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Maud A. Piggott Part III

We conclude the story of Maud A. Piggott, an English woman who traveled to India several times but ultimately settled down in Hollywood, California where she passed away on August 19th, 1974 at age eighty-seven. She was the first Western woman to visit the Maharshi and, by the grace of the Master, had a profound experience in His presence.

AFTER a brief visit to Sri Ramanasramam in the beginning of January 1935, Maude Piggott returned toward the end of the same month for a longer stay. In her Mountain Path article she writes about her life in Tiruvannamalai:

“From that time onwards, started a routine that was to be the same for many weeks. The rickety cart would turn up at six in the morning. It took me up to the Ashram and came back again at seven-thirty in the evening for the return journey. I soon acquired a technique of balance that promised safety if not comfort and the drive lost most of its original precariousness. However it was never peaceful owing to the small insect life inhabiting the straw on which I had to crouch.

“Up at the Ashram I was given a small hut, seven feet by seven, for my use during the day. In it was a wooden plank, a chair and a table on which were a basin, towel and soap. Not luxurious, but the thought and care with which it had been provided touched me more than I can say. However, being a European, my bones were not accustomed to wood unrelieved by a mattress, and the midday rest taken after the noon meal was hardly one so far as I was concerned.

“There were two chief meals, one at eleven-thirty in the morning and the other around eight in the evening. I ate

with the others at the morning one. The food was more or less the same at both – rice, with an assortment of vegetables and milk curd. Everybody sat on the floor in front of an individual strip of banana leaf.”

The question of food, especially the strict vegetarian meals that were served in the Ashram and the diet prescribed conducive for the sadhaka by the Maharshi himself was something a Westerner would necessarily question. And Maud Piggott, along with her new-found American friend, Mr. Evans-Wentz, sought decisive clarification from the Master on this practice.

Entered in Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi on the 31st of January, 1935 is the following dialogue:

22. Mrs. Piggott returned from Madras for a further visit. She asked questions relating to diet regulation.

D.: What diet is prescribed for a *sadhak* (one who is engaged in spiritual practices)?

M.: *Satvic* food in limited quantities.

D.: What is *satvic* food?

M.: Bread, fruits, vegetables, milk, etc.

D.: Some people take fish in North India. May it be done?

No answer was made by the Maharshi.

D.: We Europeans are accustomed to a particular diet; change of diet affects health and weakens the mind.

Is it not necessary to keep up physical health?

M.: Quite necessary. The weaker the body the stronger the mind grows.

D.: In the absence of our usual diet our health suffers and the mind loses strength.

M.: What do you mean by strength of mind?

D.: The power to eliminate worldly attachment.

M.: The quality of food influences the mind. The mind feeds on the food consumed.

D.: Really! How can the Europeans adjust themselves to *satvic* food only?

M.: (Pointing to Mr. Evans-Wentz) You have been taking our food. Do you feel uncomfortable on that account?

Mr. Evans-Wentz: No. Because I am accustomed to it.

D.: What about those not so accustomed?

M.: Habit is only adjustment to the environment. It is the mind that matters. The fact is that the mind has been trained to think certain foods tasty and good. The food material is to be had both in vegetarian and non-vegetarian diet equally well. But the mind desires such food as it is accustomed to and considers tasty.

D.: Are there restrictions for the realised man in a similar manner?

M.: No. He is steady and not influenced by the food he takes.

D.: Is it not killing life to prepare meat diet?

M.: *Ahimsa* stands foremost in the code of discipline for the yogis.

D.: Even plants have life.

M.: So too the slabs you sit on!

D.: May we gradually get ourselves accustomed to vegetarian food?

M.: Yes. That is the way.

And to clarify the matter thoroughly, she continued on the same subject a few days later on 4th February, 1935:

24. Mrs. Piggott: Why do you take milk, but not eggs?

M.: The domesticated cows yield more milk than necessary for their calves and they find it a pleasure to be relieved of the milk.

D.: But the hen cannot contain the eggs?

M.: But there are potential lives in them.

