

# *Allen Ginsberg in India: An Interview*

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Allen Ginsberg's association with India began in 1962, when he spent over a year there with Peter Orlovsky, travelling and looking for a spiritual teacher. There were visits to the Himalayas with Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger, to the caves of Ajanta and Ellora, to Buddhist shrines in Sanchi and Sarnath, protracted stays in Calcutta and Benares, and meetings with mystics, yogis, poets, writers, musicians, and religious leaders like the Dalai Lama. He also met, without knowing, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama who would come to the U.S. in the 1970s, set up the Naropa Institute at Boulder, Colorado, and become Ginsberg's teacher. In 1970, Ginsberg published the journals he had kept during his stay, and the following year he was back in India in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war. Now planning his third trip in 1994, Ginsberg gave this interview last July in the apartment he rents each summer in Boulder while teaching at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute.

*So in February 1962 Peter Orlovsky and you arrived in Bombay with only a dollar . . .*

Very little money. Did we only have a dollar? We went looking for mail, and there was probably some money waiting for us. We'd been out of touch for a long time, going on a boat to the Red Sea to Dar es Salaam and Mombasa and then to Bombay.

*Was there already the 60s craze to go East, to "spiritual India" and all that?*

I had already been to Europe and spent several years there and that was a traditional thing as in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century—the American in Paris. By 1961, I was more interested in going beyond the traditional expatriate role or

voyage, of wandering out in the East, particularly India, the most rich and exquisite and aesthetically attractive culture. And also least expensive. . . . But at that time India was pretty well unknown. There weren't that many people who went there. There were rare people, famous rare people who did that, but it wasn't a whole generation that took it on. It became a stereotype almost instantly when *Esquire* sent some photographer to take pictures of us and put out a fake cover with a guy who looked like me, and a piece on beatniks in India. And that apparently was a model for a lot of people going there. And then I published my Indian journals and that encouraged a lot of poor people to go looking for drugs. . . . But, then, I think it was a very valuable experience for many Americans. You will find any number of advanced Canadian and American practitioners who were there in the 60s and learnt Tibetan and who translated major works and were interpreters for visiting lamas. So there was a whole network of understanding, of experience, of education that led ultimately to things like the Naropa Institute, to an institutionalization of the meeting of Eastern and Western minds.

*What did you associate India chiefly with?*

You know, it was thirty years ago and I don't remember very clearly except snake charmers and . . . I really didn't know what to ask for, but I had the idea of going there to look for a teacher. That was definitely the purpose. I had read the Bhagavad Gita and Ramakrishna's *Table Talk*, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and a lot of Buddhist writing. I had some idea of yoga but not much. Actually, when I was twelve years old I heard an American give a lecture on yoga in Patterson, New Jersey. That always intrigued me and it's still vivid in my mind. . . . I had read some Krishnamurthy, some saint poetry, some Yogananda, a little of the Mahabharata, some of the Vedas, and translations by Isherwood and Prabhavananda of the Upanishads. I had also read Lin Yu Tang's *Wisdom of the East*. Then on the ship I read *A Passage to India* and *Kim*, the Jataka tales and some Ramayana.

*What about the cultural scene—for example, did you see Satyajit Ray's films in New York in the 50s?*

Oh yeah, but not that many. I remember *Pather Panchali* and being very impressed by that. But on our way to India, at Mumbai, I saw a film which outdid Disney and would make millions of dollars if shown in America. It was called *Sampoorna Ramayana*, and it was my real introduction to Indian mythology, to specific Indian attitudes. Boy! It was amazing! Ganesh was so pretty and amusing and sophisticated compared to the very heavy-handed, very serious Western regard for God—only one of them, watch out!<sup>1</sup> An interesting, sweet and innocent film, probably more culturally wise than anything by Disney.

*Were you familiar with the Indian classical traditions in music and dance?*

I had seen Uday Shankar, an old man, dancing at City Center, New York, and there was some Shiva dance that he did that was absolutely astounding. I had never seen anything like that—such absolute and subtle control of the whole body so that a wave of energy could pass, beginning at the top of the skull and move down, go up the arm, and down to the belly, and from left to right. It was like a current of electricity. It was one of the most extraordinary and ecstatic artistries I had ever seen.

