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Shivoham! The Temple in the Shopping Mall

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Abstract: India, through its culture, fascinated me in adolescence, mostly due to the stories of Mircea Eliade about the fabulous India! The spirituality of India, the search for eternity and profound meanings of life, marked my maturity stage, culminating in a doctoral thesis on the philosophy of the Orient (especially India) and modern physics. So the first day in India I was expecting to be ... I was actually expecting to be ... to confirm that my teen dreams were not illusory, that was not Maya the one who had suggested there was something profound, something waiting to be discovered, and that India can be the Alterity that reveals the meaning of Yourself!

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First day in Banghalore!

India, through its culture, fascinated me in adolescence, mostly due to the stories of Mircea Eliade about the fabulous India! The spirituality of India, the search for eternity and profound meanings of life, marked my maturity stage, culminating in a doctoral thesis on the philosophy of the Orient (especially India) and modern physics. So the first day in India I was expecting to be ... I was actually expecting to be ... to confirm that my teen dreams were not illusory, that was not Maya the one who had suggested there was something profound, something waiting to be discovered, and that India can be the Alterity that reveals the meaning of Yourself!

Lalbagh - the heartbeat

First visit to Lalbhag .. the botanical garden of Banghalore ... The silence of the nature fills my heart with a feeling of *home*. Strangely, because I am not a person who shudders in the face of the beauty of nature, but rather in the face of evidence of the human creative power! In terms of Indian philosophies, the archetype of the hero - vira - attracts me more than the contemplative - devya. The botanical garden of the city with 12 million inhabitants stretches over 40 hectares .. sure .. and what does that tell me .. hectares of exotic plants, I expected to see a tropical abundance, here where in the middle of winter we experience a pleasant warmth, such as back home, in a day of May ... Not the flowers, although abundantly present, not the trees that absorb the pollution from the millions of vehicles that cross the city's arteries, but the silence and self-reliance Lalbhag inspired me, is for me the attraction of this place, as in the Oriental stories, it gives me, suddenly and without any prior notice, access to the sacred space of the Heart! Lalbhag is not just a botanical garden, it is a temple dedicated to the most important God of the Hindu Pantheon, to whom no purana, no hymn of glory is dedicated: The Self! The sacred texts whisper the supreme secret which is not a secret, *tat tvam asi*, you are That One, or Shivoham - you are one with Shiva, one with the divine, because a drop of Him lives in you, witness of the roles – which, as actors in the cosmic theater, we play life after life! Although it is assumed that Atman (the Self) is an impassable witness to your joys, your sufferings, at the same time the Advayta tradition tells us that he enjoys and saddens along with you, for the divine nature is not only impersonal as it is described in Upanishads, it is also as personal as it takes when it takes the form of the Divine Mother, be it Kali, Durga etc! Without the presence of divine maternity, the creative and omnipresent aspects of the One Who is hidden in Himself, an Indian proverb tells us,

Shiva himself, the God of transformation, destruction, and dynamic balance, it would be nothing but a corpse... Shava! A single letter, in fact an apostrophe in Sanskrit language, which changes the reading of the word from Shava to Shiva, is uncoincidently, the sign of the letter I, the mysterious mantric symbol of the feminine creative energy ... Lalbhag is a temple of this Creative Power that manifests itself as the Divine Mother, in the unseen shadow of which we are born, we love, smile, we grieve, we are heroes or meditators, we die, we are reborn ... No ritual, no drop of milk on a statue of any imagined deities, but pure existence, is the only sacrifice in this temple of the heart! Lalbhag - the Botanical Garden of the Bhengalur City - and every corner in nature left to exist outside the civilization, is a temple of Her, the divine Maya, the great Mother, the one without which the Supreme God Shiva itself is nothing but a corpse!

Milk on the head!

