yogananda left India in 1920, he told Satyananda, again and again, to be ready to come to America. In 1922 he wrote from Boston that one of them, Satyananda or Dhirananda, should come to America. Satyananda replied, no, he did not wish to go. Yogananda was a little saddened at that. Yogananda wrote: "Dhirananda must come right away. Satyananda, take up the fortitude to direct the Ranchi school." □

As Satyananda writes, Guru Maharaj (Sri Yukteswar) "later said quietly and somberly that he felt that the beginning of an inauspicious future was connected with this journey that Dhirananda was taking." □

Yogananda and Dhirananda soon started working together in Boston. They printed books, pamphlets, and circulars (mission statements), under the name "Yogoda Shiksha Pranali." □

Then, in 1924, Yogananda started his cross-country lecture tour. In 1925 he inaugurated Mount Washington. Interestingly, in 1925, when Yogananda called Dhirananda to join him there, "Dhirananda had established himself quite well in Boston, in the area of teaching and mathematics, but at leader Yoganandaji's wishes, he shut everything down, went to Mount Washington in Los Angeles, and took on the responsibility of that center." □

Dhirananda was certainly a great soul, and karmically very close and dear to Yogananda. In his first East/West magazine, in Nov/Dec.1925, when Yogananda announced that he had invited Dhirananda to be in charge of Mt. Washington, whenever he was not present, he also wrote: "I am powerless to tell how greatly he has helped me in carrying on my educational work in India and Boston, or of the good which the world has derived from his ideal character and exalted spiritual life. He will bless Mount Washington with his presence there as the residential Swami." □

Not many of Yogananda's known direct disciples actually met Dhirananda – they all joined Mt. Washington later, except Tara Mata (who joined Yogananda in 1924, even

before Mount Washington was established), and Kamala, who came in Mt. Washington in 1926, and who was invited there by Dhirananda.

Even Durga Mata came later, in Dec. 1929; she writes that in May 1928 “Dhirananda had left the fold of his Guru.” (A little mistake- she herself later explains that it happened in 1929). All other disciples, then, tell their stories about Dhirananda by what they themselves have heard or read.

Masters, as Yogananda explained, live a dual existence: they have a very human side, which suffers and rejoices, and a divine one, deep inside, where they are completely free in God, in bliss, never forgetting that everything is just a great dream.

Yogananda, Durga writes, bore deep love for Dhirananda. When Dhirananda, “whom he loved so dearly,” left Mount Washington in 1929, after having lived there for 3.5 years as the resident teacher, Yogananda cried in pain: “My best friend has gone!” He was heartbroken. In a letter he once wrote: “I have given more to Dhirananda than to anyone else.” Yogananda was so distraught that he took off and went to Mexico, to forget his pain (also written in Durga’s book.) The disciples thought he might never return. Kamala writes that Yogananda was away much longer than planned. But “the Lord mended Master’s wounded heart.(Durga)” □

That trip turned out to be quite fruitful- Yogananda met the Mexican president, lectured there, and wrote the chant: “Devotees may come, devotees may go, but I will be Thine always”. He also visited Xochimilco, which turned out to be one of the most beautiful spots on earth Yogananda had seen. In the *Autobiography of a Yogi* he writes: “As entries in a scenic beauty contest, I offer for first prize either the gorgeous view of Xochimilco in Mexico, where mountains, skies, and poplars reflect themselves in myriad lanes of water amidst the playful fish, or the jewel-like lakes of Kashmir.” □

Yogananda’s heart found peace only when he met his friend of friends, Rajarsi Janakananda, in 1932. Durga: “He often said that the Lord brought him back (from Mexico), because the Lord had a boy hidden in Kansas City, in the form of Rajasi Janakananda, for him to love a million times more than he could love Dhirananda.” Yogananda wrote Rajarsi in a letter, Oct. 36: “All that I wished for Dhirananda, I only got such disappointment, but God has fulfilled many times in you.” The love and friendship between them was truly divine. It is deeply touching to read about it in Durga’s book. Yogananda wept tears of love for Rajarsi, sometimes hiding them with his hands, so as not to show them. And Rajarsi, the “little one,” or “beloved Nr.1” knew where to respond: not on a personal level, but from soul to soul, in God.

When Dhirananda left Mount Washington, he opened his own meditation center in downtown LA. Daya Mata relates that he actually set up his own organization, which created a lot of confusion among the LA members. She tells that this was such a heartbreaking moment for Yogananda that he even considered leaving everything, going back to India. Dhirananda had been an enormous pillar for Yogananda: Daya Mata states that his departure actually required a rebuilding of his society. (Daya, telling the story, doesn’t mention Dhirananda’s name, but it is clear who that “monk from India” was.)

However, Dhirananda's new organization never got off the ground. His magnetism wasn't as great as he may have believed. He probably thought himself equal to Yogananda, but once he turned away from him, his sails were empty, so to speak, while Yogananda continued to fill the greatest halls in America, with thousands and thousands of people.

Dhirananda ran his meditation center until 1933, and then abandoned it, together with his Swami title, and became a very respected and successful University professor in Michigan. Good for him... but it still seems a sad story. Of course, he also could have become a great artist, a great businessman, a great star, or whatever. But what does that mean for a devotee like him, except emptiness for the soul?

Dhirananda married in 1934. He had a son and a daughter.

