

## Swami Vijayânanda: The last days

By Vigyânanand (Jacques Vigne)

Many of you probably already know that Swami Vijayânanda left his body peacefully on Monday the 5<sup>th</sup> of April at 5.10 PM.

He had attended all the satsangs in a very normal way up to the day before - Sunday evening, in spite of the fact his breath was getting shorter and shorter and his voice more and more difficult to hear. Before, when you were very close to him, you could hear him, but for one or two weeks, it was getting more difficult because his breath was shorter and shorter.

Mâ's game is really surprising : as I was just beginning to write this message to give some details about the way Vijayânanda "had merged into the Braman" ( in Sanskrit and Hindi, you say " bhrama-lin " when a sage leaves his body), I received a phone call from a young Swami of Israeli origin connected to Bhaskarânanda and who informed me that he left his body that morning on Thursday the 8<sup>th</sup> at 4.55 AM at the ashram in Bhimpura, on the banks of the Narmada, Gujarat. He was 94 and three months according to the Indian way of counting, which means 93 and three months according to the Western way of counting, what means two years and two months less than Swami Vijayânanda. They met Mâ Anandamayî at the same period and were both of them very close to her. Mâ had entrusted Bhaskânanda with the task of giving initiation on her behalf. When they were sitting together, it happened from time to time in the ashram in Khankal for some celebrations, they did not show great emotion, but you could feel they had a deep connection and were united in a peaceful and spontaneous joy. The fact that Swami Bhaskarânanda "merged into the Brahman" just two and half days after Swami Vijayânanda, and that they knew each other for 60 years spent next to Mâ, is a good proof of their bond. We can assume that he heard, when he was conscious, that Swamiji Vijyânanda had left his body and that it helped him to leave his body.

Bhaskarânanda's pacemaker had failed on 1<sup>st</sup> February and he was then mostly in a coma at that time. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, he had been brought back from the hospital to allow him to leave his body in the ashram at Bhimpura. He was on a ventilator, and feeding was through a tube to the stomach. After his return to Bhimpura he learned to breath without the ventilator, though still with the tracheostomy; the times

when he appeared conscious with open eyes increased day-by-day. Some people heard him pronounce "Jai Ma" quietly. He would nod Yes or No to questions asked. Moreover, on occasions he blessed people who were visiting him, by holding their head with his hands, and would smile. It's touching from a symbolic point of view, you can interpret this as the symbol of what he had done his whole life : to give his energy in the service of Mâ, to give on behalf of Mâ. We'll talk more about Swami Bhaskarânanda in the next issue of Jay Mâ.

=== To come back to Swami Vijayânanda, we should first evoke the successive parts of his life in a nutshell. Born to a Jewish family on November 26, 1914, at the beginning of World War I in East France, he was destined to succeed his father who was the main rabbi of the town of Metz. As a child, he was very pious, but during his adolescence, he studied philosophy and took his distances from the idea of a unique, omnipotent God and creator. He chose to study medicine, and followed a first spiritual teacher which was a French psychiatrist influenced by Buddhism, in Paris itself. In the end of 1950, he took a boat from Marseille in South France to Sri Lanka and India in the hope to find his guru. His idea was to ask instructions and to come back to practice them in this small town of South France where he was practising as a doctor. He had the hope to meet Shri Ramana Maharshi and Shri Aurobindo, but both had just passed away when he reached Chennai in January 1951. He met Ma Anandamayi in Varanasi on February 2, 1951, asked her if he could stay for two or three days in her ashram, she said yes, and actually he spent the next 59 years in those ashrams, and he even never left the holy land, the *devbhumi* of India. For the first 19 months, he was always with Mâ, except for one day. In 1953 or 1954, She asked him to stay a full year in Patal Devi ashram in Almora, a place She did not visit during all this year. He did so, and then came back to Varanasi. He went again up to Patal Devi in 1961 for a year, and then for eight years in Dhaulchina ashram, in full solitude. He used to come down to see Ma only a month every year, and still not every year. In 1970, he came back to Patal Devi ashram until 1976, when Mâ asked him to stay in Kankhal. She arranged a room for him on the terrace of the *sadhu kutir*, and she told him : "*Yahan baito!* ", 'Sit here!' and so he did for 34 years, until his last breath in the afternoon of the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2010. He hardly left this room but for one month if we add the duration of his different hospitalisations in Delhi. I stayed for the first time in Kankhal for three months and three weeks in 1985. At that time, Swamiji used to come down every day for the evening puja, but not to stay long, hardly five or ten minutes after what he used to go back

