

# End of Illusions

*translated from the original French*

I was twenty-six when I first met Satprem. It was in 1969, on the seashore of the Bay of Bengal, at the playground where Mother, past eighty, sometimes came to play tennis with the Ashram children. Newly arrived from the West with a doctorate in mathematics, I stared like an infant at that wholly unknown world, struck by the air of simplicity and familiarity that seemed to pervade everything. A few days earlier, Mother had concentrated her diamond-like gaze upon me. And the first meeting with Satprem that followed seemed to confirm my inner certitude that this had been my world from the beginning, and would be forevermore — although it still felt very mysterious and completely out of line with my mathematical theorems!

It had all begun eighteen months earlier at the Place de l'Odéon in Paris. I stood there one day in February 1968, just before the May convulsions that shook the world, when the subway had deposited my destiny on the sidewalk, right under the watchful eyes of Danton, whose statue dominates the square. A friend I had not seen in a long time had just come out of the Metro. We had barely finished displaying our mutual surprise and delight at this chance encounter when he started to tell me about a place he had recently visited in India and about a book that would explain everything. He spoke with a kind of urgency in his voice, as though he were freeing his conscience of a responsibility whose meaning and origins, though vague were nonetheless insistent. The place he described was Pondicherry, and the book was *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness*, by Satprem.

I last saw Satprem in 1990, at his home in the Nilgiris Mountains, where he had informed me in terms precluding any dialogue that my current problem was a clear-cut matter of exorcism. That was when my childlike trust died, shattered amid the rubble of a world of illusions and distorting mirrors which, as I discovered later, I had myself somehow created. For over twenty years I had been living in a close working relationship with Satprem. All those years which I thought I had spent in absolute, selfless dedication to the ideals of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, selflessly performing tasks defined and deemed rightful and worthy by Satprem, had now abruptly come to naught. And thus stripped of all illusions and disguise, I had to face and then come to terms with the stark reality of my loss, or else die of grief on the spot.

What follows is my account of what happened during the years between those two meetings with Satprem — and why the first contained the premonitory signs of the second.

Today, by a stroke of fortune — even an act of grace — that astounds me continually, I live a life grounded in true reality, completely freed from Satprem and all my childish illusions. Looking back with a steady perspective at the long road I have traveled, I feel I understand all its twists and turns. And most importantly, I comprehend the significance of this perilous journey and why it nearly cost me my life.

For finally, it is Mother and Sri Aurobindo alone who shine in everything. No more Satprem as “guide,” “advanced older brother on the path,” “privileged intermediary.” No more lure or diversion of any kind. Rather life itself, direct and unmediated; with no barriers left standing between oneself and ‘that.’ (Or perhaps ‘that’ and ‘That’?)

Others have not been as fortunate.

## **Patrice**

It would have been easier to remain silent. In fact, this is what I had originally decided to do. After all, my story is first and foremost my own. And too, my experiences with Satprem are the result of a destiny which I claim as personal and private, and of a course of action which led me to a goal which was my own and did not concern anybody but me.

But Patrice’s death changed everything.

Patrice died in 2006. To my shock and utter horror, I learned that he had thrown himself from the 6th floor of his apartment building in Paris. I felt this loss to be my own. His death affected my personal world far too deeply and directly for me to remain silent. This was not a news item that I could shelve and summarily dismiss, and allow to vanish into oblivion.

I had first met “Little Patrice” in Auroville some thirty years before, shortly after his arrival from France. His face constantly lit with a half-mocking smile, he, like myself, had followed Satprem. His body now lay amidst the trash-cans at the foot of his building. His sole epitaph was merely a leaden silence from Satprem and a few cold words from Sujata.

A critical threshold had thus been crossed; a point of no return had been reached, compelling me to break my silence. Nor would any “explanation” explain anything: the theories about “Patrice’s Karma” or “Patrice’s fault” would not appease the gnawing pain within me.

To you, Patrice, I dedicate these lines. Even if no one understands the “reasons” for your suicide, I know the torment you endured, and which finally broke you – because the very same torment almost got the better of me, too.

## **The Cage**

Like yours, my story begins with an impulse of childlike enthusiasm, followed by a surrender of all personal considerations.

At the beginning of 1976, a relatively recent resident of Auroville, I had received “by chance” a bundle of mimeographed letters, then circulating in Auroville. I learned that “threats” were being leveled at Satprem by certain Ashram authorities concerning the original manuscripts of *Mother’s Agenda* which he kept in his house in Nandanam.

Without thinking, I rushed to offer him my support against the “enemy,” as vague for me as if all this were simply a work of fiction, but in fact very real and material for him, made up of real faces and people. Unknown to me, I was about to enter a world of internecine quarrels among certain Ashram members. Satprem, because of his personality and previous stances, was cast in a starring role. But I did not care about the “historical” reality. I disregarded all contingencies. It was imperative for me to side with the underdog, the alleged victim; even if in doing so I was sacrificing reason and reflection upon the altar of spontaneity.

Thus, I began a new life. I had chosen my camp, as it were. In my eagerness and naiveté, I subscribed to a past that was completely foreign to me, and eagerly began to endorse a psychological profile that was not mine. Henceforth, there would be “pros” and “cons”, “blacks” and “whites,” but no halftones. And, above all, no wavering. For in fact, my existence had become amazingly plain and simple. I was embarking on the path already mapped out by Satprem. In a split-second I had willingly handed over to someone else the job of understanding and interpreting the world about me. I had agreed to immerse myself body and soul into a prearranged universe. And my commitment had to be free of all personal reservations. Such was the price I would have to pay to gain access to the world of responsibilities and to exchange my youthful hesitations for a strong-minded certitude, even though that strength would not be really mine. The child in me would be comfortable. For I would thus be endowed with a new life, proud to be relieved of my infantile cocoon. I would be “responsible” at last.

Or so I thought. For, in actual fact, I had already, if unknowingly, entered the cage of illusions.

I believed I had grown up by committing to an “adult” stance. I had a “real cause” to defend fiercely against numberless (and often faceless) enemies. “Enemies” seemed a prerequisite in order to be taken seriously. Enemies helped to define who you were; they enhanced your state of being.

In retrospect, I see now that none of this had anything to do with me. I was not getting any closer to myself by taking such a “radical” position. In reality, without my knowing it, I had internalized Satprem’s own internal world. My initial movement of adherence and uncontrolled empathy led me to identify with Satprem’s inner reality. I now felt as he felt, thought as he thought, saw through his eyes.

It was a perfect working arrangement and a win-win situation. I covered the field in my borrowed seven-league boots; he gained a helper who would spare no effort. In the ensuing years, to varying degrees, I saw the same phenomenon of identification affect all who had an extended working relationship with Satprem. Although the practical, day-to-day benefits of such a situation seemed inestimable, it is obvious that the extreme empathy which I felt also carried the perils of total psychic dependence — as future events would unfortunately more than demonstrate.

Why do human beings often feel such a need to seek support outside themselves in order to give significance to their life? Why must we seek to offload the burden of finding the full meaning of our incarnation onto an outsider, be it a

person or an organization? Do we not contain everything within ourselves? The question and its answer? The problem and its solution, like two chicks in the same egg? For a time, it is no doubt easier to leave the matter in someone else's hands. But this is just putting off the day of reckoning. A time will come when we are alone face to face with ourselves.

But for the moment, these queries were mere inner murmurs, vague intuitions awaiting their time to burst into the open and declare themselves.

## **The Agenda**

Eighteen months later, in July 1977, Satprem and I ascended the steps leading to the Central Court building in L'Île de la Cité in Paris, in order to register the statutes of the "Institut de Recherches Evolutives," whose purpose was to publish and distribute *Mother's Agenda* worldwide. The day before, a prominent Paris attorney had confirmed that the copyrights of the Agenda were Satprem's legal property, thus opening the way to its publication independent of the Ashram's good offices. Several publication attempts within the Ashram had previously failed because Satprem maintained that such arrangements would jeopardize the validity and integrity of the publication.

From then on, the work of *The Agenda* would be in the hands of four associates of Satprem's: Micheline, Anne, Robert, and me. A handful of other friends in France and in India would lend their occasional but enthusiastic support.

There was a great feeling of shared delight in our original little group. We had found a gold-laden ship at the bottom of the sea and we were bringing the ingots one by one to the surface. The very material in this marvelous *Agenda* revived our energies and filled our days with sparkling life. Although each person had very specific and challenging tasks to accomplish, we were united by the birth of *The Agenda*. Future plans were infinite. Publication in other languages, creation of other "Institutes" around the world, "laboratories of evolution" bringing together those who were eager to embark on their own evolution in the light of the teachings of the *Agenda*.

It was thus the extended moment of a felicitous dream that could somehow effortlessly become real, almost as though by accident.

The first volume of *The Agenda* came out in its beautiful red jacket for Mother's centenary, in February 1978. By then, the earlier threats concerning Satprem had materialized into a full-fledged expulsion from the Ashram, and he was compelled to find a new residence in the Nilgiris Mountains. This now became the main center for all the Agenda activity.

Subsequently, in the course of a few years of intense, concentrated work, the thirteen volumes of *The Agenda* in French were published. Translations into several other languages — Hindi, English, Italian, German, Spanish — were begun.

Those first years were for me an opportunity to settle into my new existence. I had waited all my life for a chance to give myself wholeheartedly to a work that had real meaning. And I did not spare myself! It was a monumental task

to transcribe hundreds of hours of conversation, taped on non-professional recorders, into printed matter which reflected accurately the nuances of Mother's message. But the faith and commitment of our little group could have moved mountains. Often ingenuity made up for the dearth of available resources.

Over time, in order to respond to the challenge of a growing task and its expanded geographical setting, our little group gained new members: Keya, Roger, Boni, Davide, Nicole, Michel, Patrice. Satprem also counted on the support of personal relations of his own in the literary and political circles of New Delhi and Paris.

Satprem seemed to be everywhere at once. Nothing escaped his attention and assiduity. With far greater experience than we in publishing, he supervised every detail of the production, but he also knew instinctively how to teach us, trust us, and develop our fragile confidence. His encouragements and trust were the mainspring of our daily actions. On the other hand, everyone had the utmost faith in his judgment and vision for all matters concerning the *Agenda's* material destiny.

And yet there was a serious flaw in this idyllic picture. A problem which concerned his relations with what must be called the "Enemy."

For despite a set of trustworthy and devoted friends, some of whom would have no doubt given everything to support and protect him, and despite the move to this magnificent and protected environment in the Nilgiris Mountains, Satprem felt constantly pursued, hounded by a pack of invisible foes. A word picked out in a letter, a fleeting image caught in a dream was enough to set in motion a whole train of catastrophic and despondent fears: the "adverse forces" were looming in the shadows, ready to pounce at the least fault and to destroy the Work in progress...

The ensuing crisis of confidence would typically last a few hours or a few days, during which everyone held his breath. Then all would return to normal. The clouds vanished as suddenly as they had arrived, and the sun reappeared.

On the occasion of these "setbacks," a newcomer to the group would soon learn to assume and take into account the "occult reality" of the work in which he was taking part. To publish this *Agenda* would in itself represent a stupendous victory over the forces of ignorance in the world, symbolized in the first place by the current administrators of the Ashram. In Satprem's view, his mission was to rescue this Treasure from the grip of all those who would seek to bury it anew. As the principal point man against these forces, it was normal and logical that he should be repeatedly attacked in his inner world, even if these apprehensions would never materialize in his outer life.