Dhirananda could not forget Yogananda. Did his envy grow, even then? Probably: in 1935, six years after leaving, he finally sued Yogananda, claiming former institutional partnership with him. He won, and collected \$8,000. Congratulations! He also, in the courts, declared that Yogananda was taking sexual advantage of his young female devotees.

Dhirananda rejected Yogananda ever since. Yogananda said he would never forsake him. One day he remarked, talking about Dhirananda: "No matter what he does, he will never find God except through this channel, ordained by God." □

Yes, Dhirananda (a Ph.D.) was much more of a scholar than Yogananda. Yogananda openly admitted that he has never been a great scholar at all. Dhirananda's English was better too. But what does that say? In Sri Yukteswar's words: "A university degree, in any case, is not remotely related to Vedic realization. Saints are not produced in batches every semester like accountants." □

The question is: was Dhirananda happy after he left? He wasn't, if his son is right. He was a sad man, and probably (says the son) because deep down, part of him always longed for the monastic life he left behind. (Plus his best friend in life and death!)

Several disciples seem to think that Dhirananda was the father of Mona, Tara Mata's daughter. True: Dhirananda and Tara left Mount Washington about the same time. Dhirananda left in May 1929. Tara also left in 1929, since she was pregnant. Mona was born in October 2, 1929, meaning that she was conceived in the beginning of January 1929 (while Yogananda was in Boston, lecturing).

This, however, might be an untrue story about Dhirananda: First of all, Mona's appearance didn't show any sign of oriental influence (so one is told). Secondly, Dhirananda's son, who is quite frank about his father's "many flaws," described immoral behavior as "antithetical to who he was." Third, Tara left pregnant and married. It seems probable that she married the father of her child Mona. Who that was is unknown.

To finish that part of Tara's story: After returning from India, in 1936, as Durga Ma writes, Yogananda went to San Francisco to convince Tara Mata to come back to Mount Washington, to help him with his books. Yogananda held her in high esteem

(she too is neither “black” nor “white,” as some people seem to believe). He arranged for her and Mona to live in a bungalow near Mount Washington. Durga, by the way, out of tact, never mentioned Mona in her book, nor that Tara had married.

Yogananda described Dhirananda as one of his two Judas’, the other one being Nerode. When Dhirananda left, as Daya Mata said, SRF (then still called *Yogoda Satsanga*) required rebuilding. Nerode (an Indian who met Yogananda in the early 20ies who became his student, and who also met Dhirananda) was therefore invited to be in charge of Mount Washington whenever Yogananda wasn’t present, which was frequently. But from the early 30ies Yogananda mostly withdrew from lecturing, and Nerode was the one who was sent out touring, to promote the work and the lessons. Nerode was a good teacher, intelligent, successful, and traveled almost continuously from 1932-1937. As Dhirananda, he wrote his own books, which SRF published. Nerode married an American lady in 1931 (there is a film of Yogananda celebrating that marriage), and they had one son.

In 1939 Nerode too left and sued Yogananda heavily for \$500,000 (which might be compared to \$2 million today), claiming partnership with Yogananda. But Yogananda had learned his lesson ten years earlier, with Dhirananda: he had Nerode (and maybe others) sign a paper back then, in 1929, which declared that he was working as a volunteer. That paper saved Yogananda. Nerode lost the case. Much worse, however, was that Nerode accused Yogananda’s morality even more than Dhirananda had. He accused Yogananda of pretty bad sexual misconduct, of having young girls at all hours in his room on the top floor, while he kept the older women on the floor below.

This was certainly no small thing: Nerode was well-respected teacher. Devotees (maybe still today, when they read these things) got shaken in their love and trust, in their discipleship to Yogananda.

Isn’t it amazing how low good devotees can sink when *maya* blinds and squeezes them? Of course the easiest and most effective way to attack an opponent legally is a clamorous sexual scandal. That’s what Dhirananda and Nerode did with Yogananda.

Here is a broader understanding of the Dhirananda story: Yes, Yogananda called Dhirananda a Judas. But did he ever reject him in his heart? Did Yogananda’s love end for him, his concern for him, his loyalty? No, his love is unconditional, and that’s the difference to most of us. When we say “Judas,” we easily reject, our love usually ends, we might get angry, or completely push that person out of our lives. That’s why Dhirananda is not much known today. The Master, however, even though the disciple may indeed have acted like a Judas, never stops seeing him for who he is: an angel of God, whom he loves. Thus Yogananda sent Dhirananda a box of mangoes every year for Christmas, as a gesture of his unconditional and undying friendship, but Dhirananda sent it back each time, unopened. The guru’s love is eternal, the disciple’s love is often fickle.

Amazingly, Yogananda had known for a long time what would happen with Dhirananda. Even as a boy he said to his closest friend Tulsi Bose: “One day Bagchi (Dhirananda) will betray me and marry a white woman.” Isn’t it amazing that Yogananda still let him in the door, and gave him all he could? He also related that

Dhirananda had already betrayed him badly in another lifetime. But the Master's love is divine, ongoing.

And so the drama will go on and on. Who knows what the next lifetime will bring? Again Yogananda, as a divine messenger, will bring light and love to the world, and again people will try to pull him down, will throw dirt at him, will betray him, will misunderstand him. The Master's love and patience remain, fortunately. And thus, one by one, the disciples will find their final release in God.

The best thing, it seems, is to learn from Dhirananda's story, so that we ourselves don't stumble and suffer more than necessary. Oh Lord, help us to watch this stupid ego!