to his room. Only after Atmânanda left her body in October 1985, he started to see more visitors, especially Westerners, because Ma had asked him to care for them. He did that as a *seva*. We have a French quarterly called *Jay Ma*. Atmananda did her last work of editing by revising the number 1 in September 1985. In the following years, until perhaps 2005, Vijayananda continued to read the proofs and answer in writing the question of devotees. These answers have been put on the internet, as well as the replies to many oral questions during the satsang, and articles on Ma that he wrote mainly in the 50's. [www.anandamayi.org/devotees](http://www.anandamayi.org/devotees)

Let us now describe what happened in the last few months. At Christmas 2009, he had bad flu that handicapped him and he missed the satsang for a few days. Afterwards he came back and gave satsang as usual up to Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> of April in the evening - that was his last meeting with the devotees. Mâ had asked him to take care of the Westerners and he was doing it as a *seva*, selfless work. I am personally very moved because it was my birthday. Our birthdays were 51 years apart. Thanks to the Kumbh Mela where I was since the beginning of February, I attended the two last months of satsangs of Swamiji almost continuously, except a few days, amongst which were the last four days. On Sunday evening, we were in Rishikesh with the last group who had spent 5 days with Vijayânanda in Khankal. We attended the arati on the edge of Ganga in Parmath Niketan with the Dalai Lama. Several members of the group met the Dalai Lama for first time, they were very impressed.

On Monday morning, Izou, who was close to him for more than twenty years, went to his room because he was feeling unwell. He was tossing and turning in bed so as to find a position that would alleviate his pain, but in vain.

The nape of the neck, the back of the head and his chest were very painful. He vomited several times. An Indian doctor from the village came, diagnosed gastro-enteritis and prescribed some medicines. Vijayânanda did not take them because he had understood that the diagnosis was wrong. In fact, it was probably the symptoms of an intracranial hypertension with the beginning of an engagement of the basis of the brain in the spinal canal: this results in depression of the breathing function that makes breathing weaker and weaker, and leads to death. For Swamiji, it was probably due to the considerable bending of the nape of the neck through osteo-arthritis, and the vertebral compression that was pressing the spinal cord and that had paralysed the lower limbs when he wanted to walk a few steps.

In fact, for a few months, his breath had been getting shorter and shorter, and his voice was very weak during the satsangs. As we said before, for two or three weeks, he had difficulty in finishing long sentences. Beforehand, we could understand his words by getting very close to his mouth, but more recently there were some times when even when doing so, we were not able to hear him. Consequently, at the end of March, I said to my hermit neighbour in Dhaulchina, Swami Nirgunânanda, and to another friend of mine on the phone, that it seemed that Swamiji would not stay much longer in his body.

On Monday around noon, his breathing became more difficult, but he could communicate and even stand up to go to the toilet. At 5.00 PM, the breathing got even more difficult. Gonzague was next to him and Izou was calling the air- ambulance that was supposed to carry him to Delhi urgently. Izou went up to his room, to be with him and after 10 minutes, he breathed his last. What is surprising is that he had predicted to her that she would be present when he would leave his body, in spite of the strict rules that prohibit women from entering the sadhu kutir, which is reserved for male ascetics. He left his body in his usual position of meditation, resting against some cushions with the hands brought together and the legs stretched out; it had been difficult for him to cross his legs for several years. He was always very encouraging to people, for when Narayan came back from the exams he had on that day, he was very happy to see him and asked him with much interest if he had done well. Narayan did not realize that he was at the point of death and that he had only one hour to live. Izou, and Sonia from Delhi, had done their best to charter an air-ambulance in order to transfer Swamiji to the Delhi. He expressed his appreciation for their efforts by saying: " It's great ! ". They were almost his last words, He passed away a little after. Izou could contact the plane that was already on the take-off runway and cancelled it. It was better that way. Vijayânanda had been living in that room for 34 years where Mâ had installed him telling him : " yahan baito ! " " Sit down here ! " Indeed he died there after some decades of intense sadhâna.