Thus, our group, functioning under Satprem's leadership, lived under the constant threat of an "imminent court case" which the Ashram Trustees were at least in theory about to launch in order to take over the publishing rights of the *Agenda*. Or perhaps the Trustees would send some henchmen to steal the manuscripts? Or else, since we were in India, it would not be unreasonable to imagine Tantric manipulations. For out of sheer necessity we had become expert in

occult sciences. Every shrub was the hiding place of an Asura or his stooges, and the conviction of our cut-and-dried imprecations and anathemas were on a par with their puerility.

Here, it might be appropriate to say a few words about the Ashram and to clear up some misunderstandings by putting its existence and development back on its true foundation. In 1954, during a *Questions and Answers* session at the Playground, a child had this conclusion to offer to Mother: "Mother, you are wasting your time with all these people in the Ashram now." And Mother replied: "But, you see, from an occult point of view, this Ashram is a sample. From an external point of view, you can say that, in the world, there are people far superior to you, and I would not contradict you, but from an occult point of view, as I said, it is a sample." Then later on, she added: "To tell the truth, I think you have it so easy here that you don't go to much trouble at all! Are there many among you who feel really an URGENT need to find their psychic being? To know who they really are? What they must do and why they are here? For you, it's just life as usual." (25/8/54)

"Life as usual" would not improve over time, as she confided to Satprem a few years later: "There are many – many – who think I will die and they must organise themselves so as not to be completely destitute when I leave. I know all this... Some people... oh, they would almost wish I would go now, because it's a pressure on them. They tell me quite frankly: 'As long as you are here, we are obliged to do the yoga. And we do not want to do the yoga; we want to live in peace. So after you are gone, we won't have to think about the yoga!'" (22/4/61)

Of course, Satprem could only be profoundly distressed by Mother's comments. He who had nurtured a life-long rebellion against any form of institutional organization, saw in this Ashram adrift the justification and realization of his worst suspicions, a nightmare come true.

And yet reality has contradicted all his negative forebodings, all the "threats" he sensed in the air after Mother's departure. In some fifteen years of very close proximity, I personally never witnessed a single case of physical violence from members of the Ashram against Satprem, not the slightest hint of a court case – and even Tantrism does not seem to have affected an inborn good health, for today, at 83, Satprem is as fit as a fiddle [*see note at the end of this text*].

As to the question of publishing rights of the Agenda, which legally belong half to Mother (as the interviewee), or her beneficiaries, and to Satprem (as the interviewer), it is fitting to note that neither the Ashram Trustees nor Mother's family ever undertook any legal action, at least to demand a share of the royalties.

## **Satprem**

Today, some twenty-five years later, when I recollect those events, I am mainly struck by what amounts to our own responsibility in the birth and growth of the "Satprem phenomenon." When I say "our," I refer of course to the small group of individuals mentioned earlier, which expanded and contracted in the course of time, and made, as it were, Satprem as we know him today – as if he fed himself

month after month, year after year on our adherence, on our enthusiasm for a cause we knew to be a complex, difficult and radical one.

It is the curious attraction which Satprem exerted on people that I would like to examine here. And since I can only talk of what I felt myself, I will try to describe and analyze the nature of this magnetism as it affected me. This is what I called earlier the “cage of illusions.”

To be affected by magnetism, one has to be conductive, sensitive to the magnet, otherwise it does not work. The power of the magnet is in finding the opposite pole in you which will respond to its attraction.

I know of no one who has approached Satprem, especially for the purpose of a specific work, without thinking under his breath that, in doing so, he or she was getting nearer to Mother and the Divine. This is the source of the magnetism, and hence of the illusion.

The spiritual aspiration, which shines at our very core, is our strength and our true self. And yet history — even recent history — is strewn with pathetic instances in which this aspiration is lead astray, bogged down in ludicrous or sometimes disastrous experiences, from which it comes out disfigured or even completely stifled.

But, with Satprem, none of this was likely to happen. The Agenda is teeming with Mother’s praises for him. Was he not practically the only disciple capable of understanding the physical revolution involved in Mother’s experience? To be sure, the Agenda is also teeming with Satprem’s own questions and doubts, but that only brings him closer to us — a human brother with whom we can more easily identify. It must be said, though, that some Agenda conversations will never see the light of day and remain tightly sealed under plastic protection. These were what Satprem called “Personal Agendas” — probably far more piercing comments and estimations made by Mother about him personally, which he felt went beyond the scope of the Agenda. In fact, Satprem has never claimed to be a saint; on the contrary, it is his willingness to assume his share of “ordinary” humanity, together with a stated ambition to go beyond the human, which always set him apart and drew people to him.

Thus, this man who had spent all these years within Mother’s intense crucible, listening to her progress in man’s future, could only be a perfect, caring, and delicate mentor toward the young people who approached him as a big brother and a role-model...

Well, not exactly. Behind impeccably cordial manners of hospitality, the newcomer soon perceives that a sort of test is under way: the test of an unconditional and exclusive adherence. In a flash, he senses that a complete and unequivocal commitment is a necessary prerequisite in order to pursue this relation any further; that he must make a personal sacrifice of fidelity and allegiance, as if he were entering holy orders.

Without a word of definition, a clear-cut choice is being presented: “Here is the Adventure knocking at your door. Open this door in total and absolute

acquiescence, disregarding the pettiness of naked reason and of cheap criticism, sensible though it may seem to be. If you can't or won't renounce your little self and open up to this greater dimension offering itself before you, then be gone — but know that you would be renouncing the one opportunity to make your life something other than this grey amorphous thing people call existence.”

Such were the words, as I transcribe them today, that I heard more than thirty years ago, at the beginning of my relationship with Satprem. It was a barely perceptible breath, hardly defined, whose stakes were unknown to me. Yet it was there, very real, and wholly determining of future events.

As I was perceiving this “choice” before me, I was also quite aware of the somewhat heretical quality of the world that came with it. I was openly courting controversy, perhaps even scandal, by going counter to the proper, established ways. I was enjoined to trample a community of elders underfoot — the Ashram — to which Sri Aurobindo and Mother had devoted the best parts of their lives and efforts — in the name of a “higher” truth that I was to accept without a word or adequate comprehension.

In my shoes, others might have wavered and argued, but, on the contrary — and this is where the immature human “vital,” as Sri Aurobindo would say, came into play — all these obstacles and negatives suddenly appeared to me as irrefutable proof that this WAS the real adventure, the one that bypasses grey, boring neutralities to tread the rugged paths full of pitfalls. I was mistaking adventure for controversy, the battle against oneself for the battle against others. Not to mention that all these “enemies,” real or imagined, seem to present an all the more serious picture; they made the whole issue more exciting, credible, and genuine.

Actually, enthusiasms followed by dramatic reversals are the mark of the human “vital.” My life flowed like a quiet — perhaps too monotonous — river. But all of a sudden I am seized with a sort of internal frenzy; I feel myself plunging into a world I had not even envisioned an instant earlier, which induces in me a complete reversal of my ways of thinking and feeling. This is obviously the sign that a great force has penetrated and is driving me. While the ways of the mind revolve around reflections, procrastinations, hesitations, and time is an essential factor in the process through which it derives its conclusions, “vital” time is almost instantaneous, and hence fraught with all the risks and vagaries that go with this brusqueness.

Furthermore, my vital “enthusiasm” concealed from me all the contradictions of my new situation. It prevented me from seeing the narrow Manichean nature of the world I was joining. Without batting an eyelid, I was about to unleash a whole string of muted resentments toward everything that conflicted with my new-found religion, all the while claiming to draw from Sri Aurobindo's vision that embraces everything in its scope. From one day to the next, I had become a staunch little Jihadist : the causes of problems were to be sought (and found) in others, outside myself. I remained forever untouchable within the cocoon of my superior certitudes.

In the end, the few objections that a more mature and thoughtful mind might have raised were completely swept away by another vital illusion: the unwritten promises of spiritual enlightenment implicit in my new status. Indeed, was this not a marvelous opportunity to get closer to the real Work of Mother and Sri Aurobindo on earth, with all the associated booty of personal accomplishments? Ultimately the hope was that of reaching beyond the anonymity of the average seeker, and of entering the charmed circle of the Chosen Ones...

Before this unexpected Grail, what human "vital" would be pure enough to hesitate and mature enough to draw back and take the time of reflection?

But there is better (or worse, depending on the point of view) and more to this "vital" trap. Now that the cage has closed on me and possesses me, with my full consent and participation, I make a kind of psychological U-turn and reverse the terms of the contract by pretending to own it myself. In order to hide the cowardice and servility of my condition, I integrate and take possession of the mechanism that binds me. Henceforth, I will defend it obstinately against all those who would challenge it in any way. Not only am I ready to offer my life to serve my cause — and this may include a physical commitment — but I am also prepared to rise up against those who voice the slightest misgivings or veiled objections against its foundation, that is, Satprem himself.

As the first volumes of the Agenda were being published, a renowned French literary critic, André B., who had praised Satprem's books in the Parisian press, suddenly wrote to me to convey his "great distress" before some of Satprem's plethora of comments about the "horror and darkness of the world," in which he saw mainly a bout of paranoia. I immediately wrote back to reassure him and convey an informed denial about his diagnosis based on "my profound knowledge of Satprem" etc. In the back of my mind, I was shocked that someone so "intelligent" could question Satprem.

Now if I set my mind on the two "revolutionary" encounters in my life — the first with Mother, the second with Satprem — a drastic contrast between them appears. After the first few seconds of bewildered stupefaction in Mother's presence, under her intense gaze, and the sort of stupefied state I experienced afterward for several days, I can see today that this first encounter with Mother could well have ended up as it began, with nothing more than this stupefaction. In other words, it was UP TO ME to make it into something else, for the simple reason that NOTHING was demanded or expected of me, no commitment of any kind. More precisely, the "demand" would have to come from me, from my own depths, or else it would not exist at all. In Mother's presence, I was not confronted by a specific "context" or by life's "contingencies"; I was confronted by myself.

In my encounter with Satprem, on the contrary, I was not asked to take a stand toward myself but toward him and his inner world, toward his quarrels with the Ashram, toward his history of dissent and rebellion. Right there and then, I was summoned to accept unconditionally this whole "package" — or be on my way. At bottom, the real "fault" with Satprem may be that he lead you AWAY from yourself — ultimately to replace yourself with him.

## The Tragedy

I was now fully enrolled and a fully committed member of what might be termed Satprem's faction. Everywhere I went, I carried my little inner bible, which included the obligatory chapter whereby Satprem was part and parcel of Sri Aurobindo's work – was in fact an essential, and even indispensable, constituent of his work. His open rebellion, his established dissent had to be the signs of a more profound, more inward difference, from which a new way of living on earth would eventually emerge: indeed, an example of the New Being Sri Aurobindo had hoped and prayed for.

I took it for granted that an attitude of enlightened yet uncompromising critique towards the world was the key, or at least an essential condition, to personal transformation. For me, Satprem's consciousness was the perfect crucible for that future birth, for it combined to the highest degree refined critical intelligence and implacability. In him, the endeavor of being human appeared to have found its accomplishment; the circle was complete – and now the slightest effort would enable him to achieve personal transformation...