We stop at a neighborhood temple. Misery and bigotry! A lot of dust, some believers, have gathered to attend a ritual in honor of a God, as alien to me as to her worshipers. A statue placed on a symbolic pedestal representing the Himalayan mountains, and in fact, deeper, the Mountain of the World, axis Mundii, the home of gods! While whispering mantras, a brahman - if Brahman really he was –sprang the statue of the bored God, actually vigorously covering her in cow's milk... Nanda! The ritual was aimed to be a *puja*, a form of adoring the Divine, hidden in the form of a God or Goddess! The flowers, water, sweet offerings, the fire offering, are all seen as gestures of adoration of the Divine! But all are external signs of inner adoration, through profound communion with what that Zeite symbolizes, with those qualities of the Soul that the Zeity manifests and which exist in the soul of the participant in ritual, or nowhere! The washing of the statue with milk, and its crowning with flower garlands, are such as to awaken those powers of the soul, or to conceal them in the immense ignorance of being faithful, instead of being trully a part of the ritual, when the milk from the head of the statue drips into the soul of the seeker, and feeds him/her with eternity. A Hindu remark says you can not adore a God, until you yourself are not one! In our European terms, until you find the Divine presence in each and every one, in the widow who places a crown on the head of the statue, in the child who runs wearing shoes on the steps of the temple, in you who are caught by every thought, until then, you will only be ... hunting the wind! Because the Nameless God ... is the *prana* ... the Divine Spirit ... or the wind that blows in Karnataka!

Om Namah Shivaya... The Temple in the Shopping Mall

We head to the famous Shivoham temple ... Famous ... so we were told from the hotel, so the taxi driver says, but he does not know much English ... so says the Almighty Google! I do not trust famous temples ... The driver stops in the parking lot of a Shopping Mall .. here it is .. To the left, the entrance to the shops .. to the right, the entrance to the temple! You were taking the elevator to the shops ... you were taking your shoes off and be given an order number, to the temple!

So shivaist this welcoming... The same door, two destinations ... one to the kingdom of Maya, of fame, glory, humanity, candor... or to the kingdom of Shiva, the one whose foreheard is the spring of the Gange, the water of life! The Illusion, Maya, is seen in Upanishads as a veil that surrounds us, blind to the supreme reality, that of the essential identity between the aspirant's Self - in fact the Self of any being- and the absolute Divine, Brahman, the one without name and form! In Hinduism, Brahman takes the name and form of Shiva-most often, but also Chaitnya, Maheshvara, Krishna, depending on the specifics of worshiping one or other of the Hindus gods. The Temple from the Shopping Mall bears the name of a famous mantra - Shivo ham - often considered as the ajapa mantra, the unspoken mantra, which every being pronounces without being conscious, while breathing, in the form of So ham, the letter S designating Shiva and Ham, the individual being or the Ego (ahamkara). Hence the translation of this mantra would be: *I am Shiva!* It is the Hindu version of the famous Tat Tvm Asi formula - You are the One, through which the Indian culture and spirituality made place in philosophical thinking in the West. I like to understand this Shivo Ham mantra as the Hindu version of the Hebrew YHVH (Yahveh), included in Christianity as Jehovah, of course by making a syncretism, perhaps not allowed, and certainly implausible, some Christians would say, and also many Hindus, between this mantra - Shivo Ham - and the name God Himself revealed to Moses when he sent him to make known his commandments to the chosen people.

We enter the temple, not before buying coconuts, scented candles and other ritual offerings. For a few extra rupees, we are invited to participate in a special ritual for us, which of course I have accepted, out of the curiosity and the vanity of the European arrived in India, who is proposed to have something done specially for him ...

Ever since the entrance, we have been invited to visit the temple on a special itinerary, an initiatic journey that symbolically traced sacred places of pilgrimage all over India! 12 sacred places in one pilgrimage, Europeanly

speaking .. how could you miss such an opportunity? We are, however, in a mall, why wouldn't we have discount spirituality! We're going to go through the summary of India in 12 minutes! Linga is the sacred symbol of the cult of Shiva. The Linga is represented as a male genital organ, representing the absolute creative power of the Divinity. Along with Creation, for the adherents of Hinduism, the Divine also has the function of the creator of the creation, the destroyer of it, the one who reveals himself or hides himself in front of the seeker. Few know that the pedestal lying beside it, usually of a triangular shape, represents Parvati, or Shakti, the great mother, who makes the masculine creative power of the supreme god not to be absolutely sterile! Shiva Purana describes the mythological appearance of Shiva's Linga as an infinite column between the other two parts of the Hindu Trinity: Brahma - the creator of all that exists, and Vishnu - the one who maintains the creation! Shiva itself is seen as part of this trinity, representing the destructive, in fact transforming aspect of it. As Brahma and Vishnu entered a competition for divine supremacy, Shiva appeared in the form of an infinite light column, to which the two competing gods could not find their heads, even joining forces in search of its edges. Although the legend of the appearance of the Linga presents it as a luminous symbol, its sculptural representations are always black, which contrasts with the white color of the god to which the symbol belongs.

