



KOLU PADI

Navaratri 2006

Sankalpam

Once more I sit
facing a blank screen
and what feels like an uphill task
(oh, but think of the view at the top!)
--to sneak in time
to prepare myself
to give myself
to be consistent
to take this time
from a day full of meaningful meaninglessness
(or is it meaningless meaningfulness
or is there no difference?)
--to be with you.

To be with you.
To be with me.

My annual gift to you
for which I ask you to help me
and through which I come back to life
like a baby
a sunrise
a spring blossom
a phoenix.
In your image
in your words
by your grace.

So here we are
where we are every year
for eleven days.

I sit at your feet
and look at all the steps I have to climb
to reach your heart.

Does your gaze reach me where I am
shriveled and scared and still excited
to start the climb?
Does it reach me? Can you see me?
Well, here I am and here I go again.
Don't blink or it's snakes and ladders and start all over.
Keep your gaze fixed on me like a banister,
a rope, a lifeline.

And I will come to you, step by step.

Mahalaya Amavasya, September 22, 2006

Today I start my uphill climb towards you.
And the first step is wanting to do so –
a little longing, a little needing,
a good deal of faith that if I start here,
it is possible for me to reach there.

The first step is faith.

This baseline looks like many others –
as grey and unprepossessing as a concrete platform
as lowly as an inflation baseline relative to its later points of comparison
as shadowy as a fog in which visibility is poor
as debatable as conclusions in qualitative research.
All ameliorated by the sense of sureness that –
life will fill in colour
prices will rise
light will fight its way back in
debate is certain.

Accepting that sureness is the first step.

With no need
to prove
to explain
to justify
to assert
to preach
to explicate,
but just knowing in silence
that it is there.



Is joy.
Faith is joy.
And when that joy surges
like a baby gurgling in its mother's lap
like a spring in a puddle in a monsoon downpour
like slow-boiling milk gleefully ready to overflow
like warm lava in a cold volcanic interior,
Amma, I know I am standing on the first step.

And you can see me at this moment,
standing tall and looking ahead,
and you say, be careful,
be aware of the step you are on
in this moment.
I am that step too.

Prathamam, September 23, 2006





Be aware of where you are.
I reach out to the next step and
haul myself up
knowing you are watching
and knowing I am climbing.

My right hand reaches first.
Then my right knee seeks a hold.
Then my left hand hoists the rest of me
Over to the second step.
I scramble to my feet.
I catch my breath.
My breath brings me to the second step.
In awareness.

The second step is awareness.

I type these words
and pay attention to the dance of my fingers on the keyboard
and their unique rhythm:
one-two-backspace
three-four-backspace.
A marginal variation on
one-two-chachacha.
I watch my mind wander,
imagine how people will read these words,
this one, that one, that one.
I watch my mind wander to old collections
of 48 rpm records
that we cannot play
because the stylus needs to be replaced.
If I find a stylus somewhere, I should buy up the lot to keep in stock.
We have such good music in the record collection.
I wonder if I can digitize the records.





My feet slip and I grasp the step above to make sure
I remain on the second step.

I am here now.

Sitting.

Breathing.

Watching.

Witnessing.

I am here now.

The thought occurs to me that my wandering mind and I
may be stuck here forever like Trishanku.

And I take note, type, breathe
and say

In this moment, I am here.

In this moment, I am here.

In this moment, I am here.

I breathe.

I breathe.

I breathe.

And try to anchor myself in the present moment.

Like pegging a large picnic tent with a drawing pin.

Or holding down a sheaf of paper in front of a fan with a single black pepper.

Like trying to make a two year old sit still.

I watch. I try to remain aware
that I am not always aware.

Amma, I am now on the second step.

Come join me here.

Dvitiyai, September 24, 2006



What are you doing there?
Just being.

Just being.
Right here.
Right now.
On this third step.

Did I mention that steps are actually treacherous?
Like old worn concrete steps with patches of ice.
You have to watch where you put your foot
and you have to keep your attention right there
in order to stay put.
In order to stay put keep mind on foot.

So here I am
in the present moment
on the third step.

The present moment is the third step.

In this moment
there is no past
no future
no history
no strategy.
There is just being.
And when I am,
where I am,
there you are,
so where else need I go?

In, out, in, out
no philosophy do I spout
but a bit of doggerel
a list of words
and the last of doubt.

On this third step
is all of existence
along with you and me
in the present moment,
just being.

