I spent the summer months of 1989 in the ashram in South Fallsburg, New York, and in September I flew to India, prepared to spend a year in Ganeshpuri. I loaned one son my car and stored some boxes with my other son, but mostly I gave everything away. The Ann Arbor community packed up thirty-seven boxes of books which ended up in the ashram library in Ganeshpuri, and they also organized a yard sale to benefit the ashram at some point during the summer. I had arranged it so that I could still return to Michigan and teach again, but I was not at all sure where the coming year would lead me.

It took me a while after I arrived in South Fallsburg to recognize how befuddled my mind was at that point. It also took time to decipher how protective and considerate people were being when they assigned me one of the simplest tasks ever assigned anyone, to help a swami keep track of his daily appointments. I can hardly remember anything about those two months except the healing effects of the daily practices and the pleasure of being with my roommate and old friend, Vidura. In early September I set out for India.

After I made it past the jet lag and settled in with my condo-mates, I was assigned to be the head of the paint crew. The whole construction crew was working at maximum speed to get the ashram ready for Gurumayi’s arrival. The monsoons were just over, and the yearly project of restoring paint to the buildings had begun. Pat, the head of the crew, smiled, as did almost everyone else, at the thought of assigning this newly arrived professor to supervise the work. In reality, the fact that I hardly knew the difference between oil paint and the other kind made little difference. The painters on the crew were from Pune and spoke only Marathi, except for Vasudev, my contact person and the chief of the crew. Tom, who clearly knew a great deal about construction, would pass along the day’s assigned task, and then I would have a most cordial if not always linguistically effective conversation with Vasudev. When Gurumayi arrived and heard about my assignment, my seva, she threw her head back and laughed, at which point Pat spoke up and said that I was doing a very good job. Starting each day’s work with the carpenters and electricians pulled me, in the best possible way, out of my other preoccupations and memories.
By mid-October I realized I was approaching the time when I needed to let the University of Michigan know if I planned to return the following fall and resume teaching. I went up to Gurumayi in the darshan line, and I realize now how undecided and unclear I was about what should come next. Gurumayi responded quickly to my framing of the choices, saying, “Go back. Continue your work as a professor.” I was a bit crestfallen that she didn’t say I should stay in the ashram, but at the same time, I was relieved to settle the issue. So I let the Department know my plans.

In late October my role in the ashram community began to change. Panna approached me in my capacity as a psychologist to suggest that Gurumayi might occasionally send devotees to talk with me at some length. I made it clear that I was not a therapist, so we settled on the term counselor. For the rest of my time there I would get together with individuals or couples, sometimes more than once. One recurrent aspect of this counselor role was brought into sharp focus several months later. In March, Isabel and I co-led a large “sadhana group” for women only, a place for reflection and growth. We met several times. After the first session, Isabel reported to Gurumayi in one of our little planning sessions that some women had complained that it was inappropriate to have a male leader for a group of all women. It made them feel less likely to participate. It upset them.

Gurumayi quickly replied to Isabel that she should go into the next group and inform the women that she, Gurumayi, had sometimes had occasion during darshan line interactions with devotees to suggest that they seek out Chaitanya since that I was serving as one of her counselors, adding that I would be willing and able to speak with them at length. Gurumayi went on to say that Isabel should tell the group that subsequently these same devotees would come up in darshan and talk with her about the conversation. Gurumayi told Isabel to say, about Chaitanya that he doesn’t hold himself back, he gets himself, and they go away feeling they have received a gift from Gurumayi because he gets out of the way and lets something greater happen. Isabel repeated all this to the women’s group, and the issue of the male leader seemed to fade away.

But I heard something else in Gurumayi’s account of her devotees’ experiences, something that enabled me to comprehend one part of these conversations that I hadn’t found words to describe. I would arrange to meet the devotee somewhere in the upper garden or off from the main activity of the Ashram. Initially, as I listened to their story and noted their questions, all I could think
was, “I have absolutely no idea what to say to this person. There has been some kind of misassignment here. I’m not a therapist. I can’t think of anything helpful to say right now.” I would keep listening, of course, but alongside a mounting sense of unease.

Then there would be a click. A shifting of gears. A repolarization of the light. I would just start talking, asking questions, and commenting, but I was giving voice to thoughts that did not seem like things I would usually say. For one thing, my usual ‘maybe this and maybe that’ way of presenting things had dropped out of my speech pattern. I was being spoken through, it seemed. I felt more at ease and confident the more I stopped scanning and filtering what seemed to be coming out of its own accord. I was on automatic. Or something like that.

