

Mischa Cotlar as I knew him

I first met Mischa at the Williamstown Harmonic Analysis summer school in 1978. Being a graduate student I was quite tongue tied to be amongst many exalted people so I recall I did not have much of a conversation. Few years later in the Fall of 1984, Mischa and I were together at the IAS in Princeton. Later there were other occasions, at MSRI in the fall of 1987 etc. It was in Princeton in 1984 that I came to know Mischa in a very close way. He had a very deep interest in Indian metaphysics and philosophy and was very much influenced by the great Indian mystic saint *Ramakrishna Paramahansa* (d. 1886) and his foremost disciple *Swami Vivekananda* (1863-1902). He carried a picture of Vivekananda everywhere he went in the world. In 1987 he gave me this old picture of Vivekananda with a personal note for me, which touched me very much.

But the deepest influence in Mischa's life, that which moulded much of his actions and his world view was that of arguably the greatest mystic/saint philosopher of modern India *Bhagwan Ramana Maharishi* (1879-1950). A photograph of Ramana was always with Mischa wherever he went and he would show it to me like a child sharing a secret. I think Mischa as most people in the West learnt of Ramana through Paul Brunton's book *A Search in Secret India*. Ramana never left the little town in South India, Thiruvananthamalai where he arrived as a young boy of 17 in 1896. Once Mischa told me that he had desired very much to visit Ramana, but the War intervened and then later his financial situation made it impossible. After Ramana passed away the attraction was less, though Mischa always wanted to visit the place of residence of his great hero. The teaching of Ramana was only one: Asking oneself the question *Nanu Yar* in his native Tamil or *Koham* in Sanskrit, or Who am I? The ashram (hermitage) of Ramana Maharshi is dominated by a huge mountain that rises out of the flat plain and dominates much of the countryside. This is the Arunachala mountain. In Caracas, in Dec. 1993 Mischa pointed to me the mountains that circled his home and told me that it reminded him of Arunachala. Such was his deep and abiding fascination with Ramana Maharshi, the Master as he sometimes referred to him.

To quote a classic description of the man who has mastered the Self: He is like a lotus leaf which is immersed in a muddy pond(the world) but which the water does not wet, so it can it be said of Mischa, who lived in the world, performed all the actions enjoined of him, and yet was not tainted by the world. In this way he is an example of a life lived that Ramana claimed was practically possible and not a hypothetical ideal.

Mischa always provided me with encouragement in my mathematics and I am grateful that he shared with me a side that seems to be almost invisible to most people. I shall remember very much this gentle man from whom I have learnt much.

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