*Did the books you read provide a framework for such experiences?*

In the Bhagavad Gita, there is a visionary moment when Krishna shows himself with armies flowing from his mouth. That's a little bit like the high point of vision that you get in Dante's *Inferno* or some of Blake's "Last Judgment" or other poems, and to me it seemed immediately universal. . . . The Gita is really an universal poem, really archetypal. I had had some similar visionary experiences on my own—in the late 40s they were related to Blake, and then in the early 50s and late 50s I had some minor experience of psychedelic drugs—peyote, mescaline, the cactus, and then in '59 lysergic acid.<sup>2</sup> So I'd seen a lot of internal mandalas in my mind that reminded me of the pictures I'd seen in Tibetan Buddhism and of the universal form of Krishna in the Gita. So I was tuned into that kind of mythologic archetype as a real experience of consciousness, and I was looking for some way of making it more permanent, or mastering it or getting clearer about it in

my own mind. . . . I was interested in what that older culture still had as a living transmission of spiritual and visionary energy because in the West there didn't seem to be one.

*Since you mention drugs, did you know about soma, a god and a hallucinogenic plant in ancient India, with roots in heaven?*

I was very interested in soma. I had met Robert Gordon who had a lot of experience of mushrooms and who had a theory that soma was a certain mushroom. So I was prepared to take that mythology a little more literally than most Westerners, as signifying something more literal on a spiritual level. There were realms of modalities of consciousness that were available and real, that were not within the Western psychological category except maybe in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* or in the hermetic tradition of Blake.

*Was there a sense that the West had failed you in certain respects?*

Well, as I had written six-seven years before in "Howl": "Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen." I had read Spengler's *The Decline of the West* in 1945-46 and was already anticipating the decline of empire which took a long time to happen, but in half a century it was almost gone, almost over. . . . So there was a realization that the West was impermanent, that the entire Western rationalistic, Aristotelean mind was causing chaos, and I was interested in Eastern thought, all summed up in that gesture—the very Indian gesture—when you ask, "Are you enjoying yourself?" and an Indian will shake his head . . . shakes his head. It could be either yes or no depending on the context, and I was interested in that context with its subtlety of expression rather than in a Western context. . . . Then there was something else I was interested in: the notion of the Kali Yuga.<sup>3</sup> I had read Vico's theories of Golden Ages, Stone Ages, Iron Ages, and Bronze Ages, of the cyclical nature of things, so I was curious about the idea of eternal return and the cyclical evolution of *kalpas* and also, about the staggering number of *kalpas*.<sup>4</sup> That fitted in with my idea of the decline of empire, of an aeon being over. The scope of the cycles of consciousness and incarnation in Hindu

and Buddhist mythology was very attractive given the smaller historical cycles of the American century.

*So after almost a year and a half in India, what did you find there that you had not found in the West?*

A more intimate awareness of the relation between people and God. Just the very notion of Ganesh with a noose in one hand and a *rasgoolla* in the other, and his trunk in the *rasgoolla*, riding a mouse. . . .<sup>5</sup> Such an idea of a god, such a sophisticated, quixotic, paradoxical combination of the human and the divine, the metaphysical and the psychological! You don't often get that in Christianity, except maybe in some esoteric Christianity. The idea of an entire culture suffused with respect for that mythology, that religion and its practices, that poor people could understand its sophistication and grant things that hard-headed Westerners are still trying to kill each other over. That was a revelation: how deeply the sense of a spiritual existence could penetrate everyday relations, the streets and street signs . . . Naga sadhus walking around naked—people who would have been arrested in America<sup>6</sup> . . . or for that matter—I remember writing to Kerouac—everybody walking around in their underwear, in striped boxer shorts. What would seem outrageous or strange to Americans was just normal—it was hot and people wore very light cotton—it seemed so obvious. That showed me the absurd artificiality of some American customs. . . . And then just the notion of somebody being a businessman and then renouncing the world and being a *sannyasi* and going around with an intelligent expression looking for *moksha*, that was such a switch from the American notion of business, such a good model, but it doesn't work for even Indians now.<sup>7</sup> . . . And then the availability of ganja and its use in religious festivals and ceremonies was a great source of release for an American used to government dictatorship of all psychedelic drugs (even marijuana), to prohibitions, murders, beatings, corruption.<sup>8</sup> At least in India there was some familiarity with what it was.