It's probably relevant to say that at the moment when Swamiji left his body in Kankhal, our group of French people was just coming back from the pilgrimage of Surdanka Devi, 3,000m high, in the Himalayas. Among the 52 pilgrimages to the goddess that represent 52 parts of the body of Mahadevi spread out on the land of " Mother India ", this one

corresponds to the highest one, to the "bulb, *kanda*, of the head, *sur*". This evokes the area from where the soul leaves the body.

Swamiji often said that the function of a guru is not to give an intellectual teaching but to transmit energy. That's what he was doing in a way through several channels, sometimes very direct ones, but mostly very subtle ones. Those who have spent time in Kankhal, in particular during the last year, can testify personally. He himself had a lot of energy; for several months, he was sleeping very little. Despite that, he was giving much of his time to attend regularly the satsangs. When he knew that the people had important questions and a strong desire to spend more time with him, he was staying more than the two usual hours, in spite of his old age and the removal of the prostate that forced him to go and urinate quite often. He was never complaining about his health. For this reason, we had not expected his imminent departure. When he was asked about his health, he could not lie to say that he was going well, so he replied : " As usual ! ". He almost did not take any medicine. He had often said that to live to be very old was not always a blessing and could be a disadvantage. He probably meant that the handicap was a weight for oneself and for the others. Narayan, Pushparaj's nephew, who was brought up at the ashram in Almora, has taken care of Swamiji daily for the last two or three years, while he was studying. His departure is for him a very big change and it's even more beautiful to see how quiet he has remained and how helpful he was for all that has to be done during these last days. We can see the direct and stabilising influence of Swamiji, beyond the superficial changes of life and death.

Vijayânanda's special way of transmitting energy arose when he was asked to bless something. If it was a rosary, he would take it in his hands and began to recite it; if it was a book, he would leaf through it; if it was a photo of Mâ, he would comment briefly on the particularity of the face, holding the photo in his hand; and if it was a meditation mat, he would usually put it on his head before putting it on the head of the person who was expecting the blessing. On the 21st of February, the satsang was unusually full of energy : the Italian Federation of Yoga came with its president, E. Selvanizza and his wife Antonietta. She is a devotee of Swami Chidânanda, who was, up until his death, the successor of Shivânanda at the head of the Divine Life Society, and who was also close to Mâ Anandamayi. The group consisted of more than sixty people and we could have been concerned about the satsang because of Swamiji's weak voice and the fact he persisted in holding the satsang at the noisiest time

of the day, during the puja in Mâ's temple, with the loud speakers, whose volume was regularly turned high. Nevertheless, there were many questions, and as I repeated Swamiji's sentences loudly, with Antonietta's translation of course, the group could follow the satsang, ask some questions, and have the appropriate answers. Moreover, Swamiji offered to each member of the group, (most of them are yoga teachers), a small meditation mat made in Gandhi's ashrams. As there were no more questions at that point, each of us was more sensitive to the vibrations of the moment, and we can say it was a magic moment. Vijayânanda took his time, kept the mat a long time on his head or on the head of the person to whom he offered the mat. It was the last evening of this big group in the area of Haridwar/Rishikesh, and we can say that they left with " something ", not only the meditation mat but also and above all with a subtle and keen energy. The Kumbh Mela gives the opportunity to meet some sages and these Italian people have met one of them in Vijayânanda. Even if you can't fully be aware of his level, you can receive directly love from him, this is the experience of many people who came to visit him.