This didn’t resemble channeling in any way. It felt more as though I was sharing with Gurumayi what it was like to allow the kindness and wisdom in her, in us both, in all of us really, to be present in this conversation. Each person I was speaking with also contained that same kindness and wisdom, even if it was obscured by the static created by fear and old baggage. It might have seemed simply as though I was passing along what I had learned from Baba and Gurumayi over the past sixteen years, and that was all there was to say about it. But then, what was that click, that qualitative shift in my capacity to embody that kindness and wisdom? What was that?

When I was in Oakland in 1975 I several times had the good fortune to be allowed to sit just to the right of Baba’s chair as one after another devotee came forward for the noontime darshan. I heard their questions. I heard and saw his response. All I might have been able to say at first would have been that he was immensely loving, clear, and compassionate. But as the moments went on, I would have needed some other formulation, perhaps that he was in some other state, some higher plane of consciousness. Even that wasn’t how it seemed in the end. Watching a few startlingly powerful conversations forced me to see that the shock, delight, joy, and awe in the devotee’s face and posture came from a deeper truth about what Baba was doing in his responses. He was giving voice to the devotee’s own inner Self, showing them, mirroring for them, the self-love and deep knowledge about what to do next they already contained. And for a second (which is, at one level, enough) they opened to their own Self, to The Self. And they showed it, paused in gratitude and moved on.
The click, then, the qualitative shift in me as counselor, seems to have mirrored what I had seen in Baba and Gurumayi. It was my version of being free for a moment of the egoic chatter and doubt. I rediscover this lovely state from time to time in my teaching. The room feels particularly quiet, the light seems more alive, and we are suddenly having a radically different kind of conversation.

After the temporary influx of visitors from all over the world around Christmas, my time with the crew and the painters from Pune came to an end. My new seva assignment began with a summons to come up to the gazebo in the upper garden. Gurumayi and George were already there when the five of us arrived, three swamis, Colin, and myself. Gurumayi wanted to create a five person team to explore something about ashram living that perplexed and disturbed her. She began by wondering aloud why it was that so many of her devotees do their ashram work with so much dependency and so little creativity. This was the puzzle we were assigned to explore. It seemed to me that George’s comments expressed very little enthusiasm about the project.

George, in both the best and the worst senses of the word, was like the first mate of the ashram. He had been instrumental in Baba’s many efforts to expand and decorate the ashram. He set a high bar for the crew in terms of time and devotion committed to making it beautiful. He continued to function in this role with Gurumayi after Baba took mahasamadhi. He ran a very tight ship, and it was widely acknowledged that his leadership was indispensable. On the other hand, as with many of the real and fictional first mates, he could often be overbearing, insulting, and harsh. Having a run-in with George or hearing his withering critique of the work of one’s whole crew was not an uncommon experience. As the head of the paint crew, I had been told by George more than once to completely redo some project and work on throughout the night. Ashramites learned to regale each other with stories about George's latest intervention in their work life. The humor surrounding these stories always struck me as fundamentally benign and therapeutic.

One day in the courtyard Gurumayi saw our newly formed group walking along, and, noting our number, said, "Ah, you are the panchakshari. The great, five-syllabled mantra, Namah Shivaya.” And with that she named us the Panchakshari. She then turned to us and said we should each select one of the five syllables which signify one of the five elements. And then, “Chaitanya, which syllable do you choose?” I paused for a moment and then chose the final syllable. "Yes,"
she said, "'Ya.' That's very good. The ether." I was pleased to be connected with the alluring element of space, the space between things but also that same space within everything. The element that connects and penetrates forms but is also at the very threshold of formlessness.

It seems to me, in retrospect, that the goal I set for our work, to modify a leadership style that bred so much anxiety and resentment, required many small, interconnected changes and a considerable period of time. During whatever time it might take to bring about major changes, there would always be an element of uneasiness in the ashram community, an uncertainty about how wise it would be to criticize or complain. There were many work assignments that seemed less like service and more like punishment or banishment for getting out of line. By the time the Panchakshari had completed three months of interviews and group meetings, the reformist spirit seemed to be ebbing away, and I tried, with some difficulty, to reconcile myself to this being merely an early round of a long process of change. I could not see, as I think I can now, how Gurumayi's next project flowed from a larger perspective on the cause of and remedy for excessive dependency and constriction.

Gurumayi created a small team to design and conduct group meetings, some for men only and some for women only and some for everyone. The purpose of the groups was to help everyone open up, to let their inner self come forth. To soften, to get beyond fear, to overcome weakness. To share: “when you share, you let things go. You offer it to the fire.” My role, in several of these groups, was to be the MC and to guide the conversation in fruitful directions.