*But did you find the same kind of tolerance for sex, given India's notorious homophobia?*

In Bombay someone took us to a district where there were many transvestites, but whatever the situation, it was familiar, domesticated. . . . They don't have transvestite districts in America, of course! Although I was in India for a year and a half, I never had a love affair with an Indian. It was just that I was so absorbed in whatever I was seeing that I wasn't able to connect emotionally with any particular Indian. During our last days in Calcutta, somebody took me to a gigantic beerhall of a basement. . . . All homosexuals. I didn't realize it even existed. Maybe I didn't ask about it. I wish I had known.

*Since you mention Calcutta, were you, like most foreigners, overwhelmed by the city at first?*

I had no idea about Calcutta except I had heard of the Black Hole of Calcutta, but I didn't know what it was. I met Asoke Fakir there, who just appeared at my hotel one day and became my guide. He was both a fool and at the same time a devotional man, in some respects the most intelligent person I met in Calcutta, who knew what we wanted to see—low life, religious life, tantric life. I wanted to go to some place where people smoked a little ganja and were serious, so he took me on a walk along the banks of the Hooghly to Howrah Bridge and to Nimtallah burning ghat.<sup>9</sup>

*What was your experience of the burning ghats?*

I went there several times a week and stayed there very late at night. For one thing I was amazed by the openness of death, the visibility of death which is hidden and powdered and rouged and buried in a coffin in the West. To suggest the opposite, the openness of it is like an education which is totally different from the cultivation of the notion of the corpse as still relevant and alive and "don't kick it over." There they just lay it out and burn it and the family watches the dissolution; they see the emptiness in front of them, the emptiness of the body in front of them. So I had the opportunity to see the inside of the human body, to see the face cracked and torn, fallen off, the brains bubbling and burning. And reading Ramakrishna at the time: the dead body is nothing but an old pillow, an empty pillow, like burning an old

pillow. Nothing to be afraid of. So it removed a lot of the fear of the corpse that we have in the West. And then I saw people singing outside on Thursday nights and other nights too. That was amazing, and the noise was rousing, very loud, and I would sit around, pay attention and listen, and try and get the words. I saw lady yogis meditating in the ash pit. I remember one lady who I thought was defenseless and poverty-stricken, so I offered her some coins and she spit on them and threw them back at me. And there was one very strange evening when I drank some *bhang*—it must have been mixed with *datura*—and went there with a completely screwed-up head, hallucinating.<sup>10</sup> And I thought I was in the used Vomit Market, everybody was so poor that they were selling vomit! Slept on a stone bench inside the temple all night and woke up and found my slippers gone. Pretty funny . . .

*In the journals, there are so many graphic details of bodies burning—as if you were getting high on death . . .*

I don't think I was. After all death is half of life. I was just describing life as I saw it.

*What did you think of the literary scene in Calcutta?*

We poets—Sunil Ganguly, Shakti Chatterjee, and others—met a lot in the coffee houses.<sup>11</sup> Peter and I were excited by the idea of there being a whole gang of poets like there were in New York and San Francisco, who were friends, and that we could communicate across the Pacific Ocean, and that East could meet West, and that they knew our work, and that we could interpret it more and show them poets like Gregory Corso and others they might not have heard of.

*If you were to go back to India, which cities would you revisit?*

I've a tremendous nostalgia mostly for Calcutta and Benares, and Benares particularly because I was very happy there learning a lot, and I had good friends. We had a beautiful house right above the market place and Dasaswamedh Ghat. There was a balcony looking down on the river and an alleyway that went down to the steps. That's where the beggars would gather. . . . And I remember getting really hung up on puris and potatoes.

*Now wasn't it in Benares that the Criminal Investigation Department of India got onto your backs?*

Yes. I don't know why. I think Blitz newspaper said that we were CIA spies. India was then at war with China over a border dispute, so. . . . Peter had a girlfriend, a mysterious Bengali lady, who was staying with us, and it was considered shocking by of all people secular Marxists, whereas her family was much more sophisticated, less questioning.