He often drew our attention to the energy of the Kumbh Mela that was taking place all around. He recommended that we go to the ritual baths and meet the naga babas. These sadhus, despite their peculiar attraction for hashish, and their pitched battles against some other sadhus from time to time, are even so an example of renunciation with their nudity and their simple way of life. Around the big bath of the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, dedicated to Hanuman, the god of service and devotion, Vijayânanda said that he was feeling his presence in particular. For two months, the region of Kankhal and the ashram that opens directly onto the southern part of the vishnouit camps (bairagis) was resonating with the names of Sita and Rama day and night. Several ashrams had organised continuous repetition of mantras. I kept watch over Swamiji's body in his room and for sure, this name of God continuously repeated, helped me and purified me in my meditation. The first night, some small surges of emotion arose quite frequently with the beginning of tears but that did not last. The second night was much more peaceful, with the process of mourning that was happening quite quickly, at least in the first layers of the mind. The saddest thing, when you are with the body of the person who was the most important for you for 25 years, is to realize all that you should or could have done and that you did not do. In this matter, it's similar to the psychology of the mourning of one's dear ones in general. During almost 70 hours, I only slept three hours, but the energy was there and allowed me to care about practical things during the day and

meditate in Vijayânanda's room during the night. During all of this period, Izou, Gonzague, Pushparaj, Narayan and Dinesh were particularly committed to do what has to be done; Izou's family also gave up everything to be there for the last rituals.

After Swamiji's departure, I often remembered the story of the end of a great Zen guru. He was plunged deep in himself in the lotus position and his breath stopped. The devotees began to wail complaining : " Our guru died, how sad it is ! What will we do now we are left to our own devices ? " So that, the guru woke up and said : " You did not understand anything ! We're going to organise a big banquet to celebrate together ! " That's what they did, and only afterwards the guru fell asleep forever.

### **Which funeral rituals for Vijayânanda ?**

Swami Vijayânanda often said that once when Mâ had asked him what he wanted to do with his body after his death he had answered : " You can throw it anywhere, I do not care about it ! " Mâ stood up and told him : " Your body has done so many intense practices (tapasya), it can't be thrown like this ! " We can reasonably interpret these words as meaning that they should not put Swamiji's body in the Ganga as it is usually done for the sannyasis, but that it was better to make a samâdhi, a traditional grave. Seven or eight years ago, an old western friend of Swamiji who had been long associated with Ma had decided to buy a piece of land where they could build a samadhi. But Swamiji had no interest in being placed in a place that could become a temple, with morning and evening rituals. He wanted people's devotion to remain focused on Mâ Anandamayi's large samadhi. Nevertheless, in order to respond to the numerous demands, he suggested that they could put his grave in Pushparâj's garden, but with no daily rituals, to make matters easier and in order that the place should not look like a sâmadhi. For the last few months, he was saying that Pushparaj had been a monk in a former life and that he was returning progressively to this kind of life ; for several months, he was sleeping in Swamiji's room, at the bottom of his bed, to be with him when he wanted to go to the toilet, because Swamji had fallen several times whilst doing so. In fact, since he was five years old, Pushparaj was brought up in Mâ's ashrams, and his current house where he usually receives Mâ's devotees - including the Western ones - can be actually considered more a part of the ashram than a family home in the literal sense of the word. This