Tritiyai, September 24, 2006





You know, Devi, this has been a hard climb
and now that I am here
I find that the fourth step is very slick and treacherous.
I have to keep moving.

A few minutes ago, I started to talk about how arduous the climb to the second
step was
and the step cracked beneath my feet and I could clearly see the first step
through the cracks.
There we go again!

The third step was challenging, oops,
but then this is the most deceptive.
Is it even a step?
It seems to give way at the slightest notion of recollection.

Even when I think of your grace in the past,
I can feel the quicksand shift.
Almost as if you say,
if you liked the first step so much I will take you there.

Except that when I think about how at this rate
I ever will get to you,
it still gives way.

So it is not the past or the future.
And the fourth step is not even about dwelling on the present moment.
It is about not dwelling.

The fourth step is moving on.
Motion. Change. Journey.

Now the ground is firm as I walk on it.
It is standing in one place to remember or anticipate
that makes it crumble.
Perpetual motion
assures an even distribution of energy through time.

And now that I have figured this step out,
let us move on.

Chaturti, September 26, 2006



Moving on, then,
we are now on the fifth step.
And I am tired.
One reason I am saying so little about such a challenging and rich
journey
is that these steps are very steep.
It takes everything I have,
physically, mentally,
emotionally, spiritually
to climb from one step to another.
And in some inexpressible way,
with each step I climb,
I have to keep climbing all the others.
It's a bit of a nightmare.

So I am going to sit down on this one for a while.

No, no, I hear you.
Don't sit down.
Don't rest on your laurels.
Have you already forgotten the lesson of the last step?
Move on, keep moving.
No, I haven't, but Mother,
I am so tired.
A short rest will not matter.

I feel your disapproving,
and worse, disappointed gaze.
That is worse than the effort of climbing.
I get up. You smile.
And say, listen to me.





The fifth step is tenacity.

Determination.

Motivation.

Hanging in there.

Discipline.

Resolve.

Effort.

Grit.

Staying the course.

Keep your eyes on the prize
(and know she has her eyes on you!).

Not quite snakes and ladders,
but if you rest now,
you will find yourself at the beginning
sooner or later.

And shall I tell you a secret?

Yes, yes, I say.

I know that knowing her secret
will energize my ego
and I will be able to move.

Again, she guesses my thoughts
and shakes her head.

No, not that kind of secret.

Don't fuel your ego, but divert your attention from the difficulty of
your climb
and reach out to the person behind you
and the person beside you.

This is also like a long drive to a holiday destination.

Sing a little.

Help a little.

Share a little.

Laugh a lot.

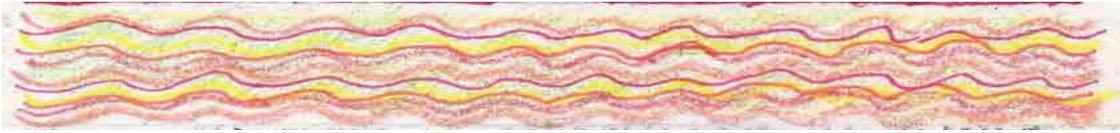
And the rigours of the journey will ease.

And don't forget what the first four steps were:
faith, awareness, being present, moving on.

Your words sink into my self
and the next step is within reach.

Panchami , September 27, 2006





"Laugh!"

**I stand on the sixth step and around me I can hear laughter.
Not the scary laughter of the bad guys in movies and mythology.
Or the wrathful laughter of avenging gods.
But chuckles. And giggles. And delighted peals.
And exploding paper bags.
And that surely is someone rolling on the floor helplessly.**

I wonder how there is room in this important journey for humour and laughter.

"Laugh!" You say again.

Okay, but at what?

"Do you need a reason?"

Laugh with these other people who are laughing.

Laugh because you can.

Laugh at yourself.

Can't you see something funny about your own earnestness?"

Not really.

You know sometimes I really don't understand you at all.

"I can tell.

**See life, not in its petty, corporeal sense,
but in the sense that you have known
and will know it again someday,
is celebration.**

Laugh in delight that it is so.

Laugh to see the bewildering range of colours and sounds around you.

Laugh to see the lack of proportion between your size and your ego.

Laugh because you can and because I love laughter."

**You don't think this is serious work,
this strenuous climbing of steps.**

"No, I don't. You are only taking the stairs, right.

That simply is. What is so serious about it?"

Come on, Devi, this is a metaphor for a spiritual journey.

Don't giggle! I am being serious.

"That is why I am giggling!

Listen to yourself – a metaphor for a spiritual journey."