The groups were designed to help people contemplate what they had learned in the ashram. Had we learned, under the influence of the Guru’s grace, the meaning of service, how to care for others, how to even uplift others? One thing I saw in the planning sessions with Gurumayi was, for her, how mutually compatible her compassion was with her criticism, or how broad critiques of each gender co-existed with the larger goal of going beyond such conditioning.

In early May my birthday was a week away, and someone I invited to share some cupcakes and soda pop for the occasion told me it was customary to approach Gurumayi in the darshan line and ask her to the little party. Not that she ever actually came to these events, but it was appropriate to ask. So that’s what I did.
The line was moving slowly and I somehow edged around to the right side of her chair. She glanced over at me and paused, waiting for what I wanted to say. I told her it was my birthday soon and I wanted to invite her to my little party.

I look back at that seemingly innocent gesture on my part as one of the worst mistakes I ever made in my life. That invitation changed everything, very much for the worse. Well, not the gesture alone but the invitation as set in the context of her reply. She said, as best I can recall, “Chaitanya. Did you think we were not going to give you a big party like the one we gave Colin before he went back to America?”

How best to describe the feelings of numbness and panic as the firm ground beneath me seemed to give way? I can feel part of that reaction just sitting here typing out this account. I sense it in my face. I am feeling flushed. Waves of something are playing up and down my cheeks. If they had words of their own, these waves would be crying, “Oh, no! Oh, no!”

I tried to recover and somehow say I would be glad if there were such a party, but she looked at me with such finality and distain that her saying “No” just closed the door on all that, period.

Such a huge mistake. I knew in a millisecond that I had taken one definitive step down a road I had traversed so many times that it was automatic, but this time it changed everything. I had presumed that my worst fear was surely about to come true and then acted on that fear. The fear? That despite all the evidence to the contrary, I had never really been a big kid in the ashram workings. That despite all the evidence to the contrary, Colin’s huge party for a departing celebrity, a big kid, was something that would never be offered to me because I just didn’t matter that much.

I had risen to a status of some centrality in the Ashram. First came the Panchakshari for a couple of months. I stayed on after Colin had his big party and went back to Ann Arbor. I co-led a few large groups, one for men only and the other for women only. And then, in my eyes, I fell. I wasn’t invited to those little planning groups in the upper garden any more. But that wasn’t the main issue.

What had happened was that my lifelong incapacity to take criticism had undercut my ability to absorb Gurumayi’s critique of how well I had done in these little groups. Her comments were
not all negative. In fact, even the negative-seeming ones were just honest reactions to how I had handled this or that interaction. But her honesty touched some core truth about me that I had tried day in and day out to avoid. She pointed out a couple of times when I had been too passive, “too babyish, right?” I had showed that I couldn’t lead, couldn’t take the reins. One such time was when I didn’t protect the sensitive men, the ones who shared their affection for other men, from the insinuations made by the more macho, more inconsiderate men.

I knew she was right about all this. I knew that if doing the job I had been assigned, to work with large groups, meant putting aside the “nice guy” persona and pressing harder to generate real insight on the part of the person I was engaged with, I had not developed enough by then to be able to do this. It’s easy to recognize that I was fully aware of all this back then, but the truth is that this insight into my situation flickered on and off within me alongside a whole set of protests at being humiliated in front of these inner circle females. At being laughed at by this one and that one. I knew she was right, but it still stung.

Nothing stopped my inner slide into a familiar place of shame and anger. Not even being told that Gurumayi was moving me from being one of six roommates in a condo to a room of my own on the same corridor as Bhau Shastri, the head priest of the Ashram, and a venerable hermit swami from Australia. Not even having Gurumayi pause as she walked with a swami along my remote corridor and come into my room, declaring, “Ahh, Chaitanya has become a renunciant.” Not even when Hema put two nice shirts on my doorknob. Not even when Panna invited me up to her room to be fitted for a ring, the likes of which two of Gurumayi’s favorites wore, which I envied beyond measure. I had figured out that I was such a little kid that I had better tend to myself if I wanted to have any kind of birthday party.

Being that far off about how I was viewed was not a matter to be taken lightly by Gurumayi, and she didn’t. There was no way to right that wrong in a flash. It has taken me most of the past twenty years.