verbal suggestion of Swamiji's was accepted on Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> of April in the evening by the ashram board along with Panuda, the president of the Sangha, who has known Swamiji for 60 years. There was some resistance from a part of the ashram. Moreover, the conservative people in the village and the sadhus connected to the Daksha temple, the Mahanirvanî Akhara and a group of pandas (monks on pilgrimage) in Kankhal opposed this project and began to demonstrate. When we heard this on the 7<sup>th</sup> in the morning, we had a meeting with a special official from the head of the police in Haridwar, Panuda, the president of the Sangha and Debuda, the secretary-general, Izou and Gonzague, and Swami Atmananda, a French-speaking disciple of Chandra Swami who lives in Rishikesh. Vijayânanda had left with Izou and Gonzague a written document where he gave them the responsibility to decide what to do with his body after his death. He did not write down his suggestion concerning a grave at Pushparaj's because it would have put him in the forefront, which he did not want. We must remember that neither Mâ's husband Bholonath nor her faithful assistant Didi had a samadhi. Even for Mâ in August 1982, the devotees were about to put her body in the Ganga and it was the head of Mahânirvâni Akhara in Khankal who insisted and he took matters upon himself for building a samadhi. We were very aware that Vijayânanda would not like having any conflict with the villagers. We have decided that the best way to respect Mâ's will concerning the body preservation was to repatriate it to France. There was the theoretical possibility to bury the body for the time being in a garden and find another place far away from Haridwar and its pandas, and to quietly build a samadhi for Vijayânanda. We even thought of Daulchina and this area of Kumaon where he had spent 17 years. But it would have been a problem to look after the samâdhi from a great distance and we finally decided on repatriation to Paris. In fact, it will be a blessing for the French people to have the body of this great sage close to them. For Indian people, it would not make a big difference, as with *jal samâdhi* (in the Ganga) the body would not be there anymore anyway. I know only one example of a sage in the Indian tradition who has a samâdhi in France; this is Ranjit Mahâraj, who had the same guru as Nisargadatta Mahâraj. He left his body in 2001 and his long-time devotee Laurence Le Douaré built him a samâdhi with a part of his ashes in a beautiful garden in her house that overlooks the Douarnenez Bay near Brest.

Sonia Barbry has been visiting Kankhal for ten years. When she finished at the French school of political science in Paris, she asked Swamiji if he felt that a diplomatic career would suit her, as she liked



India very much, and Swamiji greatly encouraged her. Nowadays she is a political consultant in the French embassy in Delhi. She came and visited the Kumbh Mela from the 27<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup>, for herself and also to write a " telegram ", which means a report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, about this great event of India. She felt that Swamiji wanted to say goodbye to her when he asked her to come for two private interviews, included on her last day in Kankhal just before taking the train to Delhi. A few days later she was very helpful in organising emergency assistance just before the death, and afterwards for the formalities and the organisation of the repatriation of the body to France. She was the one who signed the death certificate in the name of the French Republic. May we thank her for her service to Vijayânanda. The people who want more information about the date or place of the burial ceremony, or the testimonies which came about Swamiji from devotees after he left his body can ask from Mahâjyoti : [koevoetsg@wanadoo.fr](mailto:koevoetsg@wanadoo.fr) 04 93 44 63 82, she will act as a link.

### **Did Vijayânanda know that he would leave his body ?**

Sandrine Oubrier spent 15 months almost continuously at the ashram in Kankhal and attended almost all Swamiji's last satsangs. She says that twice during the last year, some visitors told Swamiji that they would come back for the Kumbh Mela and he answered that maybe he would not be there. As they were very surprised, he made up for it saying that maybe he would not leave his room for the satsang. Moreover some travellers, despite the fact Kankhal was not included in their trip, decided to come and visit Vijayânanda.

When Izou arrived in Kankhal on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, just after her father's burial on the 19<sup>th</sup>, Vijayânanda asked her not to leave. So she booked her plane ticket for after the big bath on the 14<sup>h</sup> of April, the last one of the Kumbh Mela. Izou's father and Vijayânanda were born the same year in 1914; in age they were just one month apart; they had been in the same regiment during the Campaign of May 1940 without knowing each other.

I should mention that another great Swami of Mâ, Shivânanda, left his body just 4 days after Vijayânanda, on Friday the 9<sup>th</sup> of April in the morning. He had been to hospital two days before. My feeling is that the spiritual atmosphere of the Kumba Mela in Kankhal was getting stronger and stronger as the big bath of the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, *Mesh Sankranti*,

approached, which marks the end of one cycle of 12 years and the beginning of another one. Those who consider they have made enough cycles on this earth tend to choose this auspicious period to leave their body.

We must point out that despite everything, on the morning of his last day, Vijayânanda, was concerned about the papers for the annual renewal of his visa. Maybe he thought that anyway it was his duty to do it.