We are therefore determined to attend the micro-pilgrimage through the (micro) Himalayas in the Mall. We receive a bowl of 109 rudraksha berries, the seed of a plant whose sacredness is revealed in the same purana in which the legend of Shiva's light column is presented ... Each of the 109 grains should be placed in a different bowl, used by the Hindus to worship Shiva: Om Namah Shivaya. The most common translation of it is I Salte (worship) Shiva's name. We also found texts, among the books for the promotion of shivaism for all, available at the temple exit, which gave a more esoteric explanation of this mantra, correlating each syllable with one of the above-mentioned divine functions: creation, preservation, destruction, concealence and revelation. I uttered the mantra, placing the sacred grains each in their bowl, taking care not to miss a bead without a bowl, and not to leave a bowl without a bead. In fact, the encounter between the sacred seed and the ritual cup inspires a hierogamy in the name of Shiva, repeated as many times as how many worlds are believed in shivasim to exist in the Universe. Going through the labyrinth by naming Shiva and placing her vegetal tears - rudraksha signifying Shiva's tears - in the sacred bowls, you have a sense of intimacy with the Hindus believers who perform such practices in the hope of self-recognition. I also wanted to identify myself

with Shiva like the Hindu believer, but all that my European mind could perform was to recite the mantra with as few thoughts and with the greatest excitement of meeting the Sacred as otherness. In fact, a double alterity, once the Sacred represents for each of us the Absolute Alterity, the second the cultural alterity that Shiva's cult represents for me as European.

By successfully completing the cosmic periplus through Shiva's worlds - tears -, we went to honor him, breaking a coconut on a piece of stone and pouring the liquid over a stone linga. Failing to rise to the height of Shiva's worshipers, and failing to break the coconut myself, a swami who had been assigned to us as a guide - the guru - through the attempts in the maze of the temple, does it for me by pouring the contents over the shivait symbol. I took my revenge and poured like a true Hindu water over the statue. My thoughts went to the universal significance of pouring water over a representation of divinity, and I could not refrain from referring to the ritual practices with which I am accustomed back home, splashing water to icons, but also the baptism. From Mircea Eliade I know that rituals of bathing are the return to the shapeless form of the world, to its pre-formal nature. In some traditions, it also means the initiatory act of confronting an aquatic monster, the relic of a time of *illo tempore*, when such aquatic monsters dominated the world. Shiva, the one whose forehead springs the Ganges, is sprinkled by me with the sacred water of an artificial pool. Or it could have been sprinkled with the tears of a Shivait believer, or with water without which life would not be possible. The difference between the interpretations is how profoundly allegorical you understand to relate to the divine represented by Shiva, in this case. In essence, everything is a metaphor, as Shiva's own name - which many translate through Shambu, the One Good-is. He is the destroyer of the worlds, but the destruction is apparent, because he does not do - in Hindu wisdom - anything other than bringing the believer closer to his ultimate reality in the name of Shivoham!

I have finished the ritual of bathing the symbol of the Divinity, deciding that there is the living water and the dead water, the one in the stories, the water with which I ritually sprinkled the statue. We went to greet Ganesha. Ganesha is actually a 32-meter-high statue that fills the entire visual field at the entrance to the temple itself. You can not worship Shiva, the Hindus believe, until you purify yourself before, performing rituals of worshiping Ganesha. Ganesha - Ganesh or Ganapati - is considered the son of Shiva, who, being kidnapped by his destroying father, has been beheaded. At Parvati's requests, Shiva's wife and Ganesh's mother, the terrible god brings Ganapati back to life, but not being able to find a head of human form, he attaches him an elephant’s. Ganesha is represented as a deity with

an elephant-head on a human body. He is the god of abundance, of help, who is called to bless any new beginning, whether material or spiritual. Ganapati, the master of the elements, in fact their pastor - since the Sanskrit term *patio* is used in the sense of a shepherd but also of a master of the flock - is said to be the one who, in a competition to surround the universe three times, to which he is challenged by his brother Shanmuka - the god of war -, Ganesha proves his wisdom - his name being synonymous with this - by surrounding the legs of his father Shiva three times, and not the material Universe. Explaining his gesture, Ganapati states that Shiva, through his divine nature, is omnipresent, and there is no part of the universe in which the divine is not present. So to surround Shiva means to surround the Universe. The human form that Shiva takes for his worshipers is illusory, his true nature being out of shape and without measurable attributes. Ganesha's representations are ubiquitous in Bhangalore, starting from temples, store names, statuary representations, to the tattooing of the taxi driver who accompanied us in our pseudo-initiating periplus through Bhangalore.