I had probably not meditated enough, or even understood, what Mother was trying to tell him in an Agenda conversation of October 21, 1963:

"Except for Sri Aurobindo, I always met or was always around dissatisfied people... rebels, or people extremely bitter towards life as it is... I have seen that this attitude, this way of feeling is like a fortress for everything that stands against the transformation. This morning, I had noted two observations with the idea of reading them to you. I was clearly told that this very keen sense of discernment, which perceives everything contrary to the divine Truth, is a very good thing to have – not to be disappointed or deceived (and of course not to deceive oneself). But every time one stresses this side of things, one also gives it a POWER OF BEING, a sort of power that augments and perpetuates its existence... I feel something is trying to suppress this keen, imperative discernment from my active consciousness... so that, constantly and almost exclusively, the active consciousness perceives WHAT MUST BECOME instead."

Throughout the Agenda, Satprem complained about this intractable "fortress" in him: "I feel it is like a self-contained power, which will listen to nothing, and is completely outside one's control, something which is purely negative and whose only aim is destruction..." Endlessly, patiently Mother brought him back to the straight consciousness: "That cannot come out of the world. It has to be in the place where it will HAVE to be transformed, necessarily transformed... If we could be like a beacon of the Divine, constantly shining, dimmed by nothing – that is the only solution... Only the extreme Divine will transform the extreme darkness." (17/3/71) "It must be expelled from one's nature. Indeed, it is something that must evolve from life to life – it must be driven out of your personality. It is that part of the past which must disappear, but which desperately hangs on." (2/6/71) "I had seen that, I saw it – I tried to remove it, but I couldn't." (9/6/71)

This rebellious fortress, this "self-contained power which will listen to nothing" is worth going into a bit further because it may well constitute one of the

foremost attractions of Satprem's character in his relations to others. Through his talent with words and the French language, he has succeeded in turning a weighty and harmful trait of his character into an object of fascination and seduction. Even outside the small circle of the faithful, there is no shortage of praise and expressions of admiration lavished upon him in the form of: "Satprem, the Admirable Rebel," "Satprem and the Poetry of Dissent," etc. And one can only recall how he himself has titled a recent book of personal letters — *Lettres d'un insoumis* [Letters of a Rebel] — to appreciate the extent to which he played up to that game. A game which is foremost a never-ending source of fascination to others — but remains rather incompatible with what Mother was trying to tell him in that 1971 conversation. Ham acting is not too exaggerated a phrase under the circumstances.

Satprem's see-saw movement of consciousness between the two tragic poles of "the Irreducible Rebel" and "the Lover of God" was no doubt a great source of inner difficulties over the years — a sort of agonizing struggle between two irreconcilable positions: "My only strength is not to revolt; my only strength is to believe in the Grace in spite of everything. I think I have too much grief in my heart to revolt against anything. I seem to have a great feeling of pity towards the world." (10/7/59)

This is the deep-seated ambiguity Mother tried to cure in Satprem for more than ten years: "... sometimes it takes great courage, sometimes great staying power, sometimes... genuine love is enough, sometimes, oh, when faith is there, a very small thing is enough to... sweep everything away. I've done it often; other times I failed... But because it is a karma, one MUST do something oneself. Karma is the ego's creation; the ego MUST do something. It cannot all be done from the outside... That's what I saw for you, the crystallization of that karma, which took place during a life in India in which you were put in touch with the possibility of liberation and... "(22/11/58)

Indeed, the tragedy of Patrice's suicide, as previously referred to, as well as more recent events of the same nature convey a feeling that the pole of "the Lover of God" has not permanently supplanted "the irreducible Rebel" in Satprem.

And paradoxically, this ambiguousness served him well in his relations with others, for nothing is more fascinating to human consciousness than the revelation and exploration of conflicts and personal struggles. As the French playwright Jean Anouilh put it: "Tragedy is refreshing, because we know there is no more hope... and the only thing left is to scream — to shout at the top of one's lungs what was never uttered before." Rebellion is a *fonds de commerce* like any other, without which anonymity or solitary inner struggle are among the only alternatives. And yet, in the end, even the exemplary model of the Rebel wears thin and falls into obsolescence before the imperative need for each human being to be self-transcendent in a world where everything is increasingly leveled down. Even the old dinosaurs wear themselves out as they shout their demands for attention in a world that has already ceased to be theirs.

It is quite possible that this sense of tragedy was also a powerful lever of creation in Satprem's life. Confronting impossibility is often the trigger to finding

the means of conquering the obstacle. This is the way of Yoga. But a perilous line is crossed when a systematic seeking of tragic circumstances — or their total invention — attempts to substitute our dark, momentary impulses to the divine unfolding of our destiny. The terrible sentence of Antonin Artaud — “Tragedy on the stage is not enough; I want to bring it into my life” — is a sinister reminder of the extremes in which the human spirit can sometimes indulge. And the same tone is perceptible in Arthur Rimbaud’s well-known sentence: “Rapture is in the breakdown of all the senses.”

I do not claim here to supply explanations and answers to the innermost traits of Satprem’s character. I am only trying to express what I felt when I was with him and how I see him today. Only the Divine can comprehend the true reason for this bipolarity in him, the need for this double attraction for the Light on the one hand, and darkness or absolute negativity on the other — and why, today, his life is still suspended by the twin poles of the Rebel and the Lover. There lies a mystery, which no doubt Mother would understand, but of which she was unable to cure him. “It may be an ingrained habit of revolt — are you not a rebel by nature?” she asked him in 1963.

I would like to close this topic by quoting Sri Aurobindo: “The work I have to do for myself or for the world or for you or others can only be achieved if I have love for all and faith for all and go firmly on till it is done.” This little sentence, which is hardly noticeable among letters dating from 1934 and addressed to his disciple Dilip Kumar Roy, throws a contrasting light on the gulf of consciousness between Sri Aurobindo and Satprem.

Here is a man (Satprem) who spent the greater part of his life in close touch with Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts. He wrote books about him, thousands of words to explore, analyze, expound, and praise a whole body of work, a way to bring a different consciousness to the world, the seedbed of a different Future. During almost twenty years, he sat twice weekly with Mother, as the private confidant of her Agenda, immersed in the absolute Positiveness which she brought into the thirty square meters of her room. He saw her battles to restore the straight Vibration everywhere, in everything — and yet in none of Satprem’s thousands of words, at no single moment of that life absorbed and concentrated and devoted to a unique personal aspiration, does one feel the simplicity of Sri Aurobindo’s “love for all and faith for all.” The prevailing note is again and again: “The Revolt of the Earth” and “The tragedy of the Earth.”

This is Satprem’s tragedy.

\* \* \*

And now my own tragedy was about to begin — largely as a consequence of my blindness. Not only was I not seeing the contradictions staring me in the face, but I was totally under the influence of the power of seduction stemming from them. Satprem’s bipolar attitude was infinitely more attractive to the child I was than the difficult pursuit of an Absolute Positive standing clear beyond the shadows... Mother was the absolute and irrefutable Goal, but the path to reach her had to encompass all the Satprem-inspired twists and turns. With childish and narrow-minded obstinacy, I turned away from the straight and direct line for an

expedient, a seductive stopgap that had all the appeals and credentials, but in fact shielded me from the full Light by enabling me to postpone until some later date my own confrontation with “that.”

Actually, this may be the greatest difficulty associated with the company of personalities such as Satprem. It deprives us of the only hope we have of facing ourselves *directly*, pure and naked in the light of the Divine. The very attraction we feel for this “Big Brother ahead of us” is akin to being led astray. The hope we invest in him involves the corruption of our own hope. Through cowardice or laziness, we offload on someone else the task that we alone can discharge, which necessarily involves a one-on-one, solitary confrontation with the Divine.

In point of fact, I noticed that being in touch with Satprem was innocuous for no one. It was not the kind of relationship one can store in one’s back pocket like a polished stone and extract from time to time to contemplate and caress with one’s fingers. Once a first contact had taken place (even a remote contact, through words in a book), once a kind of “magic” rapport was established, it’s as if a little independent being took over and began to live its own life inside one — a life that often bordered on obsession. I have known people who traveled uninvited to the Nilgiris Mountains in the hope of catching a glance of Satprem at the bend of the road; others have spent months or years begging for a sign, a look, a letter, a word of approval or recognition. Even today, I know many people who live day after day in the hell of the contradiction of for-or-against-Satprem, frantically piling up on their inner scales the qualities and defects of a personality that keeps escaping them — instead of doing the only sensible thing and sending packing all “personalities,” however spellbinding they may be, and establishing (or re-establishing) a direct line of communication with “that” which is beyond all personalities and all contradictions.

But I am loath to cast the first stone. I have myself done enough spinning round the cage of illusions to blame anyone for doing the same. Only, a passing, and perhaps momentarily necessary experience ought not to become a life style — a prison. Again, not everyone has been as fortunate as I, and Patrice’s death is a chilling reminder that the power of certain forces cannot be denied or minimized with impunity.

## **America**

Toward the end of 1979, as we were strolling along the straight, green lanes of the Indian tea fields, Satprem began to talk to me about the necessity of publishing the *Agenda* in English, especially with a view to distribute it in America. At that moment, I felt in me the very same impulse that had pushed me in his direction a few years earlier. I knew immediately I had to propose myself for this “mission,” take up this new challenge, as if, by doing so, I would open a new phase in the adventure with myself. And I was perfectly right, though I didn’t know what awaited me...

After he had whole-heartedly agreed to my proposal, I felt this new responsibility was in perfect coherence with everything I had already lived in the past few years — in other words, with a feeling beyond personal preferences and

apprehensions, as if light-heartedly floating above “myself.” Years later, after the spell was broken between us, Satprem bitterly reproached me for openly claiming that he had “sent” me to America, thus accusing me of not facing my responsibilities in what was clearly, according to him, a decision I had made alone. But this was the time of misunderstandings when inner readings and dreams are replaced by implacable inventories.

In any case, together we had decided that I would sail for New York as soon as possible, with the goal of finding an American publisher for the thirteen Agenda volumes, of which only the first was already translated into English. I left the Nilgiris on a stormy day, the roads submerged under water, leaving behind a part of myself – half dream, half unconsciousness – that I would never find again.

Arriving in New York in January 1980, I found my American friend Roger, who had worked on the English translation of Satprem’s books for quite some time, and together we began to pace New York’s icy avenues in search of the Agenda’s future publisher. Unfortunately, all the publishers we visited were scared stiff at the idea of publishing 6,000 pages from an almost unknown author on a topic – self-transformation aiming at a new physical condition – so thorny. On top of it, that year India was no longer trendy – too bad for us! Reality was staring us in the face: no one in America was ready to embark on such an adventure or to take such formidable financial risks. For the Agenda to see the light in America, we had to publish it ourselves, by our own means and with our own resources. No small challenge.

In this great city awash with fantastic energy, an individual feels like a minuscule point in the midst of a creative activity that never stops. This is neither the deeper familiarity of India’s inner rhythm, nor the natural fluency of Europe’s intimate complicity. I felt totally overwhelmed, and very impressed, by the magnitude of the task which without warning had befallen me. But some grace must have been present because, miraculously, the horizon broadened in a smile. And that smile was Susie.

Resident in New York, a long-time friend of French friends of Satprem’s, she seemed to have always been there, on the other side of the ocean, perhaps awaiting something... She soon understood the stakes and the kind of challenge involved in publishing the Agenda in this “New World,” so receptive to new experiences, but also so ferociously materialistic. It is thanks to her determination and to her family’s material help that the real work was able to start and the first volumes of the Agenda to see the light in America. We were married at New York City Hall and decided to live on Long island, at a reasonable distance from the nuclear reactor called Manhattan!