In many ways, Vijayânanda was turning his back on many things and prepared people for his departure. Before he would often ask visitors who were about to leave, to come back later, but recently he did not do that. He often related one of his last private meetings with Mâ, in the hall of the ashram in Kankhal. She told him as she was showing him her body : " This is just a cloth, I am omnipresent ! ". He concluded saying that he believed Ma.

Vijayânanda liked quoting a transcendentalist poet of the XIXth century, maybe Emerson, who explained that for the one who was at a high spiritual level, death became a laughable eventuality. Swamiji said that the bodies were like leaves that were falling from the tree, while the Self was the tree itself and remained the same in any season. He did not dramatize death and said that there were two possibilities : either you were a believer and you would melt in the spiritual light, or you were a non-believer and you would fall asleep. It was useless to make a big drama of it or to be always talking about death and becoming " a specialist ". He noticed that the thing that frightened people about the *big passage* was the prospect of endless suffering. But this supposedly endless suffering could be alleviated by medicine or at the most they caused a fainting fit or the death itself, so they were not endless. As a general rule, the simple way Vijayânanda considered death often reminded me of a sentence from Montaigne in his *Essais* : " Each day brings us closer to death and the last one gets us there."

We will gather together all the notes of Swamiji's satsangs of this last period. === Many people, for one reason or another, had not much time when they came to see Swamiji. Still, he was suggesting that the real encounter with a sage was not a question of quantity, but of quality. In this sense, he used to tell often the following story about Kabir :

"Kabir was a weaver. He lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Banaras. He was clad as a poor man. One day, it so happened that an ill-tempered and arrogant rich man had a big bundle to carry home. He called Kabir who was passing by : " You! Come here! There is this bundled to carry home, can you do it?" Kabir said "Yes! " The rich man said: "How much?" "As you want !". The bad rich man then get furious: "You, coolies, you always say that, and afterwards you ask ten times the price!" Kabir replied: "All this does not matter, since when you reach before your door, you will fall flat dead!" At this point, the rich man became still more furious : "You will see when I am at the door of my house that I am not dead, just by the sound beating I will deliver to you!" Kabir smiled, took the bundle and went with the rich man towards his house. While walking, he only remarked: "Just a piece of advice: when you reach the door of paradise, and that the angels of death will judge you, if they propose you a day of paradise before many centuries in hell, accept their offer!" Everything happened as Kabir had predicted. When the bad rich man was for his only day in paradise, Kabir was having a walk around; the sage recognized him and whispered in his ear the *taraka mantra*, the mantra which saves from the round of birth and death. From that very moment, the angels of death haven't been able to take him down to hell, and he could stay in paradise... "

*To conclude, here is a request: those who would like to make a record of some anecdotes or some sentences that are imprinted on their memory about their contact with Vijayânanda are invited to do so. We'll put their testimony on the Internet, probably on the web site [anandamayi.org](http://anandamayi.org), and will make a selection for 'Jay Mâ'. It's not necessary to be a good writer, you just need to feel it deeply inside. It will allow Swamiji's memory and presence to be felt and remembered in the consciousness of the writer and the readers. Vijayânanda clearly said that talking about spiritual experiences was a way of losing them. Nevertheless, it's possible to relate some anecdotes or words that strike you and that could spiritually inspire some other people. It's very different from relating a spiritual experience in detail. For sure, it's impossible to tell everything about such a deep and subtle relationship with Swamiji, but you can relate some things. Swamiji was actually doing just that during satsang when telling us some cherished memories of Ma...*

*Some of the notes of satsangs that I made in the last few months, appeared in the last issue of the quarterly 'Jay Mâ', but I have still several of them to publish. I will gather them and send them to you, it may be only at the beginning of May after the group in Nepal have left.*

*Vijayânanda told clearly that the Guru does not die and that his words have the same value before and after he leaves his physical body.*

*I hope the report of the last period of Swamiji's terrestrial life will help you to deepen the relationship you had with him. If you want to transfer this text to some more people that could be interested, just do it.*

*Vigyânanand, Kankhal, Delhi, 8-11<sup>th</sup> of*

*April 2010*