Maud Piggott in her Mountain Path article summed up the previous recorded conversation as follows:

“My companion [Mr. Evans-Wentz] next wanted a

ruling on the vexed question of vegetarianism. Everyone had something to say about that. The outcome boiled down to this:

“Food affects the mind. Certain kinds make it more *sattvic* – alive, vibrant. For the practice of any kind of yoga, vegetarianism is absolutely necessary. But on my asking if one could experience spiritual illumination whilst normally eating flesh foods, the answer was ‘yes’, qualified by the injunction to leave them off and gradually accustom the body to the purer types of food. ‘But in any case,’ went on the Maharshi, ‘once you have attained Illumination, it will make little difference what you eat. It is the early stages that are important. On a great fire it is immaterial what fuel is heaped.’

“Another problem discussed was that of the different kinds of Yoga, and the benefit of various methods.

“The Maharshi said that in the end there was only one approach to the goal, and that was through the realization of what the Self is. Why waste time on other roads which at best will only lead to the final path? Better be on that path itself all the time, and lose no precious moments. Meditate on the Self, on that alone. There is no other goal. The Maharshi’s philosophy and teaching is the purest Advaita – non-dualistic – as will be seen in a talk I shortly had with him.”

The above is but a very brief summary of an extensive, enlightening conversation Mr. Evans-Wentz had with the Maharshi that is recorded in Talks. The questions have particular pertinence to Western seekers and yoga practices.

Maud Piggott continues in her Mountain Path story:

“As the days passed, I saw more and more clearly that this was no theoretical philosophy. He himself lived it continuously and joyously. He was one of the few I have met who were not only happy but untroubled. Not that the sorrows of the world left him untouched - on the contrary - but he knew where they belonged and was not identified with them. To any sufferer his compassion was unlimited.

“Daily, everyone gathered in the hall. Most people were quiet and taken up with their own thoughts. But sometimes there were visitors, travelling monks or devotees who came for the Maharshi’s blessing, and they would sing sacred songs and tell allegorical tales.

“One day a man rushed in and flung himself face down before the Maharshi in a paroxysm of weeping. Great

sobs tore his body. The Maharshi said nothing, and no one else dared. I watched the Maharshi. His head was turned aside, and he seemed indifferent. After some little time, the violence of the man's grief subsided and gradually he became quiet. Still no one spoke. Then at last, reverently the man rose and made a deep salutation. The Maharshi turned his head and smiled upon him. I felt suddenly as if all the flowers of the world had poured their fragrance into our midst.

"Another time a poor creature that had been bitten by a snake was brought in and laid before the Holy Man. We all watched, fear gripping our hearts. Not so he, who sat looking into the far distance, while the victim writhed in pain. Calm and compassion was in that look and infinite peace. After what seemed like hours, the twitching ceased and the man appeared to sleep. Then the one who had brought in the sufferer gently touched him. The man rose, prostrated himself before the Maharshi and went out cured.

"But this was unusual. The Maharshi did not heal, in the accepted term of the word. Talking about it one day, I asked him if one could use spiritual power for healing. He remarked, 'Yes, if you think it worthwhile,' but added that it required a great deal of force, which might be used more profitably in other directions.

"I was told that the Maharshi had his finger on the pulse of the whole Ashram. For instance, when in the hall, he was supposed to know what was going on even in the kitchen – and incidentally I was surprised to find that he himself assisted in the cutting up of vegetables for the daily meal. I was also told that he knows what is passing in the minds of people. Of this latter ability, I had a small personal experience.

"It was in the afternoon and I was in the far corner of the hall reading the translation of a collection of aphorisms written in – to me – a flowery and artificial vein. I was bored and slightly irritated. Suddenly one of the devotees stood before me with another book in his hand – all the Ashram books were bound in brown paper and looked exactly alike – and said, 'The Maharshi asks me to give you this. He thinks it will be more sympathetic to your type of mind.' It was. How could the Maharshi know what I was reading? I was sitting far away, with many people in between us, blocking his line of vision. But I had previously noticed that many times he would answer a question in my mind whilst it was only in the process of being formulated. This happened too often to be a coincidence."

An insight into what Maud Piggott experienced in the Ashram while sitting before the Maharshi was recorded in Talks on 4 February 1936:

D.: Thoughts cease suddenly, then 'I-I' rises up as suddenly and continues. It is only in the feeling and not in the intellect. Can it be right?

M.: It is certainly right. Thoughts must cease and reason disappear for 'I-I' to rise up and be felt. Feeling is the prime factor and not reason.