A Swami has received our offerings in the name of Ganesha, him probably being too busy with making us wiser in matters of Hinduism. We did not spend too much time near the playful god, forever a child and with a loaned head. We resumed our journey to the pilgrimage sites, of India reduced to the temple scale. Each major province of the country is represented by a linga, each being considered a place where an epiphany of the great God took place.

The stairs were becoming narrower as we approached the Himalayas, Shambu's allegorical compound, another name of Shiva - the God with 1000 names.

We went out into a room .... Ups! It's not really a room, it's Shiva's world itself, the miniature Universe. Here the temple is not covered, probably because nothing could cover the immense beauty of the God, other than the sky. As we arrived at night, when it was already dark, we were able to enjoy *Shiva's night*, Shiva Ratri, the symbol of transcendence and grace overflowed by Shambu, and revealed in the same Shiva Purana, as the other teachings about the Shiva symbols from the column of light to the vegetal tears of God. What we were seeing was an artificial lake in the middle of the temple, which should represent the Ganges, but also any aquatic world springing from the crown of the god's head. This subtle source of the Ganges signifies, in the Indian tradition, on the one hand the sacredness of the river that flows from top of the Shiva's head, and more deeply the nectar of the beatitude that is given to the believers by the benevolent god, in the form of water and of the life itself symbolized by it. We threw coins into the

lake, but this at the suggestion of the companion swami, and not from our own idea as Europeans. Of course, we also made a wish, to the same suggestion from the occasional guru. I could not hold but smile, thinking that the gesture of throwing the coin into a water considered sacred is perhaps one of the most generally human gesture, discovering it in Christian countries, in Buddhist temples, and now in Shiva's temple. I did not hit the stone in the lake with the coin, but I managed to place the candle on fire to floate on the primordial waters of the lake. The candle, of course, was placed in a support that allowed it to float and removed the devastating contact between water and fire.



The statue of Shiva from the Shivoham temple, Bangalore India.

Photo: Bianca Huidu

We finally met Shiva! A statue of 65 meters high, according to the description of the temple we found on the internet. The statue is truly impressive by its majesty. We have only reached the feet of the God, where as any mortal, you have to place the offering. Aside Shiva was Parvati, his wife, with whom he shares the Himalayan solitude. She is much smaller, her statue not more than a few feet high, Parvati, or Parashakti in the Shiva tradition, is the feminine power, which is in fact inseparable from it. Here she is small, small... compared to what Shiva represents. Parvati represents Maya, the

illusion, the veil that stops the pashu - human beings who have not reached wisdom, to know Shankara - another name of Shiva. In fact, the whole world is Shakti, for she is the divine mother, the one who fills the entire existence with the mysterious presence of the divinity. But she is small, for she diminishes herself to make Shiva's glory visible. Or she is infinite, in Her dedicated temples, when she appears in the form of Kali or Durga, but when Shiva appears as a simple point (bindu), a seed bearing in it the infinity of divine consciousness.

Now, however, it was about Shiva's glory, so Parvati must be represented as of a smaller size compared to him. Alongside Parvati, and similar in size, throned the Nanda – the sacred cow. Nanda means life itself and the feeding process that is made with milk. Nanda is also present everywhere in Bhangalore, in the temples, on the street .. in the name of the hotel where we stayed. When I said that the cows are on the street, I referred to the actual four-feet cows, and they are absolutely serence through the most infernal and noisy traffic I've ever encountered.

We continue the periplus through the shivait temple, honoring the central linga, the altar of the temple, the altar of fire, where swami hands us a piece of wood to symbolically burn it, together with our aggressivity. By throwing the wood into the Vedic fire, we were made worthy to be marked with a point of ash in the forehead. Most Hindus bear such a mark in the forehead, representing Shiva in its bindu form, of sizeless point that contains the plenitude in the seeds. Ours were from ashes, which for me symbolized ashes of sacrificial fire, as well as that of funerary dregs, the eternity of life and death in Shiva's vibrating heart.