Thus, the Agenda in English was born and took wings right in the middle of the potato fields of Long island, a few miles from the ocean. Our garage was soon too small to contain the boxes of books which overflowed into the basement. We had officially become the *Institute for Evolutionary Research*, a Not-For-Profit Corporation duly incorporated in the state of New York, and we operated as a *Small Press Publisher*, which is the typical way in America to enable many unknown

authors to be published and distributed through a network of alternative distributing agencies.

A single computer (one of the first PC's) ran our accounting, invoicing, and dispatching system. We did everything ourselves, from the preparation and even typesetting of the manuscripts, to supplying the books to bookstores and shipping them to individual customers. I was mainly busy translating the books into English – though it was not my native tongue! While the Agenda was mostly translated in India, by other volunteers under Satprem supervision, I was responsible for the translation of his own books, since their publication, alongside the Agenda, seemed to me the best introduction to Mother's words.

From 1980 to 1992, ten volumes of the Agenda and eight titles by Satprem went very literally through our hands, from conception to delivery. Susie would regularly cram our car full of boxes and head for our small local post office, from where they left for the four corners of the country as well as abroad. It is hard to imagine a bulk of 50,000 books, piled in inadequate spaces, with no lifting gear to move them, and all the juggling to fill and strap and label the boxes... How powerful our dream must have been to permit us to maintain this grueling effort for years!

### **The Sledge Hammer**

We had, of course, rallied all the disciples of Mother and Sri Aurobindo in America, and many had offered invaluable help to prepare the manuscripts, for instance, or to facilitate the distribution in their area. Yet, we remained curiously aloof, as if some unwritten law compelled us to isolation and to feel ourselves "different." I know today that this vague feeling of a difference between ourselves and the other disciples stemmed from the same feeling of isolation felt by Satprem among his peers in India, as if, once again, we unwittingly took on his experience involving anything related to the Ashram of Pondicherry.

He had stood apart his entire life, from the time of his flights to the Amazon jungle or the Himalayas, to the Ashram in Pondicherry, where he was unable to strike a single friendship outside of Sujata, who became his companion. In Mother, he had found universal Revolt and had quieted his own revolt in the shadow of hers. But Mother's revolt embraced the "love for all and faith for all" without any contradiction, while Satprem's circled feverishly and endlessly about itself. This is the insurmountable obstacle that Mother had tried in vain to cure, which immediately resurfaced in him after her departure, ultimately to get the better of him.

The circumstances of Mother's passing as well as his own expulsion from the Ashram (which incidentally he feigned to ignore) had driven a last nail into his already hardened convictions of rejection. It was evidently this inner feeling of utter isolation that had led him to form a little group of "brothers" around him, to try to fill his isolation and drive back the walls of his confinement and loneliness. There was this marvelous instrument of the Agenda and a High Mission to undertake, behind which he would be able to dissimulate his own inherent

incertitude and failings. "Truth is always schismatic," he told me one day, as if to reassure himself.

And this is how it came about that a little band of "brothers" followed to the letter the "Satpremian Schism," and roamed the world giving vent to a delectable mood of paranoia toward anything or anyone that did not belong to the Magic Circle. The only sure ground beyond dry land was the one represented by the "fraternity" as encapsulated by Satprem; the rest of the world was suspect and fraught with dangers. The Jihadists have not invented anything. Maybe this was also a way to strengthen the group about him by maintaining cohesion and preventing its dilution into the environment of sappy spiritual routines. One feels all the more determined and united when all outside seems hostile and laden with menaces. My own difficulties with Satprem would in fact be considerably worsened when a real liking for America began to emerge in me and I mingled without restraint with "ordinary" Americans, and in particular with Sri Aurobindo's American disciples. Although this natural movement of expansion and empathy seems self-evident when one's life seeks to be founded on Sri Aurobindo's universality, it was evidently felt by Satprem as an act of betrayal against his private dogma of entrenchment.

For a while, our house in Long Island was also home to the unfortunate Keya, who Satprem had sent from the Nilgiris to help us in setting up the manuscripts in English. With mind-boggling speed and precision, she had single-handedly typeset the 6,000 pages of the Agenda in French. Torn from her routine beside Satprem, she never got used to life in America and began to plunge into depression. But carried away in our bustling activity, we did not understand her distress signals, and when we did finally realize her condition, it was too late. Urgently repatriated to India, definitively cut off from Satprem, she lived a few years in Auroville, ultimately refusing to feed herself and passing away in June 1995, at the age of fifty-one.

This was a first grim warning of what was to come, but we were so busy in otherwise worthy accomplishments that paying attention to Keya was out of the question. It was easier to brand her as "too infatuated with Satprem," and to dismiss her case along with those of daydreamers who confuse their wishes with reality. But of course, we were ALL in this same boat of delusion, except we still did not know it. Keya was merely the first traumatic incident in a long list.

At the end of 1981, all thirteen volumes of the Agenda in French were published and available in bookstores. In less than four years, in a virtual race against the clock, Satprem had revised and prepared some 6,000 pages of manuscript. In the thirteenth and last volume he had described at length the circumstances of Mother's passing, as he had lived them, mentioning in particular the use of psychotropic substances to sedate her.

It was with great relief that Satprem saw the end of his self-imposed mission and the fulfillment of his inner promise. But he also had to confront a pressing question: what now? What to do with the 24 hours of a day when the tension that had kept him going for so long has disappeared. The translations of the Agenda in other languages, of which some were under way, would follow their

course almost automatically and would take years to come out. Another activity, another goal, had to be found.

Actually, the difficulty he was confronting had to do with being face to face with himself. Mother was no longer there to show the way, neither physically by giving a tangible indication, nor even beyond death by the suggestion of some pressing task remaining to be accomplished, such as originally must have been the publication of the Agenda. In fact, a brand-new future had to be invented, but one that must be coherent with Mother's path.

A first hint came to him when a vision flashed before his eyes of an "island," adequately removed from the world, on which a very small group of human beings would attempt to concentrate their aspiration with the aim of following more concretely in Mother's footsteps — a sort of tiny evolutionary kernel. Hence, in February 1982, Satprem and Sujata left India to tour Pacific islands in search of "Mother's Island." More than a month later, exhausted and disappointed, they had to face the facts. No island could be found for such a project, no island for accelerated evolution — as perhaps Sri Aurobindo had concluded seventy years earlier when he settled in Pondicherry and subsequently declined, on more than one occasion, to move anywhere else.

The next attempt may also appear somewhat strange. It had to do with finding a Mantra which Satprem had known many years earlier, as he was walking the roads of India in the orange robe of a Sannyasi, and which at the time had seemed capable of penetrating into the consciousness of the body and breaking down the carapace of our bodily habits. In this way, he hoped to draw closer to Mother's corporeal experience. He went in search of that mantra, which he eventually found in the Himalayas. But there also, he had to face the facts: the mantra he had now found opened the doors to the world of the Indian occult tradition, but that had nothing to do with Mother and her process of descent into the body consciousness. It is strange that a man who was so aware of Mother's experience for having followed it more than anyone else, studied and described it, would then drift in these two distinct directions so foreign to Mother's course. Be that as it may, he was back to square one, back in India, and back face to face with himself.

And this is when something started happening in him which made him so radically different, so foreign to what he was before, that everything exploded around him — and continues to explode to this day.

It is not easy, and perhaps even impossible, to describe what happened in Satprem at that point. And yet I believe I was the one to whom he wrote the first letters attempting to describe what he was experiencing. I must say I was very touched to read those letters. They spoke of a new, more intense kind of concentration taking over his body, of a new, more powerful force descending into him (like a "sledge hammer"), and then of a kind of "ascent" of the body toward a "heaven above" like a great blue Sun, where everything merged into that pure reality, which perhaps is best known as "That."

Day after day, he immersed himself in this experience. Soon he began naming that force the Supramental Force, to follow Sri Aurobindo's terminology. It

was obvious he was entering into a new consciousness, a new way to see and comprehend the world.

For my part, having read the few remarks that Sri Aurobindo had left concerning the Supramental process, I was unable to “match” what he said, in letters to certain disciples, with Satprem’s own descriptions, which always seemed to emphasize the Force, the “sledge hammer” nature of the process, while Sri Aurobindo spoke of the Supramental as a “Truth-Consciousness” which hardly needs to struggle or confront the ignorant nature of the world to impose itself. For its very presence is also the dawn of a new determinism — a realization free from efforts because “opposites” have ceased to be necessary.

At the time, not only did I not question for a moment Satprem’s conclusions about his new condition, but I marveled at the idea that this Supramental condition could actually dawn in this way, so simply and naturally, in another being after Sri Aurobindo and Mother. This was a dream come true, here and now, on two legs and in the flesh; the little nod from evolution for which Sri Aurobindo and Mother had so much hoped and prayed. And thus the logical conclusion to the long preparation Satprem had lived near Mother, a kind of justification after the fact of all the idiosyncrasies that made him an ideal and predestined candidate for that “Truth-Consciousness” — a perfect outcome.

We all wanted so much to believe in the Miracle through Satprem!

But soon Satprem no longer wished to have any relations with the world. He no longer wanted to receive or answer mail, write more books (he later changed his mind), intending instead to explore this new state he lived in. From America, I was in charge of channeling his mail and drawing his attention to anything important or imperative. The fictitious explanation of his departure from the Nilgiris for an “unknown destination” was supposed to justify the abrupt break in his communications with the older members of our group, who had to swallow a rather obvious pill without protest, and accept to write to him through me. Naturally, no one was fooled for a minute, but all grinned and bore it, playing the game of the “secrecy” out of respect for Satprem and what he stood for. I willingly played the fool, yielding like everyone else to “higher” reason. Satprem was no doubt aware of the discomfort felt by everyone but did not seem to care in the least, giving absolute priority to his new experience.

It is impossible to know the exact nature of this new force Satprem felt within him, which so manifestly transformed his being and his life. But one can certainly wonder about the immediate, visible results of the emergence of this force in him. As time went by, he seemed to become increasingly impatient, almost annoyed and irritated, with anything that was not what he experienced himself (that is, practically the whole world!) This growing impatience tended to make him more distant from us. It seemed as if he had difficulty holding this new life within while accepting a minimum of contact with life here below, its imperfections, its stumbling and inborn dissatisfactions. In a very short time, he had become a very perfect (and very sharp!) sword in a very imperfect world. He had swapped his former human hesitations for an ardent faith, intolerant of the humanity we still represented. While until the very last Mother’s arms had

remained open to humanity around her, Satprem's seemed to close only onto his own experience and himself, as his exasperation kept growing.

Was the "sledge hammer" going to break the vessel?

However, none of this put the least dent in my faith in Satprem, and in the hope he had fostered. In fact, until the last moment in 1993, I would continue to keep him in my heart, and it is he and he alone who finally managed to convince me of the depth of the illusion I had entertained all these years.

Yet another detail had surprised me. It concerned the "Fourteenth Agenda." Satprem had planned to collect his entire personal correspondence prior to the Agenda publication (when he wrote to certain people likely to help, of the value and meaning of the still-unknown Agenda) into one or more volumes, which would form a continuation of the Agenda proper: Agenda 14, Agenda 15, etc. I admit I was shocked, deep down, that he could put on equal footing Mother's words — especially Agenda 13, which represents a breathless entreaty to the Light — and his own battle (however brave it was) to publish the Agenda. But he later changed his mind, for these letters are published today under yet another title.

It was also around that time that a rather surprising and unexpected dream came to me.