Laughter.

"You still don't get it?"

I can hear the compassion as clearly as the laughter.

"Why are you so serious?

Do you really think you are climbing?

Will the staircase melt with your joy as it does when you dwell in the past?

Do you know all the answers?

Or even the questions?

What can you change by keeping a straight face?"

"Laugh and release those stones in your heart.

Pour out in peals of merriment

the anger in your spleen.

Unknot the tension by rolling around on the floor, laughing.

Open the windows of your spirit by rediscovering the wonder

**that made some words strange and some things unbelievable funny
when you were a child.**

**Play small games, like hide and seek,
not big ones.**

Just laugh. You don't need a reason.

And laugh at yourself, no one is funnier – believe me."

"Still serious?

Alright, don't laugh.

Don't smile, beam, grin.

Don't even be secretly amused.

Be ponderous, self-righteous, all-knowing.

Pontificate, don't quip."

I am immediately transported from this journey to a seminar room.

And the thought has me in splits.

I know instantly what you mean.

The journey up these steps is an arduous one

and if I cannot shed the weight of the world,

that no one asked me to carry,

I will not make it all the way.

**The image of me carrying a seminar-agenda full of worldly and other-worldly woes
up the stairs all by myself**

while it is possible to travel light

tells me what you know –

I am being a fool.

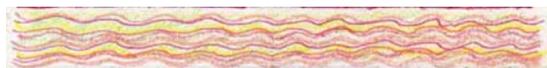
Now the laughter comes unbidden.

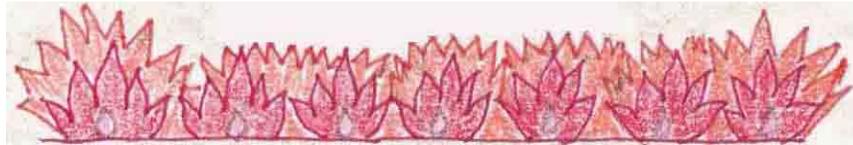
And the baggage starts rolling off.

I can hear your delight now.

Thank you, Devi, for relieving me of myself.

Shashti, September 28, 2006





Laughter builds courage.
On the seventh step,
I need courage.

I am greeted first by a python called Ego.
Encircling me in jubilation,
it seeks to celebrate my arrival at the seventh step.
How many people make it this far?
But I am still shaking with laughter,
and I shake off this serpent easily.

Next, I am stung by hornets, bees, wasps and scorpions
who taunt me and say,
do you think you have done something great?
We live here and are much greater.
You have arrived here
and you look dreadful for the climb.
I find humour in being found disagreeable by insects.

Then a host of sages meet me and say,
this is nothing, the next step is the most difficult.
They whizzed past the first six and were batted back from the
eighth.
Voices of doom, they tell me that if they cannot make it
with their exalted accomplishments,
I certainly cannot.
When they tell me I cannot escape the seventh step,
I notice the python and the insects again
and now feel very afraid.

On the seventh step,
your worst fears come back to haunt you.
Suspension mid-path with a half-aroused consciousness.
Aging without immortality or care.
Worst of all, mediocrity (and there is that python again!).
No, even worse, being abandoned by Devi
as not quite worthy of her gaze.
And that one restores perspective.

I know your gaze is unconditionally loving.
So what am I afraid of?
I laugh at myself, so easily perturbed.
My bedrock is faith,
and my journey has taught me to value this moment
while moving on tenaciously and with humour.
So why do I fear the future?
Would I be here if you did not want it?
Therefore, it stands to reason that you will take me
as far as you want, and that is where I want to be,
so what is there to fear?

The seventh step is courage under fire.
Your grace and my faith, together.

Saptami , September 29, 2006





The eighth step is paradise.
The sages I met were wrong.
It is the kind of heaven that children dream of
--lollipops on trees, wishes granted at every corner.
I am delighted by the cornucopia.

It is visual.
The richest and the most subtle colours.
The brightest, the jazziest, the shiniest.
And everyone is beautiful
because my eyes have learned on this step
to see beauty and colour and life everywhere.

It is tactile.
Velvet, marble, grass, wet sand.
Pumice, jute, satin, metal
--hot to the touch and cold to the core.
My skin delights because I know
that everything I touch is you.

Everything is fragrant.
Roses, lavender, jasmine, sandal.
Peat, sweat, urine and shit.
Musty smells musky.
Every breath I take and release is a link to you
and you pervade everything, making it fragrant.

