

FUNERAL ORATION FOR MUKTANAND

**By John Ransley, partner
Uniting Church, Sussex St, West End, Qld
20 February 2004**

Muktanand had a rich and varied life and it is not possible to canvass more than a few aspects of that life as I knew it. Because of the pressure of time what follows is a kind of riff on her life; please excuse me if it seems disjointed.

It might help to explain that I knew her before she went to India. We met in Sydney in 1969, through our mutual friend Chris Powell, and became close about a year later. In 1971 I moved to Toowoomba to take up a lecturing job in geology, and in 1972 I managed to entice her to join me there.

We were interested in many of the same things, but for my part the key elements of her attraction were her bright intelligence, her strong personality and her sharp tongue – she could be bitingly funny. Plus all the usual attributes of a beautiful young woman.

One of the particular interests that drew us together at that time was the anti-psychiatry movement, best represented in our minds by R D Laing. But there were also many shared interests unconventional, including the counter culture, the alternative substance culture, the hippy movement and fierce opposition to the Vietnam war.

Muktanand had commenced studies for a Bachelor of Arts degree at Sydney University when I met her, but although she had done brilliantly wherever she had tried, she was too young and too much in the turmoil of youth to make a go of it then.

I am not quite sure when she first developed her interest in yoga, but I think it was during her Sydney university days. I know that she sampled the Indonesian mystical group Subud, then, as well as Bob Gould's meetings above his bookshop, where he tried to interest innocent young first years in anarchism and socialism.

When I met Muktanand she was going with John Kearins, a very fine person who was her first serious boyfriend. So I think it is true to say that I was Muktanand's second boyfriend. We had many adventures at that time, together with our friends Chris Powell and Tony Harper, who are here today.

After she came to Toowoomba Muktanand developed her yoga practice much more intensively, helped and encouraged by June Henry and her then husband, Karl Jackson. Muktanand always said she loved the physical practices of yoga, despite being an anti-sport student when she was going to school.

Although she lived with me when she first came to Toowoomba, she moved out later so that she could have a flat of her own. Almost certainly my place wasn't clean enough, and she didn't want to be stuck cleaning up after me. But also it made it much easier for her to do her daily yoga practice.

We had drifted apart by the time she went to India in August 1974, but I kept in touch and tracked her down to the Monghyr ashram in early 1976 – what is now known as the "old"

BSY. I stayed there for about three months, working first in the press under Hariprem, and then in the editing department under Nischalanand. While I was there I edited the first version of Swami Satyananda's Yoga Nidra book.

During that time I stayed at the Skye ashram some distance away, while Muktanand was accommodated in the main ashram. Relationships were actively discouraged so I didn't see too much of her, but I remember that on the second day that I was there Muktanand "stole" some things I'd left lying around and later returned them, just to disabuse me of any pre-conceptions I may have had about the nature of the ashram.

I had always intended to travel to England so when I finished the Yoga Nidra book I started to think about moving on again. What prompted me to leave was when Swami Satyadharma pointed out that I had started to speak to newcomers like I was an old ashram hand.

During the twelve or so years Muktanand was in India she didn't write very often because ashram policy discouraged correspondence. Nevertheless we maintained sufficient contact to enable me to follow her ashram career with interest.

When she returned to Australia in late 1985 I was desperate and dateless and rushed to Sydney to meet her during the Christmas holidays. Once again I managed to entice her to Queensland. By this time she was a mature woman, still young, with a hoard of fascinating stories about India and an intellectual and credential hunger to finish her university studies. The photo on the order of service dates from this period. It was immediately apparent to my untrained eye that she had developed extraordinary skills as a yoga teacher, and that she had acquired a great depth of knowledge of the yoga tradition, at every point through the filter of intensive personal practice.

Initially I invited her into a shared house in Miller Street, Hill End, but it was not long before she started agitating for cleaner premises. In August 1986 I purchased the house at 18 Rosary Crescent and we have lived there ever since.