It was night and guests were gathered around a long table. Sitting in the middle was Sri Aurobindo, looking majestic but without any affectation. Mother was to his right, smiling, and Satprem to his left. Several other guests, whom I did not recognize, occupied other seats around the table. I was sitting near the end of the table, looking intently toward the center, toward Sri Aurobindo. On the table right in front of Sri Aurobindo was an imposing dish filled with an enormous cut of red meat, like sirloin steak. This meat, barely cooked, was even lying in its own blood, according to the way quality meat is cooked in the West. To my utter surprise, I saw Satprem pointing a finger toward the dish and inviting Sri Aurobindo to taste the meat. He had to insist several times, because Sri Aurobindo did not seem keen to accept the invitation. But Satprem's insistence finally paid, for Sri Aurobindo made a gesture and took a small morsel of rare steak.

When I told my dream to Satprem he did not seem unduly surprised. But what was he attempting to push onto Sri Aurobindo in the symbol of this rare meat? His own Western ways of looking and analyzing life's processes? The rebellious, schismatic nature of his personality? Or something else?

### **The Malaise**

For me, too, destiny was irremediably advancing. I was about to enter the true reality of my situation. At the end of 1983, Susie and I had decided to move south, to Virginia, partly to escape the massive population growth of the New York area. A big, somewhat ramshackle farmhouse among the green rolling hills around Charlottesville would now give us shelter, with our 50,000 books... This new place was also better suited to our publishing activities. It is there that, during the next eight years, we published most of the Agenda volumes and other titles by Satprem

in English. We were in frequent communication with him through letters and often through telegrams. From time to time, we would even make short trips to India, which were opportunities to visit the Nilgiris and touch base with Satprem. I was also in weekly telephone contact with my close friend Micheline, who supervised the activities of the French *Institut de Recherches Evolutives* in Paris.

At this point, everything, then, seemed to run as smoothly as possible and the future looked as bright as could be. A small, motivated group, united around material tasks and a tested underlying spiritual ideology: Satprem, sitting in India, true to the image we had formed of him, which our childlike superstition had molded out of the rather fearsome mystery surrounding his new condition of "Pioneer of the New World." Were we the creator of that image? Or was he? Did he perhaps unwittingly comply with what was expected of him? These questions will remain unanswered forever, but in fact that image was unable to prevail against the test of time and reality. Today, no one remains of that small group of people, not a single soul to testify to the durability and substantiality of an experience which was supposed to provide answers for an indefinite future. But in reality, some, like me, were excluded under one pretext or another; others died before their time – Keya, Micheline, Patrice – still others turned away without a word but with a heavy heart.

I was thus the first of a long list to live with the frozen knot of disillusionment in my heart. This cold spell lasted for years, without giving its name, while everything appeared to be normal on the surface. This is the long-drawn-out ordeal when everything is felt, but nothing is known – when the inside has yet to meet with the outside to form a coherent and comprehensible whole.

That peculiar period must have started in the middle of the 1980's, perhaps on the occasion of the writing and publication of "our" book. During one of my visits in India, Satprem had suggested that I record him while he talked about his new experience in the body. We had taken a walk in the surrounding countryside, and there, amidst the tall trees of the *Shola*, I turned on the tape recorder...

Back in the United States, still following his suggestion, I had written an introduction to this taped conversation with a view to putting his words in the context of Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's yoga. The resulting text, including the interview of Satprem, was later published in Paris by Robert Laffont under the title *La vie sans mort* [Life without death] under the dual authorship of Satprem and myself.

To my great surprise, writing this book had turned out to be amazingly easy. I who had never formally written anything could see the words form themselves on the paper without any effort or prior planning. Sentences followed one another as if automatically, and I literally discovered the details of the ideas as they appeared on the page. The only "effort" on my part was to maintain a state of peace and inner receptivity.

To be on the safe side, Satprem had decided to reread my text before giving his assent and sending it to the French Publisher. And this is when I felt the first tear between us. The book ended with these words: "To be continued...". Of course, I was speaking of the continuation of that wonderful yogic bodily

experience he was undergoing, which held out the promise of canceling death itself while rendering it unnecessary. Given my faith, I saw no reason why this condition could not assert and amplify itself, eventually replacing the old terrestrial life and making a clean sweep of all our mortal habits. But, oddly, Satprem took this term merely as a claim on my part for more interviews with him and for more books to come. While I saw the sublime in his condition (and tried to describe it), he only saw the bottom line and personal calculations. We could not have been on two more different planets! To make sure I had taken the hint, he even sent me a curt little note confirming that I was not to expect any more conversations with him.

What had taken hold of him? What had he sensed in me that I was not perceiving myself? I had neither asked to record his words nor to write that book. Yet, in a moment's notice, I was clearly brought down to the role of a schemer. One more turn of the screw and I would turn out to be a fraud and even a profiteer... A strange mechanism indeed. At this point, we may well be near the heart of the problem.

If I had had the courage and, especially, confidence in myself, I would have packed my bags and taken my leave right there and then. But this is where the spell works admirably – Patrice, are you listening? Not only had I wretchedly and piteously accepted the insinuations directed against my integrity, but I began the high acrobatics of actually turning the tables against myself and accusing myself of faults I could not have committed. I used my best Yogic knowledge to try and find in my ego the cause of all this trouble. But since the ego is evanescent and elusive, naturally I found nothing. It would, of course, never have occurred to me to look for the cause in Satprem himself. He was forever beyond suspicion, uninvolved in terrestrial pettiness, and to question the sublime in him would be simply unthinkable – an act of sacrilege.

So there we were; the fatal “mechanism” had kicked in and would not stop. Whatever happened, we would now have to go to the end of the dramatic course – there had to be drama to conclude and put a final stop to what had begun under such apparently insignificant appearances. This was in fact a process with an uncompromising, devouring logic to it – one that would only subside with its pound of fresh innocence.

While he could easily have cleared with one word or one gesture the inane and abusive interpretation he had formulated against me, he chose to do nothing and to keep inside him this spark of suspicion and umbrage. Then, with implacable logic, time saw to it to amass more material causes of misunderstanding, which would swell the spark into an irresistible volcano. I spent several years with this weird sensation of an unspoken malaise and growing uneasiness, without ever being able to pinpoint or stop it. My few awkward attempts to seek explanations or “put the cards on the table” only met with Yogic admonitions or a wall of silence. I had therefore to resolve myself to live with this odd contradiction between a still bustling (and still attractive) daily activity and a growing, silent question, which would not divulge its meaning.

At any point in time, Satprem consciously could have put a stop to this malaise, to this ambivalence invisibly taking hold between us. Was he not supposed

to stand “above” these emotional whirls, to be capable of viewing things within a larger, more embracing spirit and light, beyond the human-bound heaviness that forever hold us down? Perhaps he did not do it because he himself was caught in that “devouring logic,” or else because he did not see fit to come down to this level of human conflict after his recent breakthrough into such an utterly different dimension? Yet if Mother had never “come down” to Satprem’s level, what would have happened to him? And where would he be today? There are circumstances when one ought to “return the favor,” as it were, even (and perhaps especially) when that appears to involve a diminution of consciousness. Here we are back with the great difficulty of the “love for all and faith for all.”

All the same, it is worth stopping a few moments to dwell on this state of profound ambivalence, almost schizophrenic, in which one part of me desperately sought to salvage something from the wreckage, while the other — deeper and freer from surface illusions — already knew there was nothing to salvage. The truth was right in front of me, blindingly, and the only thing to do was to welcome it with all due respect and gratitude. Failing to know what was happening to me, this state - which I called earlier “the cage of illusions” - became my dwelling place for years, and thus I know all its nooks and crannies. The cost of renting this dwelling is PAIN: the unspeakable pain of not being true to oneself, the pain of choosing appearances over being, the pain of nourishing cherished habits and sweet intoxications which are supposed to make up for the utter destitution of the slack periods.

In the extreme, this pain can become so intense, so unbearable, that any means will seem appropriate in order to evade it - including that to put an end to a life that merges with it. I am thinking about Micheline, who according to credible witnesses was suddenly stricken with a strange condition which gave her a staggering gait and a slurring voice, in her sixties, after devoting some 20 years of her life to help Satprem. I am thinking about Patrice, whose grief was already smoldering in India, and who breathed his last while calling Satprem and Sujata for help. I am thinking about Keya, one of the first to go, misunderstood and abandoned by all with her “infantile obsessions.” I am thinking of others, too, who even today are there in the shadows, with the weight of their silent questions and restless eyes.

Is Satprem morally, humanly responsible for all those personal dramas, big or small, which we did our best to hide out of fear, out of shame or simply not to “make waves”? He was by far the most conscious among us, the one whose many years spent beside Mother should have endowed him with patience and compassion. And it is futile, or absurd, to deny the facts, which are staring us in the face. So where, in the presence of so many broken lives and abused hearts, is justice?

Let me provide a personal answer. I believe that these events involving Satprem cannot be understood solely by the means of the human legal system. What I am trying to say is that each person must determine his own responsibilities for his actions. And that the essential freedom given to us from the start, though it may sometimes appear to play against us, must be accepted with all its

concomitant uncertainties as the price to pay in order to guarantee that a real process of evolution is rooted in human soil. This is the price of being fully human.

### **First Turn of the Screw**

My story is coming to an end. There only remains to deliver the litany of various misunderstandings (or perhaps absolutely "understood" elsewhere, who knows?) which peppered the years from 1985 onward, increasing the malaise between Satprem and me until the final explosion of 1993.

The first serious warning shot came in 1990, during my last visit in the Nilgiris. Susie and I had been invited for a few days of "rest." There was such a build-up of unspoken resentment between us that it would have been wise to have some simple, heart-to-heart explanation. But this was not the style of the house. On the contrary, silence and wordless "understanding" were the only means of communication. But the tension between us was so palpable - he behind his wall of Yogic silence; I within my repressed pain - that none of us would take the first step toward the other. That is when he went so far as to speak of my needing some kind of exorcism, which probably meant that he considered me as lost forever, beyond any chance of recovery. Destiny was sealed. With great, shared relief Susie and I left the Nilgiris a few days later and flew back to the United States.

And that's when the dreams began, as if the daytime atmosphere had to extend also into the nights and complete the picture, so to speak. In these dreams, I saw myself begging Satprem for a little love and affection. Generally, I had to pass through a "welcoming committee," composed of young people who surrounded and protected him, and who did not spare any effort to make me feel the abjectness of my condition. Once admitted to see him, things took a radical turn for the worse, for he usually indicated through a curt gesture or word that I still was not ready for the "realization," because my rigidity, my lack of inner suppleness, and especially my refusal to give myself fully and entirely were still blocking the way to the "enlightenment" I was hoping for.

These nightmares occurred at fairly regular intervals, and then more and more frequently as the months went by, ending up by overrunning my entire nights as well as my daytime life. I tried to reassure myself and clear up the pernicious atmosphere poisoning my days by telling myself that I was seeing a "false Satprem," just as Mother had once seen a "false Sri Aurobindo" at night - and this was a "phase" of yoga to go through, and one had to be strong, remain quiet, and so on. In other words, I kept spinning my fable.

Later, I had to face the fact that daytime reality agreed with the images I glimpsed at night and, against my will, I had to open my eyes to the true actuality of my situation and of my relationship with Satprem. This traumatic turn of events, administered drop by drop to ease the pain, finally left me without any explanation, yogic or others, in a situation I had to face alone with the sole recourse of a life bare of purpose or future.