Every sound speaks to the rhythm of life.
Spoken words are dulcet and soothing,
never banal, never negative, never hurtful,
and they all come home to you,
even when they are.
Music is everywhere, in objects,
in conversation, in that footfall,
animating everything.
Every sound is silence, and my mind finds rest.

The water is sweet, the food is delicious,
from the lollipops on trees to more staple offerings,
and even the life-denying, slowly-dying
can learn that to delight in texture
and savour flavour, is not a sign of weakness or vice.
Life is multi-sensory splendour
and detachment is not denial or deprivation.
To appreciate and enjoy,
without dependence or regret,
is joy.





And as I walk through paradise,
I feel just that.
I am delighted by the abundance
of all that is wonderful and splendid,
but I feel no need to indulge.
I take what I need,
appreciative that is there when I need it,
and continue on my journey.

Whoa, what was that, why did you bump into me
and jerk my hand, you idiot!
And someone – you, of course – holds me steady
as I am about to fall off the eighth step.

The eighth step is control over the senses –
and these include not just the physical senses
that I have been describing,
but also the emotions.
To lament, to be wildly happy, to cling and grieve,
to feel guilty, to feel responsible,
and worst of all, to be angry.
Yes, mother, I hear you.

“One moment of anger will cost you this journey.
I will not let you fall
but if you insist on jumping off,
even I cannot stop you.”

But, mother, I am so angry.
Everything irritates me.
Everybody is irritating.
And me most of all because I am irritated so easily.
Are you laughing at me, mother?

I am trying not to, you reply.

I don't understand.





Well, here you are.
You have faith,
you are learning to be aware,
to live in the moment while moving on from it,
You have tenacity and you have courage,
and I know you can laugh at yourself.
But this thing that you do –
feel so angry and bottle it up
so that you think you are anger.
What sense does it make?

Enough lectures, give me a way to change it.
Your hand to my back to steady me,
your energy flows through my heart chakra.
My breath steadies, so does my mind.

People are irritating, you tell me.
Don't you think I know that?
They are inconsiderate, messy, talkative,
too fast, too slow, too sloppy, too boastful,
too self-obsessed, too eager to please,
just too irritating for words.
But that is between them and me.
It is not your problem.

If they make work for you, do it if you can
or tell them you cannot.
Be honest in the first moment they irritate you
and the pretence will not drive you up the wall.
Please yourself. Do not try to please others.
Don't let the action and reaction of others
stifle or confine you. That will drive you crazy.
If they interrupt or disrupt, shatter your silences,
come back to your breath rather than going after them.
When you hear the banal, the vicious, the vacuous,
the self-indulgent, the repetitive, tune them out
and hear only my presence. I am that too you know.

I now smile. Where you are, mother,
how can I not?





You continue:
If you were to jump off the eighth step
just because of them,
how stupid does that make you?

And sometimes I know you find yourself in places
that are exasperating.
They are dirty, lack your work ethic,
self-aggrandizing with no evidence to substantiate claims.
People boast about culture but display
not civilization but cruelty and crudity.
Does it occur to you then
that I am placing you there to do something for me,
and that as long as you are with me, you will be able to?

Mother, it occurs to me that you are testing me.

Again, your laughter.
Yes, of course, but you know,
you only face the tests you can pass.

My anger, my irritation with you even
for these incomprehensible, unlivable lectures
and my tiredness from getting angry every five minutes
now yield to tears.
And then, you hold me.
In your embrace, I know that if I accept that I have to overcome anger,
you will hold me tight through this journey as well.

Take away this cancer from me, mother.
Nobody and no place around me will transform in my honour.
Make me the instrument of the change you and I want,
and still these tsunamis of bile and spleen
that course through me at five minute intervals.
Prune resentment, irritation, anger
so that they do not cripple me
and manifest, tumour-like, in my spirit
or road-block-like on my journey.
Sometimes I feel like I am only anger;
reclaim me, and leave only as much as I need to fuel your works.

I walk this journey now like a tightrope
with flames of anger and deep ditches of negativity
reaching out furiously to claim me.
You, mother, are the way, the walk, the destination.
I have come here by your grace.
Hold me.