D.: Moreover it is not in the head but in the right side of the chest.

M.: It ought to be so. Because the heart is there.

D.: When I see outside it disappears. What is to be done?

M.: It must be held tight.

D.: If one is active with such remembrance, will the actions be always right?

M.: They ought to be. However, such a person is not concerned with the right or wrong of his actions. Such a person's actions are God's and therefore they must be right.

D.: Why then the restrictions of food given for such?

M.: Your present experience is due to the influence of the atmosphere you are in. Can you have it outside this atmosphere? The experience is spasmodic. Until it becomes permanent, practice is necessary. Restrictions of food are aids for such experience to be repeated. After one gets established in truth the restrictions drop away naturally. Moreover, food influences the mind and it must be kept pure.

The lady told a disciple later: "I feel the vibrations from him more intensely and I am able to reach the 'I' centre more readily than before."

After more than thirty years, Maud Piggott's memory remains vivid as she writes poignantly about her final days and departure from the Ashram:

"Every experience has to end and the last day of my visit to the Ashram arrived, and with it a great sadness filled my heart. I must go back to worries, problems and irritations. Here all was peace. Here it was comparatively easy to live in the mood of the spirit. Is this why so many holy people retire to solitude, I wondered. Is it only in conditions such as these that the hidden verities emerge from under the covering of distractions? Still, all of us cannot follow such a life. Is the answer to live in the world, if we must, but not be of the world? There was nothing new in the idea, yet in this place I seemed to understand it for the first time.

“That afternoon I had my farewell talk with the Maharshi. He was so gentle and human. We discussed the difficulties of everyday life and mundane problems. I asked again about the relation of the body to the ‘I’. He gave this simile.

“You came up from the bungalow this morning in a cart. Yet you do not say, “The cart came up.” You say “I came up.” You did not make the mistake of identifying yourself with the cart. In the same way, look upon your body as you do the cart. Treat it well, and it will be a good servant and instrument. But do not be deceived into thinking it is ‘I.’ He again stressed the necessity to see only the Self in everything. ‘Act automatically, so to speak, and let ‘It’ do the work. And ‘It’ always will,’ he added. ‘Do not look for results. Do what is right in the given moment and leave it behind you.’”

“At the end of our talk, he quoted that wonderful saying from the *Upanishad* ‘When to the man who under-

stands the Self has become all things, what sorrow, what trouble can there be, to him who has once beheld this unity?’

“As I went to say goodbye in the evening the Ashram people clustered round in sympathy for my departure. I felt I had made and was leaving true friends. They were so simple and yet so genuine.

“There was a service taking place in the adjoining temple and an old Sanskrit hymn was being chanted. Just as I stepped into the cart the temple bell rang. This brought a smile of happiness on everyone’s face. Apparently, to hear a temple gong in the act of departure is a wonderful omen and brings peace.

“As I left Tiruvannamalai in the dawn of the next morning, I caught a last glimpse of Arunachala, the Holy Mountain, on which lives one as one of the saints of earth. It was red and glowing in the rising sun.

“I wept.”

(Concluded)

The Razor’s Edge and Major A. W. Chadwick

By Louis Buss

‘I have never begun a novel with more misgiving. If I call it a novel it is only because I don’t know what else to call it.’ So Somerset Maugham opens *The Razor’s Edge*, which was to prove his most successful book ever – quite something, given that he was then the world’s most successful living writer. If Maugham’s pen had brought him global fame and glittering wealth, it was partly because he had a special genius for reflecting the spirit of the times.

THE *Razor’s Edge* told the story of a young First World War veteran struggling to fit back into society and make sense of all the horrors he had seen. Sure enough, Maugham published it in 1944, when droves of young men were about to return from the Second World War and face exactly the same problems.

Whether this was a happy coincidence or a marketing masterstroke, it worked a charm. Exact figures are hard to come by, but sales of *The Razor’s Edge* went well into the millions. A big-budget Hollywood production starring Tyrone Power soon followed and became one of the year’s blockbusters, with audiences again far into the millions. Perhaps Maugham’s popular touch and his knack for timing were all the book needed to secure its runaway success. But *The Razor’s Edge* had another selling-point which set it apart from the other novels to hit the shelves that year. For, as Maugham’s ambiguous opening suggests, *The Razor’s Edge* was perhaps not a proper novel at all.