What made it far worse was the actual day of the birthday. Somehow I managed to carry around with me the shame of misreading Gurumayi’s intentions, the gloomy self-deprecation that caused me to misread her in the first place, and the hope-against-hope, the desperate desire to get one of
those great rings from Gurumayi herself. Panna and I had figured out my exact ring size after all. But it didn’t seem likely.

I would like to believe that this whole drama unearthed some deeply buried immaturity in me. But, in all honesty, I don't think the babyishness that emerged that day was all that far beneath the surface all along. I put on my self-protective, avoidant persona, shuffled blankly toward Gurumayi in the darshan line and placed my offering of fruit in the darshan basket, as was customary on one’s birthday. As I turned away, I heard Gurumayi’s voice, asking "Chaitanya, aren't you going to take your birthday present?" I was a bit flustered but I did manage to pick up a fair-sized bag that contained several wrapped objects. Suddenly it seemed I had gotten everything wrong. She did intend to give me one of those great rings, and it was now in the bag I was holding.

One of my favorite students from my recent teaching days at Michigan came along as I raced back to my room to open the bag. I opened all the little packages, but there was no ring. And the tantrum that followed was worthy of a three-year-old drama prince. I filled the quiet corridor with my protestations that I did not want a gold chain or a watch. These were the presents in the bag. But I was now doubly crushed by the thought of not being one of the big boys. And I thought I knew whom to blame. It wasn't Gurumayi. It was her right hand man, George, who was a cross between the harsh first mate and the seductive macho man of the ashram.

In my mind, it seemed that George must have vetoed the ring. The truth is that the gifts were thoughtful and lovely, but I could see only my defeat. The Panchakshari had spent most of the winter months identifying George as the primary source of the anxiety and contraction in the ashram. Now, I thought, with Colin back in the United States and George always being able to squelch any or all of the swamis, he was going to have his revenge on me for the rising tide of anti-George feeling. As of this writing, however, I have to say that I have no idea who cancelled the idea of a ring, or why.

I'm going on about all this in an effort to present a full enough picture, but I do hope I have presented a pathetic enough picture of my mental state to warrant my saying no more about my birthday, filled as it was with my ego’s massive eruption into the broad light of day. Twenty-one birthdays have passed since then, and looking back from this perspective, I wish I had not spent
half those birthdays still entangled in my useless resentment of the big boys and their effect on my life. In any event, so much of how I live my life today seems to be one positive outcome of surviving and learning from my fifty-seventh birthday.

I don’t want to overstate the times when my characteristic vulnerabilities took hold of the moment. In many ways, the most profound changes that happened during this year came from the private and introspective times. Even the inner obstacle of jealousy was under reconstruction. I wrote a poem about this process and shared it with Gurumayi and the Panchakshari during one of our meetings.
Listen, Chaitanya

Listen to me. Listen to me. Listen to me.

You should be gentle with yourself. She is not about to see you
Listen to how I speak about you. As you imagine anyone else is seeing you.
I don’t care if Colin is more charismatic. She sees you as I see you.
I don’t care if Harry is handsomer. She can do no other than that.
Or if Namdev and Dan are more self-confident. Even if she wanted to, which she doesn’t,
Or if Paul is more scholarly. She could never see you any other way
Or if Phil or Art or Hugh or whoever. Than how I see you.
I don’t care about that. How can you credit and trust others
I care about you. And ignore me and her?

Listen to me. Listen, Chaitanya.

It is not a gentle thing to do
To compare yourself to others
In any way.

Because it’s too late to make you into any of them,
Not that I couldn’t have,
Because in their cases I did,
But you I made into you.
After I read this, Gurumayi smiled and said, “Ahh, Chaitanya is becoming a poet.”

After the Easter Intensive was behind us, my life in the ashram became much quieter and in-drawn. My little room in Turiya Mandir provided me with ample opportunity to let the mind find its green pastures. One day I jotted down a few lines in the hope of capturing where this process was leading me. I wrote: How did she know how much I like to be alone? To myself, I seem so needy, so nervous about fitting in and about acceptance. To myself, I seem so ready to be lonely, but here I am, so happy to be alone. But then, what I am doing is hearing what I want to say, to you, and to Her. I am spinning quietly, effortlessly on my own axis. I am in relation to you, and to Her. I am the eager, faithful scribe for my lord and master: my own true inner voice. I would do this seva forever, being the vibrant link between Him and you and Her.

Whether wordless or in some poetic form, these conversations with and about the Self, Gurumayi, and the Goddess became an important aspect of my meditative process. I was able to explore what Gurumayi had said, in various meetings, about the importance of being alone. After she moved me to a room of my own and assigned me the task of speaking about Friendship and Solitude during the Intensive, I was particularly attentive to what she had to say about such things. She acknowledged that there is a fear of seclusion, but then went on to say that it is no big deal. In fact, she said, if you want to become great, you have to be isolated. For greatness, a gestation period is needed, so you have to isolate yourself and endure non-recognition.