Then came the episode of our "move," which, as I see it today, was primarily a last test of allegiance. As Susie or I may have mentioned the existence of a particularly irascible neighbor as well as the growing drug traffic in the

Washington area, Satprem took the opportunity to suggest moving out of Virginia altogether, on the pretext that our environment had become negative and potentially dangerous.

It could not have come at a worse time. There still remained several Agenda volumes to publish, I was probably in the middle of translating the next title, and our boxes of books were being dispatched daily to the four corners of the United States. But Satprem's "suggestions" could not be dismissed or ignored, especially at a time when our relations were already so tense. The solution which Satprem and Sujata favored most was for us to leave the United States immediately and to retire to Canada, near X, an obscure correspondent of Sujata's, endowed with psychic powers, who had elected to await the "end of the world" on a semi-deserted Canadian coast south of Alaska.

In order to make this incredible suggestion more palatable, Satprem had to present our departure as a new conquest, even as its very conditions and geographical intention did not lend themselves to such a description. To that end, he introduced X to us as "a very evolved being, very advanced on Mother's path." But there was no mention of the books and the work we had begun in the United States, which demanded a follow-up. Forgotten were the contacts, the friends, the bookstores. Gone were the "Laboratories of Evolution." I could not believe it! In Satprem's mind nothing of the last ten years seemed to have existed! Or was it we who had not really existed? Without explanation, with an air of detachment verging on indifference, all the work accomplished was to come to a stop and we had to park ourselves — I was about to say in "Siberia," but that's another story... — in Alaska. I experienced the shock, the depth of disappointment, but not yet the self-examination: as in the case of my unfortunate "to be continued," I still could not come to terms with the implications of my own behavior.

So Susie and I traveled to Canada. For a while we played the game and went along with X's hospitality, finally to agree that we could not possibly adhere to the Canadian project. Susie was later harshly reprimanded for having voiced her reservations about X herself. We had completely failed our test of allegiance.

After several weeks of exploration in the Western United States, we eventually found a new home in a lovely little island of the Pacific Northwest, not far from Seattle and... the Canadian border. This was followed by the long ordeal of moving our 50,000 books from coast to coast by special truck and train. The peace and quiet we felt in our new-found home overlooking the Pacific Ocean was well deserved... But the peace was short-lived, for the volcano was rumbling in the distance, claiming its debt. There were eighteen months left before the explosion.

### **Caught Red-Handed**

A few months after settling in the Pacific Northwest, an event occurred which finally opened my eyes and FORCED me to understand that my ongoing nightmares were an exact depiction of reality. At last, I realized that Satprem in person and in the flesh was involved in the nightmares I lived day after day, that he was behind each decision, each inflexion and insinuation, each misguided assessment, as he had been earlier behind each act of courage and determination, each breakthrough and success — that he was human like everyone else, small and

fallible like everyone else. And that I was partly to blame for putting him in this false position of infallibility above humanity, for missing my cue in playing the opposite part.

Many years before, Satprem had entrusted packets containing hundreds of personal papers and letters to close friends for safekeeping. Because of the urgency and haste with which these packets had been prepared and transported at the time, no precise inventory of the letters had been kept. On several occasions, I had taken suitcases filled with papers to the United States, which were then duly filed away in a strong box at home. From time to time over the years, he would ask me to open one file or another in order to check a letter or a paper. At one point, I had even toyed with the idea of recording the most important letters by theme in our computer so they would be easier to find in their folders, but I had abandoned the idea when confronted with the magnitude of the task. Before moving to the Pacific Northwest, Satprem had requested that I send back to India all his personal papers through postal sacks, which we had done with all the care and guarantee offered by surface mail.

But now he claimed that some letters were missing!

On July 17, 1993, responding to a telegram where I stated, once again, my total ignorance about the missing letters (Susie and I had searched our house from top to bottom), and where I strongly hinted that forces of disharmony were behind this bewildering confusion, Satprem wrote me the following in his own hand:

"We are in receipt of your telegram from New Jersey.

"Sujata and I found it shocking.

"It also brings pain in the heart — and in the body.

"So we undertook the difficult ordeal of looking through the 'postal sack' that you sent us in Jan. 92 [In fact, *two* postal sacks had been shipped to India]. And I then realized with dismay the extent of the pilfering of my correspondence.

"Since you no longer seem to see clearly the Truth, I am enclosing with this letter some photocopies of your own letters where you explicitly mention my folders, transported in your house and recorded on 'electronic files' in your computer.

"I have often spoken to you about this 'hidden Foe' that a person must conquer or miss his higher Destiny.

"Falsehood is everywhere.

"I am going to be seventy.

"But I keep struggling.

"I am waiting for Luc, who I used to call my brother, to wake up at last."

I was stunned.

Right there in black and white, the person I had placed above everything else in this world, perhaps even above myself when it came to decipher right from wrong; the person who had guided and understood me so well, who had taught me so much — the very one Mother had chosen to receive her secrets — not only was accusing me of lying and stealing, but seemed to be possessed with hysterical

blindness, as if nothing would ever stop this wild lunacy, these mechanical tirades filled with “Falsehood” and “Truth,” “Destiny” and “Foe” and “struggle”... yet missing the one elementary fact that stealing those letters would have been a material absurdity.

Of course the case was sealed. And all my denials would be lost in interstellar vacuum. This is what my night-time and daytime nightmares were telling me. We had long passed the point when an erupting volcano can be stopped — by admitting, for example, that a small grain of sand had gone into the gears, that we needed to stop and review the situation together, and perhaps revise some preconceived ideas... But the words sounded so convincing, the contrived expressions so compelling that no presumption of innocence had any place in that discourse. Despite everything, despite my heavy heart, I called up all the strength of reason and calm I could muster to draft a precise, irrefutable demonstration that they had embarked on a wrong track, that I could NOT have stolen those letters. On August 5, I answered:

“This whole episode is absurd from beginning to end, a sort of ‘air bubble’ — overblown by what? I believe it is not so much an ‘awakening’ that is needed at this point as a simple act of elementary logic.

“If I had wanted to ‘pilfer’ your correspondence, which was with me for some ten years, would it not have been easier (and more discreet) for me to make photocopies of the letters I wanted to keep and send you back all your originals intact? Why leave all these gaping ‘holes’ so conspicuous in your correspondence when it would have been so simple to do my ‘pilfering’ incognito?

“If ‘pilfering’ there was, then I will go straight to hell, for I do not see what else is possible after such an act. But if there was NO ‘pilfering’, then, really, I would ask you to try and comprehend *how* such accusations could have arisen in the first instance. You alone can throw light on this confusion.

I never received any reply to my letter.

## **Violence**

Then I had another strange dream, maybe as a continuation, or a further turn of the screw, of the dream of the red piece of meat mentioned earlier. I found myself in a huge underground cave, closed on all sides, whose walls were made of a strange, salt-like, translucent substance, soft to the touch. Satprem, alone in this cave, was sitting cross-legged on the bare ground, deep in concentration. Raising my head, I could see that the cave’s ceiling, though bereft of any opening to the open air, supported, as it were, the entire world above — our physical world. On closer examination, I noticed that bits of this translucent substance were being chipped away from the walls of the cave as Satprem continued his concentration. He was hollowing out the cave as the Indians of the Orinoco River hollow out a tree trunk to make their pirogue! For Heaven’s sake, I thought, if the ceiling wall that supports the world becomes too thin, everything will collapse inward! Just as I understood the enormity of what was in store — the collapse of the world — I found myself in the open air, face to face with Satprem. He had a little amused sparkle in the eye and, as he understood I had understood, he simply said: “This is the ONLY solution.”

I do not believe that a single man, be it Satprem, can destroy the world. But ten years before the *New York Twin Towers* and the way terrorists attacks have become a feature of everyday life in the present world, this dream at least points to the destructive obsession of Satprem's consciousness at the time. Not only was I a prominent potential target in view of my alleged acts of treason, but after me (as I would later discover), everything was to follow: Michel and Nicole, who replaced me, were subjected to the worst accusations and expelled from the Nilgiris; Patrice was to follow suit one or two years later, returning home to France to commit suicide.

Nothing and no one escaped his destructive compulsion, neither the people who had been close to him and had served his designs, nor the human race as a whole, with which he still had to share this earth. A few years ago, a visiting guest asked him somewhat rhetorically: "What would you do if you were Master of the world?" Satprem's face suddenly grew tense and, making a fist, he replied instantly: "I would crush everything!"

Yet I want to believe that Sri Aurobindo and Mother did not make the effort and sacrifice of incarnating once again to spend painstaking years in trying, with a few human samples, to show the passage to another terrestrial consciousness, only for this earth to end up in Satprem's closed fist. Otherwise, what is the sense of their efforts, the sense of the thousands of letters Sri Aurobindo wrote at night, since the days were no longer enough, to affirm that Something Else is possible, here and now? Just as he, day after day incarnated "love for all and faith for all", so also Mother lavished the same care, the same concentration, the same challenge with her smile, with her thousands of daily footsteps, to tip ever so slightly the days' tedium toward that Something Else. I want to believe that their efforts have flowered, at least in a few, and that the seed is planted in a few consciousnesses, beneath the hard crust of stereotypes, unbeknownst to dissenters and assenters alike.

And then how can one close his fist on anything or anyone when he has known That?

If it were needed, another "misunderstanding" with Satprem illustrates this incipient violence. This is the incident about "India's Rebirth." Michel had collected texts where Sri Aurobindo spoke of India and her destiny, principally excerpts of the "Bande Mataram," the weekly journal Sri Aurobindo published in Calcutta during his revolutionary years, prior to the trial of the *Alipore Bomb Case*. This compilation had been printed in India in a book whose title, "India's Rebirth," was placed on the cover above the name of Sri Aurobindo and a map of India before the partition. Susie and I were surprised to receive a printed copy of this book, and even more surprised to discover that the name of the American Institute was printed inside as the official distributor of the book in the United States, for we had never been told about this new book project which had been entirely put together in the Nilgiris. But the greatest shocking surprise of all was to discover the header topping the front cover in black, bold print: "Out of the Ruins of the West..." followed below by the actual title, "India's Rebirth." In other words, Sri Aurobindo, whose name appeared as the book's sole author was supposed to

endorse the central thesis, expressed on the cover, that India's rebirth would be founded on the ruins of the West...

This, I felt, was to push Sri Aurobindo's revolutionary thinking to the limit, and even beyond the limit. Sri Aurobindo and Ben-Laden as fellow-thinkers? I could not get used to the idea. Since I knew Sujata to be directly behind this publication, I took my pen, again, to draft a careful and respectful telegram, in which I argued that that unfortunate header conveyed a wrong idea about India and her aspiration, as well as about Sri Aurobindo, who had never displayed in his writing such a fervent inclination for the destruction of the West, etc. I did not even mention what headache it would be for us to present such a book cover for sale in American bookstores! The whole scheme was incredibly surreal, to be polite and stay outside any clinical diagnosis.

I was, of course, boorishly admonished by Sujata:

"Don't you see what stares you in the face? You seem to be living in a chest of drawers, Luc. Does living in a drawer qualify you to criticize [sic] the sightings of another who happens to live in open air? Nobody need 'aspire' for the ruin of the West. It is already in ruins... [What] with gun-toting children, with homosexuals and lesbians... Are petrodollars the final aim of Evolution? If you think that the summit of Evolution is where the Western civilisation has led mankind then I'll ask you to think again... that is, if the grey cells have retained their original colour and have not turned black, losing their ability to reflect the light... For your information, the line 'Out of the ruins of the West,' to which you seem to object, is Satprem's contribution to the book."