We visited the astrological planets, which we symbolically surrounded three times, like Ganesha to Shambu's feet. This detour should be auspicious, because it makes all planets, gods, even from Vedic times, to be in our favour. We count the astrological planets, and compare them to those in the Greek-Roman mythology, Sun - Surya, Moon, Mars, Venus, Jupiter .. I forgot their Sanskrit names.

Eventually we arrived to the temple's meditation space, where from lack of mobility, I did not achieve the lotus posture. None of the Hindus who were in the same sacred space had assumed the classical posture, which is the symbol of Yoga and, by extension, of the Hindu religion.

We recovered our shoes and returned to the parking gate, determined to visit the other temple, the Shopping Mall. Fruits, clothes, home appliances, the joys of comfort and life. If Shiva's statue was under the clear sky, everything here is covered by false ceilings, which under the influence of the Temple experience, suggested to me the veil of the illusion

that covers the sky of consciousness. Ups... we have entered the game of symbols.

It is of course a symbol, the temple in the Mall, or more precisely the temple with the entrance through the Mall, as all are symbolic in India! Or maybe it was not meant to be a symbol. The Shivoham temple was built just 25 years ago! I never found out how old the mall was.

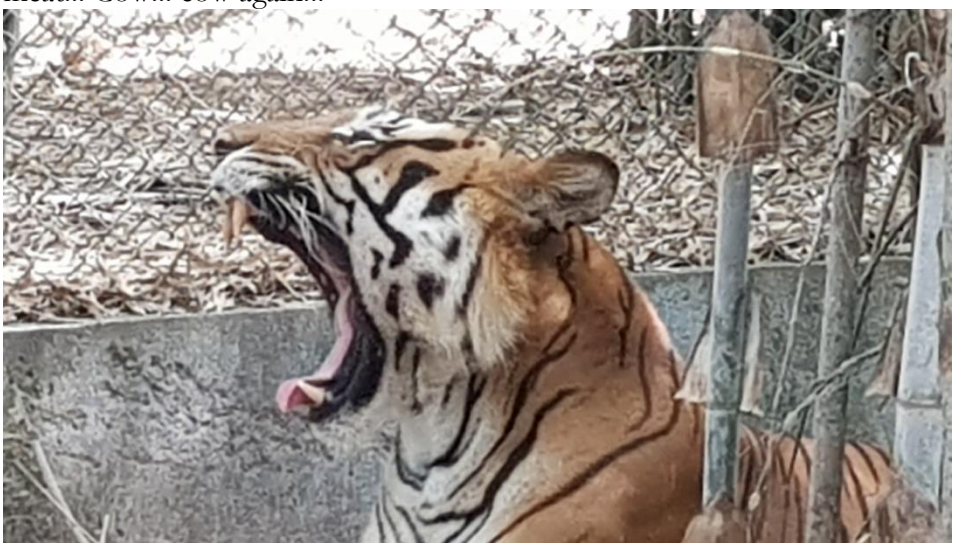
The same as home... with the cow on the hill! Nanda Hills

We were on the cow's hill... Nanda Hills. Contrary to expectations, I have not met cows... but monkeys. I was tempted to place the encounter with them in a zealous manner, in what Mircea Eliade would call the *nostalgia of origins*. The man evolves from the monkey... I'm not sure if the monkeys on the road markings and the fence limiting the road to Nanda Hills would agree that a species like the human, aggressive, warlike and so disagreeable with nature could have emerged from the monkeys. The monkeys in Bhangalore are concerned about bananas ... and they have a serious figure... They know they have the shape of a god... Hanuman, whose temple is on the top of the Cow Hill. Hanuman is seen either as an avatar of Shiva himself, or as a particularly close devotee of the god Rama. Hanuman is represented in the form of a monkey, which humorously speaking, makes me say that not the man .. but the god is evolving from the monkey. I would probably be killed with stones for such an insult, both by the Hanuman followers, many in number judging by the number of temples, and those of Darwin. But who knows ... maybe a new species of post-monkey is preparing to appear in the universe... Homo Deus. Homo Deus is the name of a book written by Yuvah Noah Harari. Perhaps, Harari says, homo sapiens was the beginning, and homo deus - the future of the species... I do not know if we can be human gods through technological conquests, as the book suggests, but maybe devotion was the way of deification that many spiritual seekers have chosen, including by Hanuman if we were to believe Ramayana. For me, as a occidental living in this era of technological (self) transcendence, hanuman is a symbol of the monkey becoming a god through spiritual effort and not through the magic of technology.