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Many people have said to me "what can you say" about Muktanand's premature death. One thing I would like to say is that in Muktanand's Master of Letters thesis on yoga psychology, she writes the following about "abhinivesha", a Sanskrit term for one of the "kleshas" or obstructions that prevent the ultimate recognition of the self as pure awareness:

"Abhinivesha is clinging to life, or conversely, fear of death (Yogasutra 2:9). However it is extended to all forms of clinging and attachment, of which clinging to life is the strongest. Like the other klesha it has its origin in ignorance of the transcendent nature of the self, which prevent us from recognising death – not as an end – but as yet another transformation of consciousness. Even the wise – the seers of the self – are subject to clinging and fear of death, albeit in attenuated form, indicating just how strong this tendency is in human nature." [p.61]

Muktanand would certainly scoff at the suggestion that she was one of "the wise". She had the same measure of the fear of dying that most – but not all – of us have. This was certainly a major factor in her fierce struggle to live, although there were other strong factors as well – such as her desire to write the definitive book on yoga psychology, her two thirds completed

translation of the Durga Path, her plans to retire to her country cottage, and her desire to simply have more fun and spend more time relaxing with friends.

In her fight against her illness, she drew strength and inspiration from whatever seemed to work, but she drew inspiration particularly from dreams and strength from the story of Durga's battle with the demons. I should explain that Durga is an Indian deity, possibly the last thing you would think that Muktanand would be interested in, but you have to remember she was brought up a Catholic, and they have a very strong tradition of devotion to a powerful mother of god figure.

Two major dreams seemed to show how Muktanand's illness would end. In the one given to her by a friend, she emerges into sunshine, surrounded by light and love. In the other there is similarly joy and light and an enthusiastic kiss for someone called Kundan.

Both major dreams were murky as to whether or not she actually would live through her illness, but she chose what she thought was the most optimistic ending. These and other dreams sustained her throughout the two years of her illness, and Durga's successful battle with the demons inspired her to face the worst parts with great courage. Like Durga she was literally involved in a fight to the death.

This was not the first time in her life where the interpretation of her dreams was a life and death issue, but it was obviously the first time where the stakes were so high. Several times she said to me that if her interpretation turned out to be wrong, at least she would have avoided a lot of mental suffering.

Muktanand's dilemma was encapsulated in the quote I have already read from her thesis. Muktanand never claimed to "know" that death was "yet another transformation of consciousness" although she had friends who did. Her integrity and intellectual honesty prevented her from clutching at this notion for reassurance, even though it is a core teaching of the yoga tradition.

As best as we can determine, avoiding hindsight and embellishment as much as humanly possible, the five of us privileged to be present when Muktanand died believe that at the moment of her death she received the transformation of consciousness that had eluded her all her life.

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Muktanand was a senior teacher in the Sivananda – Satyananda lineage, formally recognised by her title of Yoga Acharya. In an opinion shared by many people she brought to her teachings an absolutely unique combination of heart, mind and physical skill. If she had had sufficient health and energy to run week-long silent retreats modelled on the retreats she did at the Mangrove Mountain ashram, serious students from all over Australia would have been breaking down the doors to get in.

In her last years Muktanand often expressed the wish that she could just go somewhere in Australia and do a silent retreat run by someone else in the yoga style that she loved.

She also would have loved to access for herself a more senior practitioner in the yoga tradition, but this wasn't available in Australia and she felt that she couldn't afford to stop

work and go looking in India.

If Muktanand had any one regret, it would have been that she didn't stop work much sooner. In her collection of "inspiring quotations" in her Retreat folder, she has several quotes about work. One comes from Brother David Steindl-Rast who points out that the Chinese word for 'busy' is composed of two characters: 'heart' and 'killing'. The other quote comes from Bertrand Russell who says "One of the signs of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important."

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Although she only left a few scraps of writing - a tiny part of what she was capable of - we have at least plenty of photos!

I have a sense she will always be with us in spirit in whatever way we remember her: as lover; yoga friend; strict asana teacher; heart meditation teacher; skilful counsellor; bossy boots sister or loving daughter.

One of her favourite mantras was OM, which can also be used as a form of salutation: OM to you Muktanand! [facing the coffin]

I would like to finish with a simple poem I discovered in Muktanand's things written on the 18 January just past.

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BEING HERE

my reward
for getting up early –
the first sunlight
gilding the gums
blue sky and fragrant air
washed clean by days of rain;
the quiet, the birds –
that spurt of joy!

20 February 2004