Words had completely lost their meaning. We were on two planets belonging to different constellations. When I spoke of the interpretation of words and the sometimes unfortunate association they triggered in a reader's mind, I received hot-tempered, indiscriminate tirades deprived of any nuance. How could the refined elegance, the wonderful subtlety of Sri Aurobindo's thoughts be mixed with this fundamentalist caricature? Was this the meaning of my dream with the blood-dripping meat? Were they trying to force Sri Aurobindo into a carnivorous skin?

The confusion worsened when the Ashram Trustees found out about the existence of the book, whose material was composed to a great extent of texts under the Ashram copyrights. Not only had Sujata not found it necessary to ask permission before using these texts, as it is customary and fitting to do, but she had even printed, in place of the usual notice acknowledging copyrights of the work's owner, a note stating that these texts belonged "to all the lovers of India", thereby opening the copyrights to the whole world...

The Ashram could not remain indifferent. They filed a court case for infringement of copyrights in the Madras High Court, requesting from the judge an immediate stay-order banning all sales of the book. As official distributors in the United States, we had become co-defendant in the case, because we were co-responsible for Sujata's singular generosity. We were summoned to Madras to plead a case in which we felt absolutely foreign. To put an end to the legal tangle, I decided to legally disassociate the American Institute from this entire publication

project, which Satprem did not fail, later, to stigmatize as another proof of my duplicity.

### **The Last Straw**

The last incident, which would trigger the final explosion, has to do with my relationship with America and more particularly with Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's American disciples. As I said earlier, we lived in America with the feeling that it was proper to remain somewhat aloof, as if we had a distinctive, unique identity, never to be absorbed in humanity at large – what I called “the Satpremian schism.” In fact, Satprem never missed an opportunity to remind us of the difference between us and the others by denouncing, for example, “the American mixture” or even the “Aurovilian mixture,” as will appear later in this story. The exact limits and extent of this “mixture” is something he evidently left to his own appreciation and mood of the moment. But as time went by, the “mixture” covered more and more ground, ultimately to include everything and everyone in its scope.

Yet, toward the beginning of this year 1993, Sujata had taken the exact opposite position to that attitude of division as she wrote to me:

“How do you communicate with others ? Through newsletters? Sitting behind your computer? Well, it came to me that the best way to communicate is to have direct, personal contact with people. So why not go out and *meet* people? Talk with them. Listen to them. Speak to them. Speak, do not lecture...”

“Now, Luc, may I ask you a question? All these twelve years that you are in the States, how many personal friends have you made? How many personal contacts in all these years? Go out and about? ”

Sujata's wishes were going to be fulfilled beyond her wildest imagination! Her piece of advice was all the more welcome since the new environment of our little island had made me more keenly aware of our isolation. Thus I decided to come in closer contact with the American disciples, notably with those living in the Colorado area. There, around Seyril, one of the first *Matrimandir* workers in Auroville, people from the four corners of the United States used to gather each summer to celebrate Sri Aurobindo's birthday. Susie and I decided to attend.

To my great surprise, not only were we warmly received, but I could sense that our hosts felt our presence as bringing them also closer to Satprem, as if by this simple gesture toward them, they felt included in the activities of the Agenda in their country – and even in Satprem's own interior endeavor. Their receptivity and enthusiasm were a breath of fresh air and filled me with hope. Here is something truly concrete and positive, I thought. After the long, arid months of misunderstanding, of distorted or misconstrued efforts, I felt that the simple and spontaneous adherence of a group of “ordinary” Americans represented a good omen, a tangible proof that the United States was open, receptive to the forces of the future. I sensed a truly warm current of sympathy passing among us, without ulterior motives or calculations, merely as the recognition of a common feeling, a common aspiration among people who meet to share what connects them naturally to one another.

We decided to meet again soon. We wanted to try to cement our coming together by a common project or undertaking on American soil. So a few months later this informal little group of people met in Chicago. And this is where I suddenly remembered that, many years ago, while founding the French Institute in Paris, Satprem had mentioned a future possibility of "Laboratories for Evolutionary Research" in which, he then said, a few human beings could voluntarily and consciously lend themselves to putting into practice Mother's findings. Indeed, what bound us was nothing less than a corporeal experience of Yoga, as Mother had lived and described it in her Agenda — and especially as Satprem himself seemed recently to experience. This "New Being" had to start somewhere, from something. How to ignore the extraordinary hope Satprem had awakened by his own breakthrough? Were we out of our league or out of our mind? Was it fanciful on our part to envision such a "program", just like that, simply, among "ordinary" people? At the time, it seemed absolutely normal and natural, and there was a lovely light, and even an unusual feeling of power, whenever we gathered our aspiration together in our meditations...

In order to identify what had so spontaneously brought us together, I found a name for this little group — *American Laboratory for Evolutionary Research* — whose nature had to remain informal and outside any legal structure. I even wrote a few words to define its purpose — "In search of the future of the human species." Then I sent the whole thing to Satprem with the following note: "Since August 15, a few American disciples have gathered around this aspiration for corporeal transformation. With love."

I had just signed my own death warrant.

### **The Explosion**

There are many ways to die besides physical death.

On October 24, 1993, I receive the following fax from my old friend Micheline: "Enclosed is what I have just received from Satprem. Because of the strikes at Air France, the international mail is disrupted. So, first, I prefer to send it by fax, then, later, by regular mail."

There followed the two-page letter that Satprem had sent her in his own handwriting:

"I have just received three lines from Luc announcing the formation of his new grouping of American disciples. On a piece of paper dated from Chicago, Sept. 2, Luc had written, 'American Laboratory for Evolutionary Research.' Strangely, this Note of Luc's was written on the back of an old issue of "The Auroville Gazette"...

"We know of the Auroville mixtures and I am not sure what this American mixture will be — the usual mishmash.

"I therefore consider that our American Institute has ceased to exist in view of the new direction taken by Luc. *We* do not seek to form any group or gather disciples under any name whatsoever — we have only one Name, that of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and their Work, which we are ready to spread everywhere, in whatever group, be it Aurovilian or American or what-have-

you. I do not want the French Institute, or any other Institute, to be associated to those mixtures, even if we have good friends among them...

"Accordingly, please tell Luc officially to take all measures for the closing of the American Institute with the American authorities.

"I am sorry to put this unpleasant task on you, but everything becomes extremely difficult the moment Falsehood and human Mixtures set in.

"I wish the best for Luc's "laboratory", but in the final analysis all depends upon the individuals' simple Sincerity.

"One can only become what he holds in his own heart."

I wished the ground would swallow me up. Here is not the place to describe my state during the months following this summary execution. Essentially, I had become a gigantic question mark — WHY? — which replaced every organ in me, making me incapable of forming the least coherent thought about anything. If that question mark had not taken all the space inside me, I could have seen that despite its appearances of simplicity and even triviality, this letter was a little masterpiece that Machiavelli himself would not have disowned.

First, there was the extraordinary shallowness, not to say nullity, of the arguments proffered. Of course, at any time, he could have made me realized that I was on the wrong track with "my" laboratory, as he called it, that this was not the way to go. In spite of all good stated intentions, perhaps this project was excessive in its nature, bound to run into a wall? Had I ever refused to heed his advice or recommendations?

But the more vague and lacking in precision the arguments, the stronger the force of their suggestion. All it takes is an appropriate amount of big and thundering words (preferably capitalized) such as: Falsehood, Truth, Mixture, Sincerity, Work. And then the reader does the rest by extrapolating and filling the gaps left in the logic of the argument and supplying his own inner "spontaneous" convictions. (This is perhaps why any civilized justice endeavors to remove passion from the human debates and sentences, and to impose the rule of reason instead.)

But, after the failure of the two preceding eviction attempts (the move to Canada and the "pilfering" of the correspondence), what was really at stake here was to purge me smoothly, without waves, yet making sure that the "public opinion" (the group around him) was impressed with the seriousness of the transgression, a sin in "principle," if not in facts. In that respect, this letter worked wonders — I did not even know myself what fault I had committed!

Yet the letter also contained flagrant instances of contradiction: "*We* do not seek to form any group..." — except, of course, the Institutes and related organizations that I, Satprem, have formed here and there in the world, on higher grounds and for higher purposes. There were also the ranting and ravings against the "American and Aurovilian mixtures" — as if no group, no human organization (including Auroville, deliberately founded by Mother), could ever find favor with him. He alone was sheltered from the corruption and erosion affecting human endeavors, for he alone held the right degree of "simple Sincerity, on which all depends." Thus, under its good-nature exterior, this letter was really a monument

of vainglory to the promotion of an "I" who certainly did have any qualms concerning excesses.

But its most important singularity was in its public display. At the time, I was appalled that he would send his letter through a third party — Micheline — instead of sending it directly, "man to man." I saw cowardice in him, but not the calculation or the symbol. First, its public character made the conviction definitive and without appeal — one does not argue about his condemnation before the crowd gathered around the scaffold. Then it was a warning to the others: This is what awaits anyone who goes beyond the bounds of the "simple Sincerity" and forgets that "One can only become what he holds in his own heart." Lastly, it was a way to tighten the group about him by involving its members and giving them their part of responsibility in the execution of the sentence.

It is poor Micheline who had to pass on the letter ("I am sorry to put this unpleasant task on you..."), and then get involved in every detail of its implementation. Less than a week later, the public dissemination of proofs of my duplicity began. All my friends, all those likely to question the suddenness of this decision — and especially Satprem's seemingly abrupt reversal concerning me — were duly sent by mail a whole "folder" of some of my personal letters, which were supposed to establish my alleged treachery beyond the shadow of a doubt. As to the anonymous passers-by who might have heard rumors without factual support, they were invited to consult that same little "folder" in the Parisian bookstore which sold Mother's books... A few months later, the more loyal members of the group (including Patrice) would have to append their signature at the bottom of the legal document officially excluding me from the Institute. Nothing was left to chance to dislodge the spoilsport, while tightening and strengthening the little core of the lucky survivors.

In conclusion, an execution with a symbolic value — a sort of sacrifice — long-prepared and masterly implemented, with the unconscious participation of a manipulated "public opinion," which at worst rejoiced to see a little blood letting brighten up the ordinary, but mostly whose "primeval purity" found itself reaffirmed by this expiatory sacrifice on the altar of Truth, as defined and maintained by Satprem. And then, to say it plainly, one was not so displeased oneself to have escaped disaster...

As for the expiatory victim himself, he was hardly in a position to react or even to think. Not only was there no question of protesting one's innocence (for that would have at least required to know the terms of the accusation), but any request for explanation was out of the question. Every one knew that Satprem was too "fragile" to read, not to mention answer, his mail — all the more so when it was "unpleasant." So where to turn? To whom? My telephone was no longer ringing. The silence of my former friends and comrades was deafening about me. No one dared to take the pains or liberty to ask for *my* version of what happened — and to be interested in my reply. The oddest part is that I probably would not have found the words to explain anything, as if the question of my innocence or culpability was moot, already long settled outside me. There was NOTHING to say other than to live the process.