*Since you were living in a poor section of the city, how did you react to the squalor and human misery around you?*

The poverty was striking, but I don't know why we weren't repelled or angry. We were more interested in what we could do, how to relate to it, how to report it back to the Western world in a way that would rouse sympathy and action rather than horror. Peter was once an ambulance driver so he was not afraid of the homeless and the sick. Also, his own relatives had been in mental hospitals, so he was used to dealing with the mentally-disturbed. He was the heroic type, interested in attempting something. So I just followed Peter and he took utmost care.

*All this was thirty years ago. What did India give you that has mattered most, that has stayed with you and will always be there?*

The Indian influence was first of all on the voice itself and on the notion of poetry and music coming together. Pound had revived that notion and shown how for the ancient Greek poets song and poetry were one, even one with dance. The Greek choruses sang and danced and chanted, and Homer and Sappho sang with a five-stringed lyre. So India helped me to rediscover that relationship between poetry and song. I heard people singing in the streets, chanting mantras, so I began singing mantra too—"Hare Krishna Hare Rama" or "Hare Om Namah Sivaye."

*And you had never heard such chanting in America?*

I first heard it in India, not in America. I had never been to any Hindu temple here where people sat and chanted. I owned books that dealt with Buddhist mantras, but there was no place in America where there was mantra chanting or singing except



maybe in the Vedanta temples. So it was not until I got to Bombay that I saw people singing together on the street; and in Calcutta, at Nimtallah burning ghat, people would gather, as I said, particularly on Thursday night, which was Kali night to sing amazing, beautiful choral stuff, and they would pass around a chilam and sing continuously, "Siya Rama Jai Jai Rama" or "Raghu Pati Raghav." But it was at the Magh Mela at Allahabad that I heard a Nepalese lady singing "Hare Krishna Hare Rama" and the melody was so beautiful that it stuck in my head, and I took it home to America in 1963 and began singing it at poetry parties, after poetry readings with finger cymbals first and later the harmonium.<sup>12</sup> And that began to develop into singing and chanting as part of my poetry readings and led to a deepening of my voice, which slowly began to fill up my body and resonate in the breast area (you might say by hyperbole, "heart chakra"), so that I could talk from there, and that reminded me of the voice of Blake that I had heard, as if my youthful apprehension of that voice was a latent resonance of my mature voice. So at public poetry readings I sang a great variety of mantras both Buddhist and Hindu, "Shri Rama Jai Rama Jai Jai Rama," "Hare Krishna" or "Om Shri Maitreya" or "Om Mani Padme Hum" or "Om" or "Gate Gate Paragate" which I sang quite a bit, the Prajnaparamita sutra. Then singing led to transferring my obsession with mantra to sacred song, to Blake, and I began making melodies from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in 1968, and by 1969 I was writing my own folk songs and also recording the Blake songs I had set to music. In 1963, I met Bob Dylan and got interested in the new poetry that was in the form of song, influenced by the earlier Beat generation, by Kerouac and myself, and by 1970 I was recording songs with him. So things came together with the seed mantra planted. In that respect, India helped me to recover the relationship between poetry and music, offered me a model as well as gave me saint poetry in song.

*I notice when you sing you play the harmonium which is very popular in India. Any particular reason?*

Because I'm not a musician. I can't play anything. And this is like a child's instrument; it's so simple I can make out American

chords and sing blues. It's actually a Western instrument, and oddly enough the larger harmonium, the foot pedal harmonium, the church organ, is probably the instrument that Blake used for his songs; so my first project in English was to set Blake to music.

*Why is it that at public readings you don't chant mantra that much anymore?*

In 1970, in America, I ran into Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama who founded Naropa. I was showing him on the harmonium how I sang, and he put a paw on my hand, drunk, and said, "Remember the silence is just as important as the sound." He then suggested that I not sing all the mantras for they would raise some kind of expectation or neurological buzz in the audience; but he didn't have any teaching to give to stabilize that or to develop it, and he suggested that if I were to sing in public, to sing "Ah," the mantra appreciation of the voice, or "Om Muni Muni Maha Muni Sakyamuni e Swaha" about the human Buddha of the Sakya family, a wise man, or "Gate Gate Paragate"—gone, gone to the other shore gone, completely gone, vacant mind, salutations—something which didn't require a structured sadhana or practice to have some effect and would not confuse people.