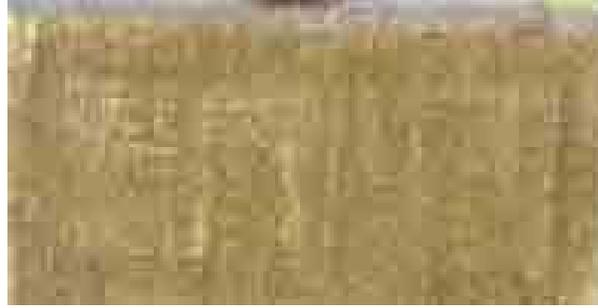




Postscript:
As she rocks me to calmness,
her fingers run through my hair,
disentangling my expectations
of the world and even the more complex ones of myself.
Her warmth melts my ice
and her cool breath douses the flames of my fury.
Head in her lap,
I am not responsible for the shortcomings of the world,
and I can only see her,
a perspective that leaves no obstacles or impediments to my
view.
My unsteady breath settles into the rhythm of hers.
My heart beats in quiet companionship to hers.
Blood no longer courses through me like frenzied rapids.
Exhausted, but serene, I fall into a sleep-like, restful silence.

Ashtami, September 30, 2006





This is a silence from which I do not wish to be woken.

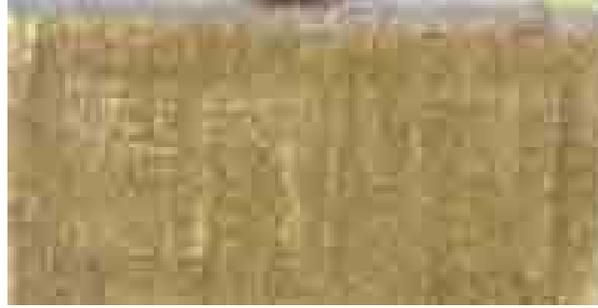
**To write about silence is surely ironic
but to tell you, mother, what the bliss of silence
means to me... to tell you, I need no words.
But to tell me, perhaps, I still do.**

Silence.

**My shield against my own excesses.
Against my lethal tongue that cuts the world to shreds.
Against my gift of words that say with precision
exactly what I mean – no more, but unfortunately, no less.
Against instant responses to provocations aplenty,
of omission and commission,
of presence and absence,
of every sort.
Everything provokes me, and silence stops me
from reacting in ways that I will regret.
My silence, uncomfortable perhaps,
is better than the alternative.**

Silence.

**That lends my words meaning.
From which come the sense and sensibility of my work.
To which I wish to retreat,
effacing the appearance of authorship and agency,
because you do, I carry out.
That allows my energies to flow
where they can do good things.
That gently and gradually severs my link
with the immediate and the petty,
to forge a link with you.**



Silence.

**Whether the silence of my not speaking.
Or the silence of my not writing.
Or the silence of my mind ceasing to spin,
first like a centrifuge of words and thoughts,
then like a child's top full of impulses and emotions,
and finally, even like a prayer-wheel out of control.
Silence of every sort,
leading me to that inner silence,
that bliss,
that is you.**

Silence.

**Where there just is.
Is you.
Is me.
Is.**

This.

**Is what I want to say to you.
Let me dwell in this silence.
Forsaking all but the most essential words.
Forsaking all.
Just silence.
And you in that silence.**

Navami, October 1, 2006



To merge into silence.
To awaken, submerged in you.

Not mine, not just mine,
but this is the journey of millions
before me,
more sincere,
more arduous,
more worthy.

One point, many rays of light.
One destination, many paths.
One truth, too many words.
One being, fractured into countless
particles,
each seeking the centre.
One centre.
You.

I find myself in your heart.
Or do I find you in mine?
One heart.
You and me.
Yours and mine.
Mutually in-dwelling,
which is tautological,
repetitious,
and takes a beautiful thing
and makes it sound undesirable!

One heart,
which we, both of us,
both are and inhabit.

The final step.
Now that I am here,
as another poet asked,
now that I have seen your feet,
your heart,
your refuge,
where should I go,
where can I go,
why should I go?

Now that I am here,
I am here.
I am.
You.

Dashami, October 2, 2006



Up these steps,
one by one,
taking notes,
as you speak
in my heart,
scribe to your muse,
here I am.

This beautiful dream
lights a lamp down a path
I must still walk.

From faith
with awareness
ever in the present
always moving
tenacious
laughing
courageous
joyous, enjoying but untouched,
never angry,
(that hard, hard eighth step)

into silence
and you.

From where I am
with you in our heart
the walk will be easier
than even in my dream
because I make this journey
cupped in the safety of your palm.

But walk I must still.
So, hold me in that palm,
keep me on the path,
still the demons that claim me,
hold me safe,
and walk with me,
be in my heart,
be my heart.

Take me home, mother.

Samapti, October 2, 2006