We have heard stories of Mother’s children who have come to Her from distant lands, drawn to Her and to Sri Aurobindo by an inner connection. Reading their lives one feels as if destiny was leading them on, preparing them, till they finally found their home at Her Feet. One such life was Medhananda’s.

Medhananda (1908 -1994), whose 100th birth anniversary fell on April 28, 2008, was a multi-faceted personality. Head of the Ashram’s library for many years, he was also an author and editor and a researcher into the meanings of ancient symbols and myths. He combined a profound intellect with the sparkle of a psychic joy. In fact, the name given to him by the Mother contains the two distinctive characteristics that his friends recall about him: “medha” (mind) and “ananda” (delight, bliss).

Born in Pforzheim, Germany to a wealthy engineer and industrialist, he was named Fritz Winkelstroeter. With the first pocket-money he received, he bought a book on Hindu gods — to the great astonishment of his family.

Despite his early interest in ancient cultures and their symbols and spirituality, he followed the wishes of his father and studied law at Munich, Heidelberg, and Paris. In 1934, although he was already launched on a promising legal career, he left Germany with his French wife to escape the rise of Nazism. They went to the other side of the globe, Tahiti, and then to its sister island Moorea, where they bought 200 hectares of virgin forest, built a small house, and established themselves as farmers, cultivating vanilla and coffee.

In Tahiti, where he spent sixteen years, Medhananda found exceptionally favourable conditions for delving deeper into the inner and higher realms of his being. Solitude, peace, and an environment of paradisiacal beauty and harmony were naturally very congenial for his extended explorations of the vastnesses within, around, and beyond him. His was an entirely spontaneous yoga.

It was after the end of the Second World War that the only bookseller in Tahiti started receiving, along with the latest novels, works by or about Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sankaracharya, and a list of books by Sri Aurobindo. Medhananda plunged into Sri Aurobindo’s books, saturated himself in them. When he was given Sri Aurobindo’s book *The Mother* by a friend, it ignited a spiritual explosion in his well-prepared field of consciousness. He notes, “… just now when I opened that marvelous little book of Sri Aurobindo, when my eyes fell on the title “The Mother”, She penetrated me like an arrow. I do not know when I shall be able to read this book coherently. I have hardly started, when the joy of his words prevents me from continuing.”

Then Medhananda wrote to Sri Aurobindo, who sent a reply through Pavitra. One of the experiences that he recounts of that time testifies to the deep connection that he had already built with the Master.

In 1917, aged 9

On the beautiful island of Moorea, riding Féitia, the horse he caught and trained
One early morning in the busy marketplace in Tahiti, he suddenly became aware that his consciousness had left his body behind and was travelling through the intergalactic spaces. When he wanted to return to his body, he realised he could not find the way back to his mother planet, Earth. But then he remembered, “Oh, I came from Sri Aurobindo’s planet!”, and the contact with his body was re-established.

For several months the Ashram heard nothing from him, except orders for new books of Sri Aurobindo as they were published. Then, on 31 August 1951, after receiving a brochure from Pavitra, Medhananda wrote, “I am enthusiastic after reading the prospectus of the University Centre in Pondicherry. I send you my best wishes for an early start. At the same time, I renew my offer of unconditional service, from cleaning the rooms to collaboration in higher studies of comparative mysticism. Meanwhile I could help you lay bricks. All my aspiration lies behind these wishes. Please receive the expression of my total devotion.” The Mother gave him permission to come to the Ashram. After travelling for two months, he reached his Mother’s home on the 15th February 1952. The first interview given by the Mother to Medhananda was almost entirely silent. She told him “Since long I am following you.” On the 26th of the same month she gave him his name “Medhananda”.

Medhananda was put in charge of the Sri Aurobindo Library. He also taught the History of Religions at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, a position he was well-qualified for by his lifelong interest in and study of the spiritual cultures of different ages and parts of the world. In 1965 he started editing the quarterly journal Equals One, for which he wrote numerous articles. Equals One, or “=I” as its cover would represent it, reflected Medhananda’s original and insightful mind and his playful and poetic style. The journal’s presentation too was innovative and unique. In 1978 he founded, together with his collaborator Yvonne Artaud, the Identity Research Institute, a non-profit foundation for psychological research. It was from about 1970 onwards that he started an in-depth exploration of the symbology of the hieroglyphs and pictorial imagery of ancient Egypt, using the psychological approach which Sri Aurobindo had initiated for the interpretation of the Vedas. Apart from his writings, there are also a large number of Medhananda’s informal talks which have been recorded. Selections from these are the basis of two books, With Medhananda on the shores of infinity (autobiographical material) and On the threshold of a new age with Medhananda (overview of his thought). Over 400 hours of recorded talks in German are still in the process of being transcribed and edited.