Nevertheless, a few hiccups occurred when it came to implement the details of the sentence. Satprem had demanded that we leave everything from one day to the next – the stock of books, the mailing lists, the legal and administrative management of the American Institute – so that Micheline could take over from Paris. (“I continue to think that you will take the true path thanks to this trial...,” he wired me, probably to encourage me...) But what was easy on paper was not so simple in reality. In particular, Susie’s family had generously contributed to the Institute’s development and to the publication of the books in the United States since 1980. Although the greatest part of this contribution had been written as a donation in the account books, another part could not be so assimilated because of legal restrictions on donations, and therefore still remained as a debt in the books. These legal constraints could not be made to disappear by fiat. And perhaps this was for the better, for at least on this point Susie and I refused to submit and to abandon the stock of books into Micheline’s hands. Thus all the Institute’s operations stopped, but Mother’s Agenda continued to be distributed in America.

Because we had not given up on every point, Satprem must have felt we needed further proofs of his earnestness. A few months later, we began to receive impressive-looking letters from a Paris attorney. Mr. Okoshken, of the Paris and New York bars, was kindly sending me the legal statement of my official expulsion from the French Institute, along with a personal letter enumerating all the troubles that my alleged tax-related lapses to the American I.R.S. could lead me into. He was enjoining me to send him by return mail a full, signed acceptance of my expulsion and of its related conclusions, failing which, my “refusal to cooperate” would set off a whole train of unpleasant measures and investigation with the American authorities. Naturally, it was all braggadocio, but still sufficiently unpleasant that we could not ignore it.

A grace must have been there with us, for at the very moment when we had to face this legal assault ordered by Satprem from India and paid for by Micheline, it is India that came to our rescue in the person of H., a former student of the Ashram school, who had just opened an attorney’s office in California after completing brilliant legal studies. He soon sized up the baseless legal harassment to which we were being subjected and offered to defend us free of charge. Thus Mr. Okoshken received all the answers to his questions, plus more questions for him to answer, and on and on. Time went by. Another American attorney, Mr. Stone, from Stamford, Connecticut, was hired to help his Parisian colleague. Micheline’s money was swelling the attorneys’ money bag... The whole ridiculous hot-air bubble, whose only purpose was to scare us, eventually died its own death. Appearances were kept. Satprem could pride himself to have acted like a great general, with skill and determination.

On January 6, 1994, I wrote him a long, personal letter in which I spelled out what I thought of his appalling accusations, from the “pilfering” of his correspondence to the gathering of “my” group of American disciples – a letter that ended in a farewell: “I am leaving you for this life – with no ill feelings and no regrets.” Later, I learned that he had never read my letter – Sujata had censored it because it contained “nasty” things about him.

Then, on March 7, 1995, more than a year later, as his lawyers in Paris and Connecticut were still busy brandishing their legal stick, I received one last letter-carrot from Satprem. He quite simply invited me to reenter the Institute and start over again as if nothing had happened — provided, of course, I yield with good grace. My accepting his proposal would be the sign that I had learned the lesson, and understood who was the boss. That he would sincerely believe that a few pages of the same stale catechism could wipe out all the malaise and frustration which had accumulated between us for years, may be more telling than anything else about his own sense of reality.

### **Clearing up and Summing up**

The one question that every sensible person may ask on hearing the account of this relentless effort to throw me out concerns the motives of such a persistence, such a fury on Satprem's part. After all, there's no smoke without fire. Would he have expended so much energy, even through third parties, to get rid of a complete innocent? Was there not something very corrupt (as well as blind) in me to justify such a stubborn determination?

This is precisely the question that haunted me for months.

If there was one person capable of seeing clear through things and people, it had to be Satprem. His entire past experience with Mother gave credence to this — all those years of training when, day after day, she had instilled another comprehension, another approach to life into him. Could someone like him err so grievously? Misread the simplest and obvious facts?

Now that I can review all these events with leisure, calm and some distance, I think I can better understand what may have happened, and try to express what led to such extremities of blindness. While we were engaged in a considerable amount of work in common, there must have occurred some "mishaps," some blunders or momentary lapses of behavior, as is possible every day when people build something together. But while my youth and inexperience led me to live each action, each event, day by day, as a self-contained whole ushering in the next one; Satprem's perception took each moment of the present as part of a continuum of existence, which had a past and a future forming a comprehensive and inevitable whole. Where I might see gaffe or clumsiness, he saw a slippage foreshadowing other aberrations — which would further slip in a never-ending, inescapable logic of corruption. While my very youth permitted me to envision a favorable outcome to things (simply because I did not think about the worst), his "experience" doomed him to perceive a disastrous course for the *same* reality, which ended up by obliging him to take on the colors he had conjured up with such energy.

This kind of catastrophe-prone habit may be the very trait in his character that Mother spent so many years trying to cure. Once triggered, this "habit", which would eventually precipitate the rest of the fatal avalanche, could never stop and allow him to return to a more measured, more positive perception of reality.

I had understood the existence of this "habit" in my case, precisely when I had perceived that my "condemnation" was played out in advance, by a sort of

“machine” whose gears had already turned compulsively well before the facts had been assembled. But it’s only when I saw the same process occurring with other people that I finally understood how this whole catastrophic ritual had nothing to do with me – at which point I began to see the end of my tunnel.

I received the first clue with a shock. It was the news that Micheline had been stricken with a strange condition necessitating drug treatment. Micheline, whom I had known so full of life and cheerful health, had under Satprem’s orders completely turned her back on me. How could my memories of her be reconciled with the wobbliness that seemed to have taken hold of her lately? Then, in 2001, came the real shock: Micheline was dead, probably of cirrhosis of the liver. Later, it was learned that she had removed Satprem from her will before dying. Did she have a last-minute reversal? Had she seen or understood something on the threshold of death, when all pretenses vanish to leave the place for the truth? I knew nothing of the circumstances that impelled her, but that end reverberated so strangely in the midst of what should have been the plenitude and harmony of a life she had chosen of her free will.

Then, in 2003, came the event that threw a complete light on the process I had undergone ten years earlier. The whole trauma was being repeated, down to the last details, with another couple, another “Luc” – but with the same accusations and the same insults (only worse), the same demonization (only worse), the same frenzied violence of having to leave everything and get out. It involved Michel and Nicole, who had lived with Satprem and Sujata in the Nilgiris for twenty years, and had widely contributed to the publishing activities in India. Recently however, they too had begun to engage in an independent intellectual activity within a cultural Indian organization. They too had struck up a friendship with Indians outside the group formed by Satprem. Without forgetting the work accomplished with Satprem, they nonetheless meant to live their own life. An ill-chosen decision.

The barely-contained tide of spiteful anger that engulfed them only subsided with their precipitate withdrawal from the house they had occupied for twenty years – a departure that Sujata, in her inimitable style, saluted by informing Michel’s parents that a new supply of books (by a wink of fate, these came straight from the stock of Agendas we still distributed in America!) would replace Michel and Nicole in the house and would, she said, “Drive away all the darkness Michel-Nicole have left in the house.” As for Satprem, probably to add his two cents worth, he snarled at them: “Let them be forgotten forever in the dustbin of History!”

Unfortunately, the great problem was not so much the liberation of Michel and Nicole as the fact that the executioner, the individual supervising Michel’s and Nicole’s eviction under direct order from Satprem, was none other than... poor Patrice. The drama was far from over.

Now Patrice is dead. Subject to depression – “This tormented being...,” as Sujata would later write – left India around 2005 without fuss (the recent Michel-Nicole episode having compelled discretion) to try and reintegrate himself into French society, after serving more than twenty years in India. And how could a

person I had known to be so full of enthusiasm and appetite for life, one who loved India as the land of his heart, end up “tormented” after all this time? This is what I wanted to know. An enigma as staggering — and as appalling — as Micheline’s sudden affliction.

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Now I would like to distance myself from my personal story and try, as much as is feasible, to seek the wider significance of what was felt, at the time, as a destruction in my very flesh. First, my case is not unique. On retrospect, it became obvious that all those who approached Satprem for the purpose of a sustained work left disturbed. I have cited a few names in this text, but there are other, perhaps less-known individuals, whose experience may not be as immediately striking, who all, to varying degrees, went through the throws of disillusionment and inner torment — and sometimes worse.

So what was the significance of this experience, which presented itself under such attractive, such “spiritual” exterior only for it to end up on the edge of a precipice? Is there a hidden meaning to this trial beyond personal lesson, personal progress, and personal “karma”? Why was this little group (symbolic as human specimens undergoing an interior change, but nevertheless real) around Satprem decimated, crushed to a pulp in this way? Why all these hearts in a sling at the conclusion of an experience that had started under the auspices of Sri Aurobindo’s marvelous teaching? Does Sri Aurobindo’s teaching need such shock treatment to blossom and spread on the earth?

From an external point of view, so many controversies aflame over public forums can but adversely affect Sri Aurobindo’s teaching by throwing people into confusion. And there may be irreparable damage. Despite Sujata’s angry denials, it is hard to see how Sri Aurobindo’s thoughts can be served by associating his name with the ruin of the West, as was so awkwardly done on the cover of *India’s Rebirth*. Similarly, an inspiring, informative and beneficial reading of the Agenda seems hardly compatible with all the commotion and human disturbances affecting the group involved in its publication.

But from a larger, more profound perspective, what was the MEANING of that “cage of illusions” where a number of us entered and lived for years —where some are still living? To speak of “karma” or personal destiny is far too easy or simplistic. On the contrary, everything seems to indicate that the “cage” is significantly associated with the work of Sri Aurobindo and Mother on earth — as indispensable appendage or foil?

Let us be clear that the cage never ceases praising Sri Aurobindo. This is its central theme, the renunciation of which would bring instant dissolution. In its way, the cage can show a great force of conviction when it comes to Sri Aurobindo. For the unstinting praise or dithyramb in its irreproachable discourse concerning Sri Aurobindo is its coinage and the foundation of the illusion by which it exists. After all, is it not what the Catholic Church has been doing with Christ’s teaching in the last two thousand years?

In the final analysis, however, irreproachable appearances must be measured against the yardstick of hard facts: the often indelible traumas caused in people's lives which in the end corrupt and sidetrack their aspirations to follow the path of light. Is that cage and all its seductive trappings, then, a menace to all the Little Red Riding Hoods of the Creation?

And if this sounds like a gratuitous dramatization or exaggeration, let us remember Keya and her stubborn refusal to feed herself, Micheline's premature collapse, Patrice and his suicidal lure of the abyss...

Popular wisdom often claims that what does not kill you will make you stronger — a maxim I could easily apply to my own case. Yet, today, I am convinced that it is not necessary to come to the brink of the abyss in order to walk Sri Aurobindo's "sunlit path" — nor is it necessary to rely on any human intermediary or attractively gilded cage. It is just necessary to be oneself, strong (or weak) in one's own truth of being.

Before closing, I have one last thought for all those friends and comrades whom I sense are still asking the obligatory questions about Satprem: Was he good or evil? Was he right or wrong? All those who await or beg for a sign, a gesture, a letter that will assuage their fear, reassure them about their destiny, give them self-confidence. I have known this sad and sorrowful condition well enough not to cast the first stone. So I just want to say: Get out of the cage; get out of the thoughts that go round and round in circle, which feed on you and cannot find an answer; throw yourself, instead, in the one worthy conquest, without thinking, without intermediary : Sri Aurobindo.

*[It must be said that the preceding text was written between November 2006 and February 2007, well before Satprem's demise in April 2007. I found it useful — and still relevant today — to reveal this story, not so much because of the context in which it took place, but perhaps more because of the human experiences of a broader nature it entails.]*

*—Luc Venet*