Why does the most celebrated novelist in the world open his most successful novel by wondering if he has the right to call it a novel at all? The reason, as Maugham soon reveals, is that this is not actually a work of fiction:

‘I have invented nothing. To save embarrassment to people still living I have given to the persons who play a part in this story names of my own contriving, and I have in other ways taken pains to make sure that no one should recognise them.’

So they are all real... In an ordinary novel, we would assume they were mere figments of the author’s lively imagination, but this time we can be sure they are all real... Elliot Templeton, the exquisitely snobbish art collector who has his initials monogrammed onto his pyjamas... His niece Isabel, a materialistic young woman faced with the choice between money and love... Gray Maturin, the Wall Street broker she eventually ends up marrying... All of them were real people who, even as those first readers

were devouring *The Razor's Edge*, were still out there, continuing with the stories of their lives where Somerset Maugham had left them.

All of which meant that Larry Darrell himself, the extraordinary hero of the novel, was also a real person. That was what made Maugham's insistence that he had invented nothing so wonderful, so exciting, so life-affirming and joyous. For Larry is a sort of modern saint, a shell-shocked young veteran who after the First World War tramps around Europe, doing odd jobs and searching for the meaning of life, doggedly refusing to give up until he has made sense of it all. In the end, Larry's quest takes him to India, where he spends two years studying and meditating under the guidance of a great guru called Sri Ganesha. At the end of those two years, Larry finally receives the spiritual illumination he has been seeking since the war. He returns to the West as an enlightened being. There he renounces his small private income and resolves to live out the remainder of his life in obscurity and humility, driving a taxi round New York, perhaps, or working in a garage.

'He is not famous,' Maugham tells us at the beginning of the book. 'It may be that when his life at last comes to an end he will leave no more trace of his sojourn on this earth than a stone thrown into a river leaves on the surface of the water. Yet it may be that the way of life he has chosen for himself may have an ever-growing influence over his fellow men, so that, long after his death perhaps, it may be realised that there lived in this age a very remarkable creature.'

How tantalising – how intriguing and frustrating – for those first readers of *The Razor's Edge*! Imagine reading Maugham's words on the New York subway one morning in 1945, then lowering the book and looking at your fellow passengers, wondering if one of them might be the elusive Larry Darrell himself. No wonder Maugham received sacks of fan-mail for Larry, along with requests for his picture and his autograph. No wonder various literary detectives set off on the hunt for the real Larry Darrell, a fruitless and inconclusive quest which has continued in some form or another down to the present day.

The first candidate for the 'real' Larry was the famous English novelist Christopher Isherwood. What made him seem a likely suspect at the time was that he was a friend of Maugham's who was interested in Hinduism, and even had a guru of his own. The historian Gerald Heard was suggested as a possible Larry for similar reasons. Then,

many years after the appearance of *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham published an article entitled *The Saint*. This gave an account of his 1938 visit to Sri Ramanasramam and recorded his impressions of Ramana Maharshi. His descriptions of Ramana corresponded exactly, and sometimes word-for-word, with the descriptions of Sri Ganesha, Larry's guru in *The Razor's Edge*. So from now on it was quite obvious that the great saint with whom the real Larry had lived and meditated for two years had been none other than Sri Ramana Maharshi.

This naturally tended to undermine Isherwood and Heard as potential candidates, since neither of them had ever met Ramana, let alone spent two years as the only white resident of his ashram. Ideally, the 'real' Larry would now need to be someone who was a devotee of the Maharshi and who had also known Somerset Maugham. The best possibility for a while seemed to be a devotee called Guy Hague. Like Larry, Hague was an American. Like Larry, he had worked in the mines, and like him he had also lived in the Ashram for an extended period. The only drawback was that, as it eventually turned out, Hague had never actually met Somerset Maugham. It seems that when the great writer visited the Ashram, Hague had not yet arrived there himself, but was still on the boat from Manila. And if Maugham never met Hague, it was rather hard to see how he could have based a character on him.