*I'd like to go back to something you said at the start of this interview—that you were looking for a teacher in India. Did you find one?*

No. Well, yes and no. I found teaching there and I found teachers there who really became my teachers in America. There is a photograph of Peter and I visiting a monk and it turns out that the young monk who showed us the altar was Trungpa Rinpoche. Then I met the Dalai Lama later at Dharamsala and had some teachings from him. And on a visit to Kalimpong, I met Dudjom Rinpoche, who was the head of the N'yingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. I was having a lot of difficulty with LSD—bum trips, hell trips, hungry ghost realms—so I asked him about it, and he gave me some very good advice, which was: If you see something horrible don't cling to it, and if you see something beautiful, don't cling to it. Basically that's the essence of Buddhist teaching,

and it has stuck with me all these years. It is still the seed. And I met others like Swami Sivananda, who said: “Your heart is your guru”; and Bankey Behari, who said: “Take Blake for your guru”; and Citaram Onkar Das Thakur, an old Vaishnav, who said: “If you want to find a guru, eat certain kinds of food and diet and repeat the mantra, ‘Guru Guru Guru Guru Guru Guru’ for three weeks.”<sup>13</sup>

*Did you try it?*

Yes, sure, of course I did. I also met a lot of interesting yogis. Someone taught us *pranayam*, which was helpful for a while since it creates some kind of mental stabilization.<sup>14</sup> But it wasn’t until 1970 through Ram Dass—Richard Alpert—who was an old friend from the 60s that I met Muktananda, and he asked me if I had a meditation practice, and, since, as a matter of fact, I still didn’t have one, he invited me to Dallas for a weekend and taught me a practice which I did for a year and a half until I met Trungpa, who suggested a more rounded form. So from 1972 I worked with the Trungpa in the Tibetan Vajrayana style.<sup>15</sup>

*Shortly after you left India, you wrote “The Change: Tokyo-Kyoto Express” in Japan and it’s widely regarded as a poem that describes what India did to you.*

Well, that’s a little corny. It’s a change from a sort of a preoccupation with the absolute to a preoccupation with the relative, accepting the body. . . . I renounce all forms of attachment—“in my train seat I renounce my power”—I will no longer be eternal or immortal or anything. I’ll just be me. In a sense, it’s a transition, but I don’t think it’s that well-expressed. People make a lot of it, but I don’t think it’s that good a poem because the references are too obscure, some of them like quasi-kundalini neurological buzzings or zappings. It’s really a head trip with some emotion.

*What do you think of the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India today?*

The greatness of India I saw was the absorption into Hinduism of all the gods—the Western ones and the Buddhist ones—and the open space, the accommodation to all varieties of human

nature, and I would imagine the curse of India would be this exclusiveness.

## NOTES

- 1 Ganesh is a Hindu god with the head of an elephant.
- 2 In 1948, Ginsberg had a visionary experience in which he heard a voice—which he assumed to be Blake's—reciting "Ah Sunflower."
- 3 In Hinduism time is structured in terms of cycles, each cycle subdivided into four ages or yugas, the last of which is Kali Yuga, the age of discord.
- 4 In Jainism, time is also treated as cyclical, divided into recurring periods called *kalpas* or aeons. A *kalpa* has two phases, each of which consists of six eras.
- 5 A *rasgoolia* is an Indian sweetmeat made of ricotta cheese dipped in syrup.
- 6 The Naga ("naked") sadhus are holy men who do not wear clothes and belong to a sect that was originally militant.
- 7 A *sannyasi* is an ascetic who has renounced society and seeks *moksha*, which in Hinduism represents liberation from karma (one's deeds and consequences) and *samsara* (rebirth).
- 8 Ganja is marijuana smoked usually from a chilam, a clay pipe, passed around by smokers.
- 9 Hindus cremate their dead at Nimtallah Ghat on the banks of the Hooghly (as the Ganges is called in Calcutta).
- 10 *Bhang* is hemp mixed with almond milk, drunk usually during religious festivals. The seeds of the *datura* plant serve as an intoxicant.
- 11 Two distinguished contemporary Bengali poets. Sunil Ganguly is also a well-known novelist.
- 12 The Magh Mela is a fair held every year in January.
- 13 A Vaishnav is a worshipper of Vishnu, the Hindu god who pervades the universe, holding it together.
- 14 *Pranayam* is a yogic breathing exercise.
- 15 Vajrayana is the school of Tibetan tantric Buddhism.