I don't think I managed to put these lessons into practice until now, twenty years later, when I have had the good fortune of spending month after month by myself, writing and remaining attentive. Silence becomes transparent, revealing not emptiness but Space. And for me at least, that Space is filled with contentment and acceptance.

Toward the end of my stay in Ganeshpuri I signed up for the five-day Blue Pearl Course. The central vision of Baba’s meditative journey was the Blue Pearl. In whatever state he was in, the scintillating Blue Pearl was always there to make visible the dance of the Goddess’s darshan that flows seamlessly into union and identity with the Goddess, and back again. Although I had
written and published a monograph on Baba's experiences with the Blue Pearl, my operating assumption was that I would never see the Blue Pearl. Many other devotees reported seeing it, and it would bring them great delight, but I was rehearsing and clinging to my insistence that this was not something I would ever know directly. If I had been asked even a year ago whether I had ever seen the Blue Pearl, I would have said No. Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered page after page of notes that I had taken during the Blue Pearl Course.

On the first day I wrote, "Am I blessed or am I lazy? No thoughts, no swirls of light, no surges of feeling, but a shift of perspective. I become a huge shell, and within me is the whole room. Everything has slowed down." On the third day I wrote, "It was worth the price of the course. No, it was worth the airfare to India. Sky, sunrise, black night sky. Blue light reflected everywhere, but no source, yet. No hurry. Stars, palaces, mansions, royal roads, all from directing my attention along with OM or the mantra toward that familiar spot, the ajna chakra. Fumbling, failing, and finally ignition. Every step is redeemed. "On the last day I wrote, "Blue light glistens. The passageway is warm, obstructed by white shards. The journey is a gentle glide. Yesterday, I thought it was the birth canal. Today I thought it was the sushumna. Yesterday the journey ended in the womb. Today it ended in the sahasrar. I will need to take this journey many times before I can know the truth of what it means. I am a different person. I can find the turnoff on my own next time. It will be familiar at times, and I will be brave when it is not. It's about UP, consciousness moving UP, images of UP, experiences of UP. And did I see the Blue Pearl? Yes, many times, but not steadily, yet."

Now why would I have forgotten about these experiences? What on earth could be the purpose behind blocking out these memories? Perhaps one of the characteristic strategies of the ego and its bizarre self-protective distortions is to protect the ego by severely curtailing expectations, the better to not fall short or be disappointed. I am fortunate to have these notes.

To sit in my room and write with such pleasure reminded me of one of the classes at the University which had given me and the students a special kind of pleasure. We called our class The Culture, and we spent much of our time sharing out loud what we had created during the week. I wondered if such a group would be viable in this ashram setting. In the end, several groups were assembled. There was instantly a sense that this writing served as a useful
complement to the inner and private work we were all doing. I recall sharing the piece that follows with the little sadhana writing group in our secluded meeting place:

I Can Relax

I spent this last summer in Gurumayi’s ashram in South Fallsburg, and from the moment I walked into my room and found Vidura sitting on the bunk opposite mine through these glorious months in Ganeshpuri, I feel, for the first time in my life, that I am surrounded by friends.

I can relax. I can be myself. What is asked of me, I can give. I can find my inner voice. And nothing more than that is really asked of me here. I can relax.

And it is so easy to take a genuine interest in others. There is nothing in me wanting to pull away to try someone else. Each conversation is a gift. Currents bring us together for a moment, something true is spoken through us, and currents pull us apart.

What I am left with is space, the space to be alone, to savor the stirrings of my mind and heart. The space to reflect on each perfect day and prepare for the next.

The thread on which all these moments are strung is Gurumayi’s love for each and every one of us. Without that abundance, we would always be calculating gains and losses, our own and others’, and these precious moments of friendship would never come into being.

Thank you, Gurumayi. I have never been so happy.

A bit later on, I was asked to join with three swamis and go back to South Fallsburg to teach in the courses offered to the many devotees who traveled there during the summer months, and the team worked many hours to design the program. Before the monsoon rains came in July, I left for the States. I had arrived after uprooting myself from my home base, but I had found so many ways to serve and be served by this ashram community. I had arrived feeling alone. I had been allowed to heal and to develop, and now I was returning to Ann Arbor feeling not separate but alone within that special aspect of God: Space.