There is one last candidate, perhaps the most surprising and implausible of them all, and that is Paul Brunton. It seems that Brunton once told his son that he had met Maugham at a party on the eve of the novelist's departure for India. Brunton further claimed that he was the one who had recommended Maugham should visit the Maharshi. However, Brunton was never one to let the facts get in the way of a good story, and there is no independent evidence to back him up. And even if he and Maugham did meet as claimed, it would still hardly prove that Brunton then became the hero of Maugham's most successful novel ever.

So perhaps, in the end, there was no hero after all. Perhaps the search for the 'real' Larry is so frustrating and baffling precisely because there was no real Larry to begin with. Perhaps, despite his own protestations to the contrary, Maugham just made the whole thing up. Surely if there was a candidate who ticked all the boxes, we would have found him by now. We need someone who knew both Somerset Maugham and Ramana Maharshi.

Ideally, he should have lived at Sri Ramanasramam for two years, as Larry did before returning to the West. What else do we know about Larry that might allow us to identify his real counterpart? Larry was twice-wounded during the war. Though he managed to carry on fighting, he had to rest on his return home, and it is strongly implied that he was suffering from shell-shock. To add to the trauma of it all, Larry's best friend was killed during the conflict. Once he has got himself back together, instead of resuming his place in society and settling down to a suitable career, our shell-shocked young man starts drifting around as a sort of tramp, wandering from one menial job to the next as he reads philosophy and searches for the meaning of life. This he is able to do because he is lucky enough to have a small private income. Unfortunately, Larry's refusal to settle down to a career makes it difficult for him to settle down with a wife. Although he is engaged to Isabel Bradley at the beginning of the book, Larry's refusal to get a proper job means that this can't last. Once the engagement has fallen through, Larry drifts from girlfriend to girlfriend as casually as he drifts from job to job, always moving on, never settling down.

It should by now be clear what a remarkable and unconventional man Larry is, and this makes the search for his real counterpart all the more hopeless. For surely such an unusual person would leap straight out at us? Perhaps it is hardly surprising that everyone today has given up the search. Either Larry Darrell was a pure figment of the author's imagination, or he was a sort of composite character, having bits of Christopher Isherwood mixed in with bits of Gerald Heard, perhaps even with a dash of Paul Brunton here and there to add a touch of colour. Yet admitting that Larry was a pure fiction all along is sad and strange. Sad because, even after all these years, it would be so much more wonderful and romantic to believe that Larry had been a real person, quietly spreading a benign influence on the lives of those around him, a living beacon of sanctity and hope... and strange because Maugham was famous for putting real people in his books. Not being a particularly imaginative writer, he tended just to lift his characters straight from real life. So how did he suddenly manage to invent a character as extraordinary as Larry? And, having invented him, why begin *The Razor's Edge* by assuring us so explicitly that he is real?

This leads us on to another crucial piece of evidence. As one might expect of a writer who based his characters

on real people, Maugham for many years kept a notebook or journal. Here he would record his impressions of the people he met and the places he visited so that he could later use them in his fictional works. By the end of his life, Maugham had filled up many volumes with these notes. Sadly, the originals were destroyed before his death, but he did produce a much-redacted version for publication. Surely if Larry was based on a real person, that person would make some sort of appearance in the notebook Maugham used as the basis for his novels. There would surely be an account of his meeting with the real Larry and of the impression he had made... and how fascinating that would be!

After the publication of *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham gave an interview in which he let slip another valuable clue. The theme of the veteran who drops out of society on his return from war was one that had long interested him. Indeed, the pattern of *The Razor's Edge* had been laid out years before in a lost play called *The Road Uphill*. And now Maugham revealed that it was something that had happened on his trip to India in 1938 that had inspired him to revisit this old theme. But why should a visit to India, of all places, have brought shell-shocked veterans back into Maugham's head? Surely it could only be because he had met the model for Larry Darrell there and come away with the idea for *The Razor's Edge* already germinating in his mind.

There is an easy way to put all this to the test. Not only has Maugham left us with a shortened version of his notebooks, but he has conveniently divided them up by country. All we have to do therefore is to turn to the section that describes his visit to India and see if he records meeting anybody there who might be a possible candidate for the real Larry.

And who is the very first person we encounter when we do this? Who is the very first person Maugham describes in the Indian section of his notebook, a person, moreover, to whom he devotes more space than to anyone else he met in the country, including Ramana Maharshi himself? It is somebody referred to only by the enigmatic codename of Major C.