Running with the tigers. Safari at the zoo

We arrived at the Zoo. Here was the promised experience of an Indian-style safari. I mean, ride a bus that was a little tired, through a huge zoo, divided into sections... large herbivorous section, bears, lions, tigers. I was as excited as a child seeing the elephants. They did not seem to enjoy

seeing us, though. More curious about us seemed to be a tiger that was circling our bus, but especially a jeep ahead of us - I think he was a little frustrated to see good food... but not be able to open the can. I tried to put myself in his place .. so much fresh food .. and he had to settle for cow's meat... Cow... cow again...



The tiger at the Zoo. Bhangalore, India | Photo: Bianca Huidu

The bear was rather bored. He was swinging along the... road ... on a road for the buses full of people entering the zoo. I think the zoo inhabitants wonder how dangerous those animals are, if they come in cages directly. Our bus had no bars ... but most of those who entered the zoo park were.

Lions and lionesses separated. In different cages... The control of natality in the form for lions. In fact there were no actual cages, but huge enclosures, where they would feel as though they were free... Feel like. We humans also feel like that, because the enclosure is larger... the fences are called: economic, political, social, cultural, religious. A tiger showed us his thighs ... he is freer. He can display his teeth without anybody questioning him that he is not politically correct.

Hare Khrishna

Hare Khrishna, Hare Khrishna .. sounds like Boy George. In fact, it is the melody, in the Indian version, but with the same mantric verses as the American one that echoes throughout the Iskcon temple. The temple is dedicated to Khrishna, an avatar of the god Vishnu. We Europeans have

entered the gate with tickets. Of course, we were there just wondering around .. not attending the dharshan .. the evening prayers. We also knew the mantra, he had just listened to the song. They were singing it with traditional and... melodious instruments. An absolutely huge temple with a roof. We were strolled barefoot around the temple, on sideway stairs, until we finally reached behind the altar, where other gurus of opportunity initiated us in the mysteries of the spiritual mission of the faithful Hare Khrisna, which is to help the children of India go to school. With 20,000 rupees, we can keep an Indian child in school - actually feed him with milk - for a whole year. The croisant and milk in the Indian version, and with money from sponsors.

We also managed to reach the front of the altar of statues not as immense as those of Shiva in the temple previously visited, but impressive in themselves. Those occupying the central segment were the god Khrishna and his wife Radha. Khrishna is considered an avatar of the god Vishnu. His love story with Radha fills the hearts of Indian adolescents with tears. As a very faithful husband he proved to be, he managed to attract the love of 1,000 Gopi - shepherds - who could have all sworn they were loved by him at least that night.

Khrishna is most adored for the Bhagavadgita teachings that are attributed to him. The Bhagavadgita is a fragment of the Mahabharata, but it is more known as a sacred self-contained text. His main teaching is about spiritual detachment. Knowing many people who consider themselves to be practitioners of different forms of post-modern spiritual detachment of New Age origin, the detachment that Khrishna preaches to his disciple Arjuna is that of fully fulfilled duty. Every gesture you make, says Khrishna, should be a divine offering ... and you should do it as such - as a sacrifice. Krishna's detachment is neither disinterest nor indifference, nor... I was about to write insensibility. Khrishna's detachment is self-oblivion for the approach to the divine in the middle of action, however banal or heroic. His teachings were given in the heart of battle, when Khrishna was revealed to Prince Arjuna, to whom he was a servant, as the incarnation of the Divine, of Vishnu's. In the heart of the battle he reveals to Arjuna the mystery of practicing yoga: The union with the divine is accomplished by the detached action, superior to the renunciation of any action, and the contemplation: The detached action shows that the practitioner understands the illusory nature of the world, even of life and death, and acts accordingly, as an actor who understands the role, plays it totally, almost identifying himself with the character, but knowing he is different from it.



Iskon Temple. Bangalore, India | Photo: Bianca Huidu

The actor in the drama of life should understand that he is one with the Spectator, with Vishnu.

We left India. Luggage arrived in Bucharest after us. I had to apply Krishna's teachings ... the detachment. The detachment of Maya, of the attachment to things we consider ours, of the Ganesha statue that we bought as a memorial from India, and we had in our luggage.

Shivoham Om Namah Shivaia.. And I've told you a story about India.. Good morning, România!

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