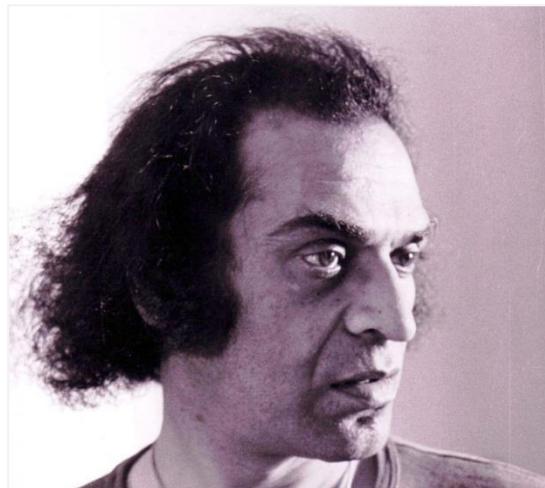


Biographical Sketch of the Artist, Sohan Qadri (1932 – 2011)



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Informed by Eastern spiritual traditions, the art of Sohan Qadri neither evokes thought nor connects the viewer to anything outside itself; like meditation, it turns the attention inwards.²
(Vibhuti Patel)

Sohan Qadri with his painting liberates the word meditation from its fashionable taste and brings it back to its proper origin, uninfluenced by Western propaganda, misunderstandings and corruptions.³ (Heinrich Böll)

Sohan Qadri—originally named Sohan Singh Barhing—the yogic seer, poet and Tantric painter, was born in the small village of Chachok, India, into a non-traditional Sikh/Hindu family. As a young child, he was initiated into yogic practices by two spiritual teachers who were living on or near his family's farm. At the age of seven, the quiet and withdrawn Sohan was introduced to his first teacher, Bikham Giri, a Bengali Tantric Vajrayana yogi or Buddhist-Shiva temple guru with whom he worked until he was thirty three. Under Bikham Giri's tutelage, Sohan Singh was to learn music, not things of the spirit. Yet, it was here that the young boy—who had some artistic talent—learned to draw yantras—the geometrical designs used for meditation—and was encouraged to participate in powerful rituals and breathing exercises.⁴

A few years later and still under the tutelage of Bikham Giri, Sohan Singh went to a famous Sufi tomb on the outskirts of the family farm where he developed a close and life-long relationship with the Sufi master, Ahmed Ali Shah Qadri, whose last name the artist eventually adopted as a sign of devotion.⁵ The master's sadhana or spiritual practice was a “mirror meditation,” a form of meditation also used by Zen Buddhists that involves “witnessing” in an effort to transcend the self. Sohan Qadri claimed to have “learned the practice silently without exchanging a word.”⁶ Ahmed Ali Shah gave him the mirror that he used in his practice all his life, a gift that Sohan Qadri treasured and carried with him everywhere.⁷

The rural village in the Punjab where Qadri grew up was half Hindu and half Muslim, and

filled with Sadhus or holy men. Qadri has described how his mother would take him to a Sikh temple in the morning, listen to talks on Advaita or Hindu philosophy at noon, or attend a Sufi gathering in the evening. He goes on to say that there were no religious divisions in his village and everyone lived in harmony.⁸

As a teenager, in the eighth grade, Qadri ran away to the Himalayas rather than take charge of the family farm. While there he made his way into Tibet in an expanded search for spiritual truth. His days were spent with spiritualists and forest dwellers or in remote Himalayan temples practicing Buddhist philosophy.⁹ Of particular interest to Qadri was Vajryana or Tantric Buddhism with its emphasis on the notion of *sunyata* or emptiness—a notion that was to figure prominently in the artist's work.

In the interim, a wrestler was dispatched by his mother to bring him home. After two more unsuccessful attempts to run away, Qadri made it clear that he had no intention of taking over the management of the family farm, despite being the first person in his village to matriculate.¹⁰ Against his parent's wishes, Qadri completed a fine arts degree at the Government College of Art in Simla, India and went on to form the "Loose Group" of painters and poets in India. For several years, he taught art at Ramgarhia College Phagwara and soon after became part of the circuit of the Indian modernists.¹¹ In 1965, he left India and began a series of travels that took him to East Africa, North America, Paris and Zurich. Mr. Qadri eventually settled in Copenhagen where he lived for over forty years.

