

# YOU ARE NOT A PERSON

by

Simon Yeats

"The Enlightened **beedi wallah**" - that was how I first heard of Maharaj; "the one in Bombay". The image was such a double take. Squatting amidst the rags, bicycle wheels, Terylene bell-bottoms and potholes of an Indian pavement, trying to sell his tiny bundles of **beedis**, the dwarf 'country' cigarettes smoked universally by the Indian poor, with his tacky picture of a god and bit of rope smouldering for those too broke to afford a box of matches . . . who but Buddha once more, rabbiting on relentlessly about a world beyond time and space.

Is there no end to it? I wondered as I flipped through the pages of his **I Am That**. These transcribed tapes (seemingly he met people at his shop, so he wasn't on the pavement then, but it was cheap fags) proved unsettling. They didn't seem very 'Indian'. No wishy-washy tradition. More Socratic than anything else - only more outrageous. What Maharaj seemed to be saying was that no one ever really tried to be themselves, not to the full - everyone was obsessed by themselves, was totally self-

centred, and yet at the same time no one was actually prepared to go for broke.

Bits jumped off the page:

*"If you want to sin, sin wholeheartedly and openly. Sins too have their lessons to teach the earnest sinner, as virtues - the earnest saint. It is the mixing up of the two that is so disastrous. Nothing can block you so effectively as compromise, for it shows lack of earnestness, without which nothing can be done".*

It sounded like Rajneesh - or like Nietzsche. Yet unlike Rajneesh, Maharaj didn't seem to play the role of guru. He had no Western followers, he had no ashram, he had no money. He ran his corner shop, supported his family, spoke only Marathi and was in his seventies. His diatribes seemed directed at more or less chance acquaintances.

Only from odd remarks in **I Am That** can one piece his story together.

Misargadatta Maharaj was born in 1897, the son of a small-holding

farmer on the timeless baked plains outside Bombay. His childhood was spent working around the farm. Sucked into the big city in his early twenties, he set up a chain of shops making and selling **beedis** which proved, by Indian standards, quite successful.

He was thirty-six when his life was turned upside down. Or more precisely, in terms of his later philosophy, inside out. By chance he met a friend's guru, who told him cryptically: "You are not what you take yourself to be. Find out what you are. Watch the sense 'I am' ".

Surprisingly Maharaj, hitherto not especially religious, went ahead and actually did this - at the same time continuing to lead a normal work and family life. Years later he described his meditation: "Just keep in mind the feeling 'I am', merge in it, till your mind and feeling become one. By repeated attempts you will stumble on the right balance of attention and affection and your mind will be firmly established in the thought-feeling 'I am' ".

At first he fell into trances. Then these phenomena disappeared and he found himself in the position of what Hindu tradition calls 'the Witness' - a stance of detached inspection of whatever happens to one, an all but scientific aloofness where any previous interpretations of experience whatsoever are held in abeyance. And Maharaj found he couldn't say who or what he was. Opinions, social roles, even perception of his body, came and

went. There was nothing continuous there at all. The only thing that seemed constant was the state of being aware: he came to experience himself as 'being' consciousness itself, not any configuration of events within it.

If all this seems hideously Oriental, then compare the following. Tennyson, Tennyson no less, had a private prayer which consisted of his repeating his own name silently to himself. He described its effects: "All at once, as it were, out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to resolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life".

With Maharaj this experience appears to have become stable. He lost all sense of being anyone or anything in particular. "I found myself desiring and knowing less and less, until I could say in utter astonishment: 'I know nothing, I want nothing' ". All that was left was an increasingly immense sense of presence.

Up to this point I feel that I can, in imagination at any rate, follow him - but now he makes his jump. Who or what is he then? He is consciousness itself, and more than consciousness. He is not a person. He was not born nor will he ever die. He, we, all of

us, are the space containing all things. We are not born into the world, he keeps repeating; the world is born into us. We are the ground of being.

The unity or no-boundary experience is a minefield the writer, mercifully down to his fifteen hundred words, has no intention of trying to cross. **I Am That** is there instead . . . or nearly there. The book, having run through three editions and numerous reprintings in India, having been translated into Italian, Spanish and German, and enjoying a growing cult or underground reputation is still only available in this country as an import . . .

The only judgement I do feel qualified to pass is this. This man is not lying. Plumb crazy he may be, but shyster he is not. There's no trace of that smart-ass Zen quality. This man is trying to describe his own experience of life as accurately as he possibly can. And listening to him makes me uncomfortably aware of just how blindly I have accepted a cosmogony which I have never tried to plumb for myself. Of just how dull I am. I cling to my materialism . . . devoutly.

Be that as it may - **I Am That** is one of the best reads in contemporary religious literature. It's all dialogue, and the conversations are as pared down as late night metaphysics in Dostoevsky. At the very bottom line, that of pathology, Maharaj must be one of the most concise and articulate madmen on record. Though personally I cannot see how

the state he is describing can be reduced to any psychoanalytic cliché: regression-to-infantile-omnipotence and the rest of it just doesn't wash. Utter happiness is such a disconcerting thing.

Academically, the book must be the best modern introduction there is to Vedanta, to the core philosophy of India, the doctrine there is only One Life. And, for that matter, to the whole **Cloud of Unknowing** tradition of total doubt in Christianity. It's no third-hand, scholarly assessment, with its comfortable pros and cons: it's the confession of someone who, rightly or wrongly, staked everything they had on the one card.

It epitomises one whole pole of our contemporary 'new religions'. It is Gurdjieff's 'self - remembering', minus the mystery mongering; it is Krishnamurti's 'choiceless awareness', but with much more muscle. It tries to break free of our chronic and all but involuntary narcissism by taking this narcissism to its logical conclusion. "Your constant flight from pain and search for pleasure is a sign of love you bear for yourself; all I plead with you is this: make love of yourself perfect. Deny yourself nothing - give yourself infinity and eternity and discover that you do not need them; you are beyond".

My own misgivings, like a lot of his interlocutors, lie more in the area of the political implications. Maharaj is adamant: until you find out what you are, there is little you can do to help the world. Are such counsels of perfection counsels of despair?

Surely that depends on what people make of them. Certainly the goal he is pointing to is unequivocal: it is socialism beyond the wildest dreams of socialism. "You are myself" his guru told him; - and repeatedly Maharaj defines the enlightened state as simply "love in action". "I

am the world", he says, "the world is me, I am at home in the world, the world is my own. Every existence is my existence, every consciousness is my consciousness, every sorrow is my sorrow and every joy is my joy . . ."

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*Nisargadatta Maharaj died in 1981. I Am That is published by Chetana, 34 Rampart Row, Bombay 400 023, India. Copies of the most recent edition, 550 pages, paperback, can be obtained from Books from India Ltd., 45 Museum Street, London WC1A 1LR. Tel: (01) 405 7226 Price 25.*

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