One of the recurrent themes that runs through Medhananda’s writings is the sense of the oneness of things, of the oneness of the universe. His years in Moorea in the lap of Nature no doubt contributed in making him keenly aware
of this oneness, of the continuity of things and their interconnectedness, the warp and weft that is this universe. He recounts an experience that he had in Moorea of an identification with a big tree: “One day on our estate on Moorea I was sitting beside a little stream, leaning against a tree... Then I felt a presence behind me. First I noticed the rough trunk I was leaning against; then the tree began to vibrate inaudibly, in a very special way, something a little like a cat purring: it was a slow vibration of contentment. This corresponded with a deep note inside me. Gradually I let myself be overcome by this contentment, and a door opened. Soon the whole body was seized by this ananda and I found I had become a tree: I was a tree. I lost awareness of my human body. I remained a tree for a long time. I experienced the rhythmic pulsation of the sap being pumped upwards, the sparkling play of sunlight in the foliage, the vivid intimate presence of everything that lives in it, and all the little plants round about it. It was a real paradise for that tree, to have its roots bathing in the coolness of the river. Its crown was very large and higher than the other treetops. It is very pleasant, soothing and enriching to be a tree. That species of tree is found in India too. The Mother called it ‘Health’.”

Along with his profound and wide knowledge, his friends and associates do not forget to mention his keen sense of humour. As Agnidhan recalls, “It was a great privilege to be with him, to breathe in his powerful, luminous atmosphere. Unforgettable are those beautiful hours in the afternoon when we, a small group of friends would meet in the Library garden, asking questions and listening in rapt self-forgetfulness to what he shared with us from his vast store of knowledge and experience. His remarks were often spiced with a trace of provocation, and there was always this wonderful sense of humour, of amusement, and the hilarious laughter, the playfulness. He did not take anything too seriously.”

Medhananda left his body on 26 May 1994.

Material for the above article was sourced from the latest issue of Recent Publications, Sabda and the April ’08 issue of Mother India. For more information visit www.medhananda.com

**Medhananda, passionate seeker of knowledge**

*Debranjan Chatterjee ’61, who worked closely with Medhananda at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Library for many years, remembers him.*

We often split a personality into two parts: the outer and the inner, the surface man and the subjective man. And yet this division cannot be exclusive. The outer may reflect something of the inner self as much as the inner may be built up of external acts. There are rare personalities who plunge deep within to discover the secret of the self. It is usually a strenuous uphill journey, and mostly hidden from others.

Medhananda was just such a seeker of his inner self. He came thousands of miles from Tahiti to Pondicherry to live under the spiritual light of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

How far he travelled in his inner quest will remain hidden to us. But some rays of his inner light surely filtered through onto his external being. This added unforgettable charm to his personality. When I think of Medhananda, the image that presses most clearly before me is a handsome man of a very robust physical stature, with penetrating eyes like crystals. He was very energetic, both physically and mentally. I
never saw any sign of lethargy in his mind; he was constantly alert, always bright and happy, never depressed or moody. A voracious reader, he was well chosen by the Mother to be our librarian. In fact, she often referred affectionately to him as Medhananda, the Librarian.

When I joined the work at the Ashram Library in the early 1960s, I was the youngest member on the staff. Even so, he treated me as he did the others, never interfering with any work he had assigned to me, but always stepping back and observing my work with a kindly attention — more like a benevolent father than a supervisor, or boss. It was this loving personality that endeared him to so many.

Medhananda was unique in that he combined a warm, expansive nature, inclined to hearty laughter and an amused perspective, with a keen intellect of the highest order. He believed fully in the education of the psychic and the higher emotions as an essential corollary to the development of the mental capacities, and he practiced this with the many students who came to him for studies as he had done with his own three children. Two of them, Vero and Jean-Pierre, had stayed in the Ashram for a few months on their way from France to Tahiti. After seeing them the Mother said to Medhananda, “You have educated your children well.”

The Ashram’s library used to be in the reading room inside the Ashram compound. And the Ashram school had its own library located on the landing at the top of the eastern staircase, which is where Medhananda worked. Books from both libraries were moved to the current location sometime in 1953-54, when the Ashram purchased the building from its owner, a French businessman who exported semi-precious stones. The Mother once told Medhananda that in 1920, when she had stayed in Bayoud House, which is opposite the Library entrance, she had noticed this magnificent house across the street and thought it would make a fine library! So, when all was ready at the new Library, Medhananda also moved here and chose for himself a very small, unprepossessing room, with only a single window. One day the Mother came to visit and when she saw his room, decided it was too small. She toured the rest of the building and chose a larger, well-lit, better-ventilated room and provided a small kitchen and attached bath.

The Mother understood Medhananda’s cultured nature and often when she received beautiful or particularly interesting objects, she would send them to Medhananda for the Library. In this way, he gathered statues and vases and picture postcards to enhance the atmosphere. He also started music collections and held musical evenings there.

Everyone knows of his passionate interest in Egyptology and how he gave a totally new interpretation to Egyptian hieroglyphs in the light of Sri Aurobindo’s own studies of the Vedas. He knew Greek and Latin, in addition to French, and guided many serious students of the humanities in their studies of history, literature, philosophy, and comparative religions. He arranged small exhibitions at the Library on such subjects as the “oneness of the world”, using scientific and historical facts combined with visual stimuli, to interest and encourage people to explore these subjects. He also had a great love for animals, studied the behavioural patterns of monkeys, and made interesting discoveries in the field of animal psychology.

Although he was a master of erudition, a creative and original thinker, and an inspiring writer, he was above all a child of the Mother, with whom he had the most extraordinarily sweet relation. It is surely that sweetness that became the nectar of his life and drew so many friends to his side. 

*Courtesy Recent Publications, Sabda*