«NIMM, DENN ES HAT NOCH, KOMM»

Thursday, March 30, 2017 – Visakapathnam (India) Bavikonda

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At a sedate pace, the bricks glide past my eyes. Soon, a sooty spot drifts into the scene. Then the small crack. After that the whitish semolina that has been pressed by the mortar out of the depths of the masonry into the light. Finally comes the little plant – lonely, green and cheeky – which has found room for its roots in the middle of the world of bricks. For the seventeenth time, it appears to now at the height of my sternum! Or, is it for the eighteenth time?

I have a spiritual shortcoming. And which country is more suitable to make up for the shortfall in one's intellectual coffer than India? I've been wandering, rolling, sailing and flying all over the subcontinent for some months now, but I've never come into contact with anything that might have corrected the imbalance even a tad. No enlightenment, no spiritual awakening, no heartfelt song that would resonate through the veins of my being. Well, it must be said that I'm not looking too seriously for such an experience. But, who knows, perhaps I'll start seeking something. Or am I deceiving myself: Isn't the connection between travel and seeking a cliché?

Here in India I have encountered many Europeans who evidently felt quite differently from me, who had unerringly found something of meaning in the country. I vividly remember a man of my age who had emerged just behind me from the great temple in Kanyakumari with his eyes glowing – no, looking radiant, looking as if they would explode with emotion. He seemed moved, deeply moved, he was trembling with ecstasy. And all I had felt was the need to wash off the oil, sweat,

soot and stale body fluids from my body, and to drink a cold coke.

I try at times to imagine how it would be if I had a guru, a teacher in spiritual matters. Would it be a person whose every word I would lap up, I would trust? How would I be then? Who would I be? The guru and me. Me and the guru. However hard I try, I simply cannot conceive of such a relationship.

But perhaps it does not need to be a guru right at the start. A mantra might well be a efficient start. In the mantra, repetition is essential, and the advantage here is that it is relatively easy, unlike in other practices, to produce mechanically. Moreover, India is the land of repetitions. Certainly. At the museum entrance you are not asked simply for your ticket, but asked for it at least twice: «Ticket! Ticket!» Photography is not just forbidden, it's: «No photo! No photo! No photo, sir!» In the meantime, I introduce myself consistently with a shortened but doubled version of my name –- though that has never prompted anyone to believe I should be called Samsam. Or maybe it has?

But even a mantra is not something you can simply invent. It has to be «handed over» to you (uttered into your ear) in an act of initiation, as it were. And this act already represents something like a small awakening – or at least it is a story. There's this legend about the poet Kabir (1440–1518), whom no teacher wanted to take under his wings as his origins were not entirely flawless. So, one morning Kabir defiantly lay down on one of the steps leading down from the Ghats to the Ganges in Varanasi. When Swami Ramananda, one of the most revered gurus of the time, came down the steps to take his morning bath in the sacred river, he stumbled over the young man and was so startled that he involuntarily uttered «Rama, Rama», his personal mantra that was a double invocation of Vishnu's seventh incarnation – which was thus inadvertently passed on to Kabir. This «handing over» of the mantra may have been the result of a clever ploy on Kabir's part, but there is no doubt that Kabir was not only worthy of being given a mantra, but also becoming a disciple of Ramananda.

The mantra I like best is the famous «Om Mani Padme Hum» of the Tibetan Buddhists. The reason is simple. Years ago, in a temple in Guangzhou, southern China, I bought – just for a lark – a little brown plastic box etched with the lotus-motif, which reproduced exactly that mantra in endless

repetitions at the touch of a button, humming with dark female voices, which worked as a sort of balm on my soul – my father was very ill at the time and my mind was in turmoil. For a long time the small box stood in my spice rack and I played the mantra to all my guests – for fun, of course. Until the day the battery, hidden deep in the bowels of the device, went kaputt – and given that changing or recharging the battery was out of the question, the repetition came to an end.

A mantra you have purchased in a temple shop is not exactly a story you would entrust to your biographer first. Even less would I tell him that the Om mani padme hum always sounded like a sentence to me, which my mother used to repeat at the table, and which I have to repeat here in Swiss German for the sake of the right tone: «Nim, denn es het no, kum» («Take some, because there's still, come on»).

Now the literal meaning only plays a subordinate role in a mantra. «Om mani padme hum» means something with lotus and jewel (the experts argue about the exact meaning). More decisive are the sound and the power, the spiritual depth of the mantra.

One has to effort a lot if he wants to spiritually transcend the literal meaning of «Nim, denn es het no, kum». At best one could let the sentence pass as a mantra for the capitalism of our days. But of course I don't want to repeat such a slogan. Nevertheless, it is a fact that this mantra has fallen to me. Can I really just ignore it?

The ruins of the Buddhist monastery of Bavikonda lie on a hill above the beach of Rushikonda, north of Visakhapatnam. From the 3rd century BCE onwards the complex was inhabited by some 150 monks for about half a millennium, then abandoned, and archaeologically excavated in the 1980s. Bavikonda is famous for a small bone found in an urn, which is believed to be a piece of the Buddha. The complex is scrupulously clean, extremely well-maintained, and of free access to visitors. Nevertheless, I am the only visitor at the site. The taxi driver, who is to take me back to the city later, cleans the windows of his Suzuki Dzire. And the gardener, a tiny little man who seems to all skin, is watering a hedge at the entrance. I wonder if he lives in the thatched hut on the fringe of the grounds?

I am unobserved and can try it again. A stupa is basically nothing more than architecture that embodies the act of repetition. I pick the biggest stupa and start to move slowly circumambulate it in a

clockwise direction. At first I say, «Om mani padme hum», but it seems terribly artificial to mutter a formula that I do not really understand. So, after the third round, I go over to my own mantra, «Nim, denn es het no, kum; nim, denn es het no, kum.» I circle the stupa 36 times as my mantra consists of six syllables and the repetition wants to be embedded in repetition.

While walking I lose my orientation momentarily. Where is the Bay of Bengal again? Where is the city? And in what kind of blur is my taxi waiting? I do not know what to focus on after a few rounds. And my left eye starts to twitch slightly. I feel the wind, which seems to be warmer on one side of the stupa than on the other. I notice that the piping of the birds changes during my circumambulations – and then repeated. I would not describe my condition as a trance, at most I'd admit to feeling a slight confusion. Afterwards, I feel a bit dizzy. Above all, I'm monstrously hungry and my stomach growls so violently that even a German mastiff would run away from me.

In no circumstances will I describe it as a spiritual experience. And anyone who is familiar with such things is bound to tell me that I'd have to do at least 6 × 36 × 36 rounds – just as a preparation. Nevertheless, the couple of circumambulations I've made have had some impact. I can at most compare it – certainly inappropriately – with the effect that a bottle of red wine usually has on me: a tender caress on my otherwise sporty mind.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

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