The fact that we have followed Maugham to India seeking some connection with the First World War and immediately run smack into a Major is surely no coincidence. So who was this Major C? And might he perhaps have borne any resemblance to the elusive Mr. Darrell? Major C was of course none other than our own Major Alan Wentworth Chadwick, a well-known figure in the Ashram and Ramana Maharshi's most prominent Western

devotee. Even from the evidence presented so far, it should be obvious that Chadwick is a prime candidate for the real Larry. Unlike any of the others in the frame, he possesses the unique qualification of having been a devotee of Ramana Maharshi who actually met Somerset Maugham – for it was none other than Major C who welcomed Maugham to the Ashram in 1938. Unlike Isherwood and Heard, Chadwick had actually fought in

the First World War, and thus shared in the great formative trauma of Larry’s life. And, when Maugham met him, Chadwick had been living in Sri Ramanasramam for two years – the exact period of time Larry was to spend there.

But all that is just the beginning. In 2011, I started researching a book about Chadwick, and I soon uncovered previously unknown facts which convinced me that Major C was indeed the real Larry Darrell. *(To be continued)*

Letters and Comments

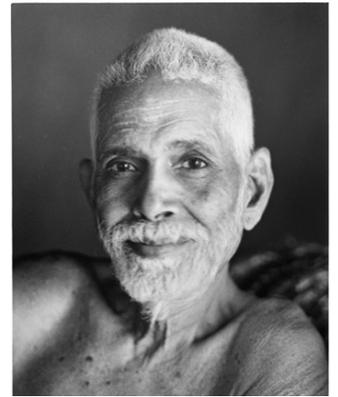
A brief story: I studied Zen passively for three decades, mostly in the context of martial arts. Months ago I heard the name ‘Ramana Maharshi’ and felt drawn to learn about his teachings, simply based upon hearing his name. When I read his teachings, a profound understanding occurred, to say the least. Since then, I have come to learn more about Sri Maharshi and Hinduism. I feel a compelling connection to Arunachala but, more importantly, I feel a sense of devotion to Ramana that my little self does not quite understand. The best I can explain it is that his words were like a lighthouse that not only showed me the way out of a storm, but also illuminated the way home. I see a reference to ‘devotees’ on your website. How does one become such a devotee in current times, if it is even possible? Is there, or even was there, initiation at Arunachala? Thank you so much!
–American Devotee

“How does one become such a devotee in current times?” It is no different than in past times when the Maharshi occupied a body and yet spread his web of grace around the globe. Many have been caught in it during his lifetime and, by far, a larger number have been caught in it following his Maha Nirvana sixty-five years ago.

Those, like you, who have experienced a compelling connection to Sri Ramana and Arunachala become devotees involuntarily, so to speak. They become fascinated by the simplicity, the directness and authenticity of his teachings. They then become equally fascinated with the beauty and graciousness of his personality.

And there are those who are caught in his web of grace by serendipitously resting their eyes on an image of him, a photo perhaps, especially the one attached to this

email. Or they may simply hear his name, like you. Then they may feel the impact of his most profound and powerful teaching, his silence, penetrating their heart unexpectedly, immediately transporting them to a realm of peace and joy never before experienced.



In this and other ways the Master chooses his disciples, his devotees. We do not choose him. It is he who chooses us. And when he does, our path to deliverance becomes clear and what needs to be done we proceed to do under his watchful eye and guidance. Devotees feel it now, just as before. Now the world is slowly saturated by a gentle shower of grace forming pools here and there where sincere souls gather to quench their spiritual thirst and extinguish the flames of worldly illusion.

One such place where the greatest influence of Arunachala Ramana is experienced is at his abode, Sri Ramanasramam, in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, at the foot of the Arunachala Mountain. If you wish to confirm your connection with the Maharshi and drink deep from the source of the spring of illumination, that is where you should make your way now, if possible. But if not possible, there is no harm. He has always said that “mental contact is the best.” All is present, here, where we are now. We simply need to turn to him and his teachings with one-pointed devotion and dedication.

Regarding your question of initiation, from what you wrote it is apparent to me that he has already given it, he has already caught you in his eternal web and you will soon be convinced of it yourself.
– Editor