These varied experiences provided Qadri with a "deep ecumenical spirit," along with a "life-long meditation practice and study of Buddhist Philosophy," all of which, according to Dr. Robert Thurman, informed the artist's vibrantly colored minimalist work.¹² Others, such as the writer and art critic, Virtus Schade writes that:

Sohan Qadri ... believes in an inner and outer sphere in the life of man. Striving to establish contact with this world within, with one's true self, he sees as utterly essen-

tial for all of us. His art belongs to something of the most refined one can perceive, something which touches "the ultimate secret."¹³

Perhaps Qadri's work can most simply be described as "an effort to abandon representation in a search for transcendence." Qadri explained: "When I start on a painting, first I empty my mind of all images. They dissolve into primordial space. Only emptiness, I feel, should communicate with emptiness of the canvas."¹⁴ The artist's method involved an Eastern mode of expression called *bhava* denoting ecstasy and/or a mental attitude of self-surrender. In Qadri's work "*bhava*" manifests as a focus purely on color and form. He says:

I avoid the distraction created by images. ... If one's mind starts playing with the known, then the unknown will not be discovered. Certain arrangements of color and shape on the space entice you to find a story, but the moment you find one, you become blind to what you're seeing. You go away, mentally; you're knitting your own story about the painting, and you're away from this painting. I want the viewer to stay with this painting completely because that's one-pointed meditation.¹⁵

Qadri suffused dye on meticulously serrated paper, so that the paper is transformed from a two-dimensional surface into a luminous monochrome, three-dimensional medium. The careful repetition of incisions and punctures created a rhythmic structure based on an effortless method of creation in tune with his Tantric yogic practice.¹⁶ The painting's vertical lines represent the Kundalini or spinal alignment, while the horizontal lines might be seen as representing Samsara, Qadri says that his paintings "contain a power that can break down sensational expectation" and "the chattering of the mind, because they don't offer anything for the viewer to stand on" and in this way, they "invite us to fall into silence."¹⁷

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¹ Sohan Qadri, Copenhagen, 1985.

- ² Vibhuti Patel, as quoted from “An Interview with Artist, Sohan Qadri.”
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/2005/01/The-Art-Of-A-Seeker.aspx>. (accessed November 8, 2013).
- ³ Heinrich Böll, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972.
- ⁴ Vibhuti Patel, “An Interview with Artist, Sohan Qadri.”
- ⁵ From a biography of the artist, provided by The Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, NY.
- ⁶ Patel, “An Interview with the Artist, Sohan Qadri.”
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Extracted from the “Chandigarh Lalit Kala Akademi Condolences Meeting” in March, 2011.
- ¹⁰ Sundaram Tagore, “Dissolving Contours,” in Robert Thurman et al., *Seeker: The Art of Sohan Qadri* (New York: Mapin Publishing, 2005), 112-130.
- ¹¹ Chandigarh Lalit Kala Akademi Condolences Meeting.
- ¹² Sundaram Tagore, “Dissolving Contours” in Robert Thurman et al., *Seeker: The Art of Sohan Qadri*, 109.
- ¹³ Virtus Schade, Art Critic and Writer, Copenhagen, 1978.
- ¹⁴ As quoted from the Obituary of the *Academy of the Punjab in North America*.
<http://www.apnaorg.com/articles/amarjit29/>. (accessed November 11, 2013).
- ¹⁵ Sohan Qadri, from “An Interview with the Artist.”
- ¹⁶ As quoted from the Obituary of the *Academy of the Punjab in North America*.
- ¹⁷ Sohan Qadri, from “An Interview with the Artist.”

Book Reviews

Dying to be Me: My Journey from Cancer to Near Death, to True Healing, by Anita Moorjani. Hay House, 2012, 191 pages.

Proof of Heaven: a Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife, by Eben Alexander, M.D. Simon and Shuster, 2012, 208 pages.

Prelude to Eternity: A Journey to Beyond Death, by Anne Pennington Grenfell. Inspiring Voices, 2013, 124 pages.

Three books on a related theme came to my attention around the same time, and I thought it might be instructive to review all three together. *Proof of Heaven* and *Dying to be Me* are both first-hand accounts of the near-death experience (or NDE), but each author underwent a totally unique experience due to the nature of their illnesses. *Prelude to Eternity* is an account of the author's experience as she cared for her husband during his final days. Although it is not an account of an NDE, it is a spiritual journey in its own way.

Anita Moorjani's NDE experience parallels most of the stories we have all heard about NDE's: a sense of expanded consciousness and freedom, a connectedness to a loving universe, and seeing friends and family on the "other side" while also remaining fully aware of what is going on with the physical form and in the environment around the form. The author discusses the moment of choice when the dying person has to decide whether to return to the body or to continue to enjoy the greater consciousness and freedom in the other world. She also describes having had a clear sense that it was not yet time to leave the physical world because there was service that she needed to render in the world.

Eben Alexander's NDE experience, on the other hand, was totally different in that instead of the organs being shut down by cancer, leaving the brain intact, it was his brain that was being ravaged by a virus, leaving him cut off from an awareness of the physical realm. After losing contact with the physical world in his brain-damaged coma, Alexander first became aware of a "pulsing, pounding darkness." Clearly, there

was some degree of consciousness, but it was without an awareness of identity. Language, emotion and thoughts were non-existent. After what seemed like an eternity, he then became aware of "objects" around him. He describes them as being like "roots...like blood vessels in a vast, muddy womb." Since this experience was similar to being buried deep in the ground like a worm, he later called this place the "Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View." His consciousness wasn't foggy; it was just extremely limited. He was merely a "lone point of awareness in a timeless red-brown sea."

Finally, Alexander began to get "uncomfortable in this world," feeling "trapped" in it. He reports seeing grotesque animal faces and hearing dull roars and rhythmic chants. His description makes it sound as if he were traversing through the astral plane. As the sights, sounds and smells intensified, he suddenly realized that he didn't belong there and needed to get out, but he had no idea where to go or how. After asking that question, a beautiful entity approached him from above. Alexander describes in precise detail his release into a whole new world of brilliance (the "Gateway"), accompanied by a guide, and his journey to the "Core," where he experienced the presence of God, whom he calls "Om," and where he received instruction.

Both Alexander and Moorjani received similar messages during their NDEs: there is nothing you can do wrong, there is nothing to fear, and all is love. They both experienced a kind of synthesis of the senses where hearing and seeing, for instance, were not separate experiences. Each also experienced instantaneous knowledge without words, knowledge that continued beyond the NDE experience. However, Alexander's experience seemed to go much deeper than Moorjani's since she did not seem to experience anything that resembled the astral plane, did not find herself in the presence of God and received no specific instruction. Alexander believes that he was able to travel deeper in his NDE than most others because he had lost his connection

to his identity on the physical plane and had no worries about what he was leaving behind or what his loved ones were feeling. Thus, he was free to access the true cosmic being that he was, that we all are.

Esoteric students understand the idea that penetration of the higher worlds depends on being able to release attachments to whatever level we find ourselves on so that we can move to the next level. Alexander's complete detachment from his previous life allowed him to leave it all behind and go further into the death experience.

Both Alexander and Moorjani became aware that it was not yet time for them to stay in this other realm. Each had work to do on the physical plane, and it would seem that part of this work was to communicate with the world of the living what they learned while out of the body and were dwelling on inner planes of experience. Alexander, in particular, as a neurosurgeon who had limited beliefs about consciousness, feels he has much to teach other scientists about the nature of consciousness. Yet both Alexander and Moorjani emphasize that manifesting love and compassion is the way to cultivate our genuine spiritual self since love makes up the fabric of the spiritual realm, and love and compassion is what our Creator feels for us.

In the third work reviewed here—*A Prelude to Eternity*—Anne Pennington Grenfell recounts the events of her life with her husband and allows us to see the special relationship that they shared. This special relationship made it all the more difficult for her to accept that she had to lose her husband to death so soon. At one point in the process, she was graced with a mystical moment in which she became convinced that God “is a universal Life Force of pure goodness

and energy, pulsating through and permeating all matter.” This is certainly in line with the messages brought back by Alexander and Moorjani. Grenfell also understood that “we are all connected to that Life Force and to each other, and we are loved unconditionally.” Therefore, it is possible to reach an understanding of the Life Force and the energy of pure Love without undergoing an NDE.

After her husband’s transition, Grenfell had another mystical vision in which she saw the tunnel of light that her husband had traveled through on his way to the “Light.” Since it was not her time to travel through that tunnel herself, she was not able to see the Light shining through the end of it, but she was given this experience as proof of its reality.

As a result of these experiences she was able to move beyond terrible grief and live life with an awareness of the greater love that connects us all.

In the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul’s writings on the topic of death, he explains that the fear of death is based on the loss of the “I” or personal consciousness, on the loss of the form that we have identified with in life, as well as the loss of all our loved ones who have been left behind. He writes, “The hope of the future and the hope of our release from this ill-founded fear lie in the shifting of our emphasis to the fact of the eternal soul and to the necessity for that soul to live spiritually, constructively and divinely within the material vehicles.” The words about the death experience as written by these three authors reaffirm this statement. And they assure us that death is indeed a release into a greater life.

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